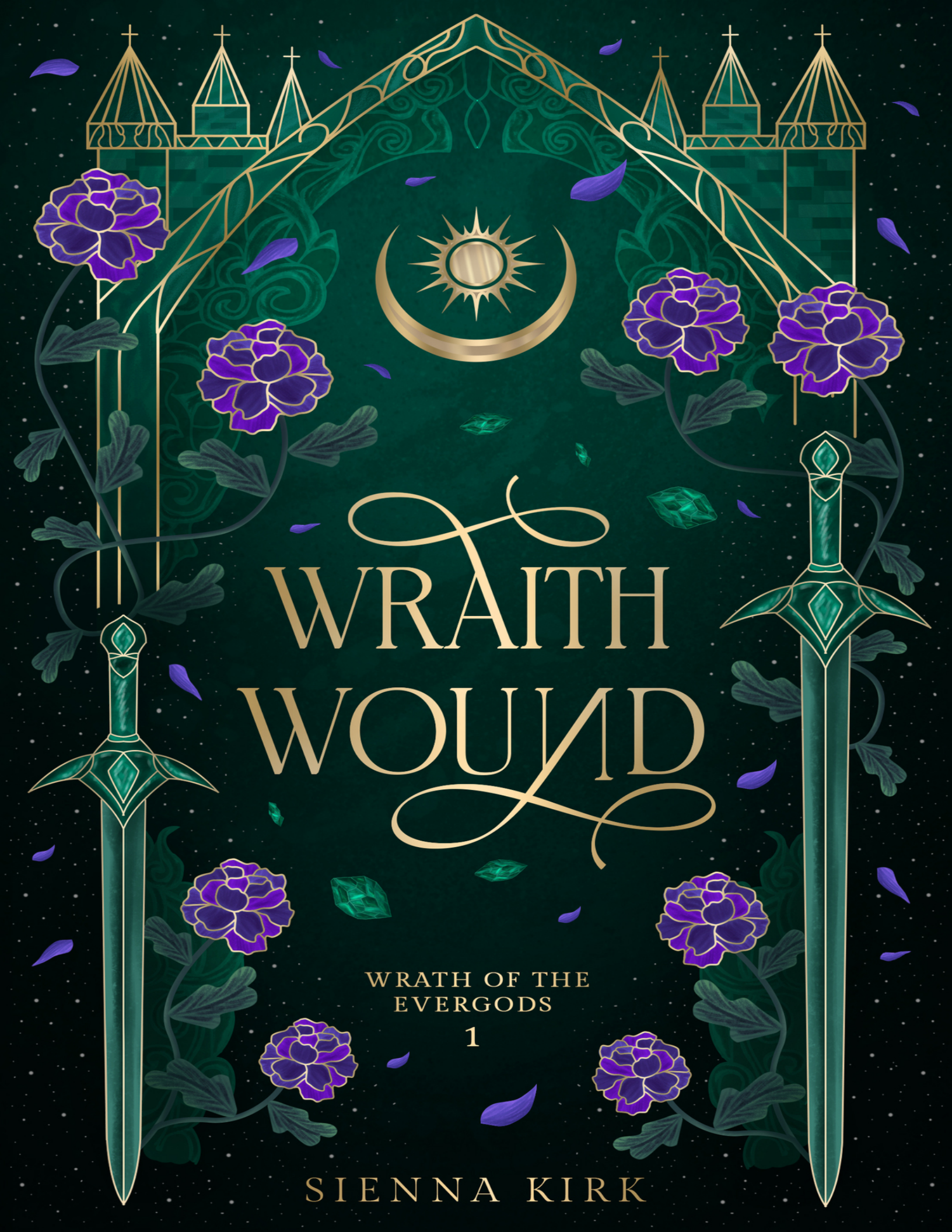
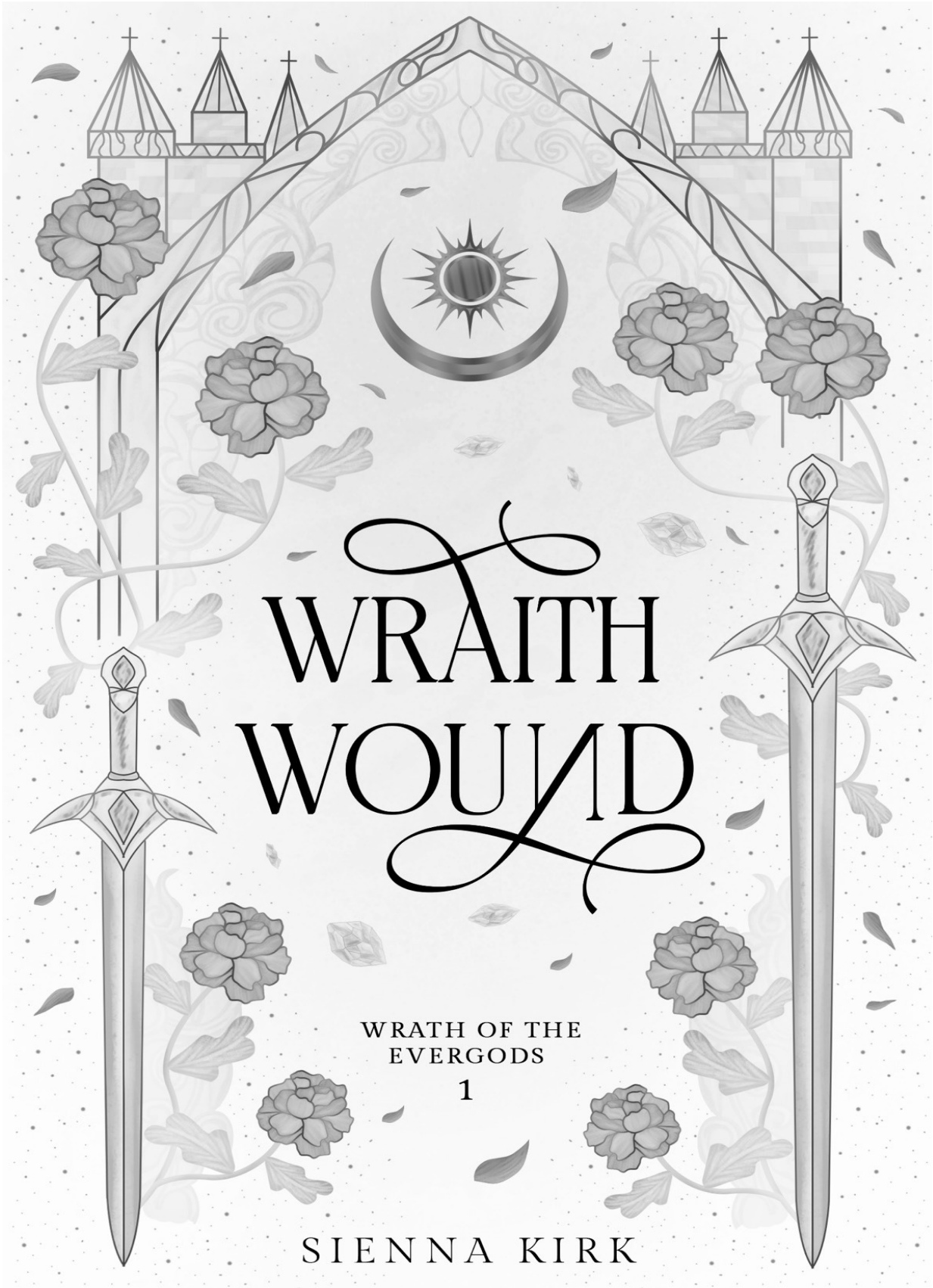

WRAITH WOUND
WRATH OF THE EVERGODS
1
SIENNA KIRK


WRAITH
WOUND
WRATH OF THE
EVERGODS
1
SIENNA KIRK

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This book is for those that have decided they're done being prey, and would rather become the monster instead.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains some themes that may be hard for some readers including: graphic descriptions of death (including familial loss), violence, implied threat of sexual violence, descriptions of wounds including blood and gore, sexual content, suicidal ideation, depersonalization, cults, depression, anxiety, trauma responses, and the exploration of grief and loss.

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About the Author

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

PEOPLE

Lena Elisande: *LEE-nuh Eh-lee-sahnd*
Ahgrie/Ahgraphina: Ah-GRAH-fina
Ada: *AY-duh*
Eduard: *EH-doo-ahrd*
Taya: *TAY-yuh*
Laney: *LAY-nee*
Taryk: *TAR-ik*
Dauen: *DOW-ehn*
Leonid: *LEE-uh-nid*
Runa: RUW-nah
Draven: DRAY-vuhn
Demara: DIH-mah-ruh
Kol: KOHL
Malnik: MAHL-nik

PLACES

Reimar: *REY-mar*
Dovia: *DOH-via*
Enora: *ee-NORA*
Virdeen: *VER-deen*
Alderun: *AHL-dur-un*
Duskit: *Dus-kit*

Sunsur: *SUN-sur*
Lundar: *Luhn-DAR*
Eydon: *EYE-dunn*
Celis: *SEH-lis*
Lythara: *Lih-THAH-ruh*
Revan Temple: *REH-vn temple*
Pirn Point: *purn point*

ANIMALS

Eleuth: *EE-looth*
Ursus: *UR-suhs*
Aurynn: AW-rin
Kharon: *KAH-ron*
Nychtyra: nik-TIER-ah
Felis: FEE-liss
Raberdin: RAH-ber-dinn
Tahorites: TAH-hor-ites

WORLDS

Eteris: eh-TER-iss
Oscurra: ohs-CURE-ah
SecaTer: sekah-TEHR

GODESSES & GODS

Quintessa: kwin-TESS-uh
Ferah: feh-RAH
Sundis: SUHN-diss
Lunis: LOO-nis
Tyrr: TIER

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CHAPTER
ONE

Lena woke to find that she was one body amongst many. In the stillness of the gray-tinged dawn, she knew she was the only living thing in this field of corpses. She stared up at the cloudy sky for a long moment, assessing the severity of the pain in her chest and dull aches that covered her body. Having grown up after the healing spring dried up and taken the oath of a healer, she thought she knew pain. But she was wrong.

Lena took a deep breath and gathered the courage to sit up. The sky careened back and forth in her vision, and she threw her arms out to steady herself. Lena regretted it immediately, wincing at the effort. When the world straightened, she looked around.

She had been right; the field was littered with mutilated bodies. The bodies of her neighbors and former patients, young and old. The funeral intended for one had become the final resting place for *everyone.*

They're.

All.

Dead.

The words struck her like stones, the realization of what happened turning her stomach. Lena gagged and brought her hand to her face, fighting the urge to vomit. The skin of her chest pulled painfully, and she peered down, moving slowly, to find four large gashes across her chest and left shoulder. The skin was peeled back from her body at each laceration like a can forced open with a dull knife. She shut her eyes against the gore but opened them in surprise when she realized the wounds weren't bleeding. Instead, they oozed slightly, the insides a sickly gray with faint

black veins spiderwebbing out just below the surface. Lena had no idea how she was still alive with wounds so deep and close to her heart—

The next thought flooded her with terror.

Where is Henry?

Her younger brother had been traveling, tending to some of the elderly patients in a few of the neighboring villages outside of Virdeen. It was possible he hadn't been in the field when the attack occurred.

Placing her trembling hands onto the damp brown earth, patchy with withering grass, Lena pushed herself to stand. Pain speared through her so swiftly she had to bend over and brace her hands on her knees to stay upright. Lena focused on taking short, stilted breaths and stared at the pearlescent thread stitched into her skirt, willing her body to cooperate. The opalsilk glimmered in the low light, as if unaware of the death that surrounded it.

When she was able to stand without fear of collapsing, she set her sights on the village in the distance. Lena sent a silent prayer to the Goddess Quintessa that Henry had been delayed and started walking. When the stiffness in her muscles eased, she set off at a run, ignoring the burst of pain that radiated from her chest.

Lena ran up the main road, dodging cracked stones and splintered wood from neighboring homes. There were no bodies in the streets. It was possible they'd all been in the field for Neema's funeral, but she *knew* Henry hadn't been there. Hope sparked in her chest, but then her quaint house came into view, and her heart stopped. The door had been ripped from the hinges and lay scattered among the debris in the street. She spotted the purple God's Eye flower that had lain on her windowsill just the day before, now wilted and dull.

Lena stepped past the threshold to find the furniture had been wrecked. Shattered glass glittered on the floor, mixed with potting soil from the herbs her mother had planted long ago. The familiar scent of her house, crushed herbs used for healing tonics, and the sterile scent of disinfectant enveloped her, but there was another strange scent that hung in the air. Something putrid and rotten.

She made her way towards the back, tripping over a broken chair from the dining room. The worn wooden table had been overturned, and behind it lay a hand. Every part of her stilled as she struggled to breathe. She rounded the table to find Henry lying on the floor. His once white shirt was stained

crimson from the gashes all over his body and smeared with black grime. Lena collapsed onto the floor beside him and shook him gently, grateful to see that his chest was still rising and falling.

“Henry?” she said softly, voice shaking. His eyes fluttered open at the sound of her voice, and his gaze met hers. A smile grew on his face to reveal blood-stained teeth. He coughed, his breaths shallow and strained.

No, no, no.

“I knew you’d come.”

“Henry, where is it? Where is our last crystal?” she urged.

Henry shook his head.

“I know we have one—we have *one* left! Where is it?” she asked, the words spilling out of her.

“I gave it away, used it—” he said.

“You gave it—” Lena’s heart sank. It was just like Henry to do something like that, gift the incredibly rare healing crystal to someone else who needed it.

“Then we can try something else. Let me see,” she said. Lena looked around at the shattered pots, the oils, and salves now staining the wooden floors.

EverGods, she couldn’t remember what to do, where to start. It had been months since she’d seen any patients, longer still since she worked on an open wound and torn flesh. She moved to stand, to reach for bandages, a salve, anything, when Henry put his hand on her shoulder, halting her movement.

“Lena,” Henry breathed.

She looked down at him, his gaze intent on hers willing her to see the importance of what he was about to say.

“Mom’s journal . . . in there,” Henry said, dragging his hand over the floorboards and patting one of them. Her gaze lingered on the smear of blood marking the wood.

“What?” she asked, tearing her gaze away from the stain.

“Mom’s journal, she—there’s a lot in there that will help you,” he said.

“Help me? Henry, I’ve been infected, too,” she whispered. Saying it out loud made the nightmare real, but where she should feel a sense of worry for what would inevitably become of her, she could only feel despair for Henry.

“Fight it, Lena,” he said.

“Fight it?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes, fight it,” he said again, his voice weaker.

“Nobody fights this, Henry. Nobody fights this and wins,” she said, tears welling in her eyes.

“*You* can,” he said.

He sounded so sure, like they both hadn’t just been handed a death sentence. Not many survived the initial wraith attack, but of those who did, they all turned. Their autonomy surrendered to darkness, to evil; their bodies ravaged by a disease so vicious many ended up taking their own lives before the turn was complete. Those who completed the turn ended up attacking others, or they disappeared, never to be seen again.

Henry’s breathing slowed, and Lena put her hand on his face. His honey-brown eyes, fair skin, and golden hair were always such a stark contrast to her own green eyes, brown locks, and tanned complexion.

“Take it,” he said.

“I will. I’ll take the journal, but let me try to fix this,” she tried again.

“Not that, me,” he said.

“You?” she asked, confusion creasing her brow. *Had the blood loss made him delirious?*

“I don’t know what you mean.” She tried to keep her voice calm.

“Promise me you’ll fight it, that you’ll find a way,” he said again.

“I—I promise,” she lied.

There was no way to fight this. They both knew that, but she wasn’t about to deny him this. Henry took one last shuddering breath, peace settling into his features, and then he was gone.

Shock hit her like a wave, the impact so devastating she felt her consciousness detach from her physical body. Lena looked down at the scene before her, like a neutral observer, where Henry lay dead, his head leaning into her touch. Time ceased to exist, and yet she could feel the devastation hollowing her already broken heart, wrecking her irrevocably.

Even in death, she could see the little boy he’d been when her mother had brought him home. Covered in filth and terrified of everything, he’d been found by Marisee wandering the streets of Sunsur alone. Lena had been delighted to have a sibling and had sat with him for hours and then days. Initially, he’d been painfully shy, opening up only after learning he’d be safe with them. He would tell her fantastical stories about imaginary lands with golden hills and spirits that could endure flame and heat. That

was fourteen years ago. After her mother disappeared three years ago, he'd become the only family she had left.

The memory of her mom bringing Henry home faded in her mind, and she found herself back in her body. She blinked back tears, unsure of what to do next, when a rippling mass appeared around him.

Stunned, mouth agape, Lena reached out to touch it. The shimmering mass sucked into her skin. Lena started at the sensation, scrambling backwards until her back hit the wall behind her. She scrubbed at her arms furiously, trying to shake the echo of the mass off. Her body *responded* to Henry's soul, the pain of her wounds easing slightly. The stiffness in her muscles lessened and the exhaustion lifted. Horror struck as a slow realization set in. Everyone had heard the rumors. Wraiths fed off souls, and she had just consumed one. With that thought, Lena felt the infection inside her wake up.

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CHAPTER
TWO

Her stomach turned at the thought of what she'd just done, and she vomited all over the floor. The air in her lungs evaporated, causing an unbearable tightness in her chest. Lena gasped for breath, the horrible noises puncturing the silence, until they turned into broken sobs.

A numbness overtaking her senses, Lena stared at her brother's lifeless body. Henry was dead, the beautiful spark that had been his life extinguished forever. Now, she was well and truly alone.

Lena wasn't sure how long she sat there. Eventually, the sun, hot and insistent, crept into her field of vision through the window. As if it was thawing the numbness that had settled deep into her bones, pain slowly crept into awareness, and she began to feel the ache in her body after sitting for so long. She reached for Henry but froze midway. She couldn't bear to look at his corpse, even though she'd seen many. Gaze averted, she unclasped the medallion he wore around his neck. It was the only thing he'd carried with him when he was found. The small metal disk warmed in her hand, and she squeezed it tightly before dropping it into her pocket.

She had to remind herself his soul wasn't in there because now it resided within her. The thought brought about a jarring mixture of comfort and torment.

His last words echoed through her mind. *Lied.* She had lied to him and promised she'd fight the turn. The ridiculousness of that promise almost brought her to hysterics. Tears streamed down her face until despair swallowed her whole once more.

Henry's life had been worth ten times hers. She was useless, had been for months, having given up on healing, her friends … life, when the grief

overwhelmed her. She had lost too much, and yet now she'd be forced to endure the loss of self. Would her final promise to Henry be empty words borne of desperation? An attempt to placate the one person in the world of Eteris she would have gladly given her life for? Lena could feel the bitter laugh bubbling up her throat.

No. She couldn't— wouldn't let her last words to Henry be a lie. Determination slowly replaced the vast hopelessness that threatened to be her undoing. Lena wiped the tears from her face and willed herself to think through the fog of her grief-stricken mind.

The Healer Organization might have answers. Ahgrie, her mother's best friend in Enora, was both a member and a renowned healer. She might be able to help. Lena didn't want to think of what else it would mean for her to go back to the city, but for Henry, she would face it. It was her best chance of fighting the turn to preserve Henry's soul, perhaps her only chance.

The healers in the Org were brilliant. They had discovered ways beyond magic to heal broken bodies and cure mysterious illnesses that arrived with the infiltration of the wraiths. One of them had even trained at the prestigious Schola of Healing in Dovia with her mother before the capital city fell. Lena would give anything to be able to access the school's extensive archives or speak to some of the instructors, but it had all been destroyed, with most of the knowledge lost.

Lena gathered her strength and stood, for the second time, fueled by a drive to keep her promise. She had failed so many people in her twenty-eight years of life, but she wouldn't fail Henry now.

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CHAPTER
THREE

Lena buried Henry at the forest's edge. A mournful chittering in the trees seemed to echo the deep ache in her heart. There wasn't any water nearby to complete the water ritual that would ensure Henry's soul was permitted to enter Brilliance, the paradise of the EverGods. Leaving his burial unfinished was a shame she would carry with her, although, if she were honest, she wasn't sure what she believed anymore. It had been fifty years since the Goddess Quintessa abandoned Eteris and the wraiths emerged from the darkness that overtook Dovia. In her absence, some had taken to praying to the other Gods for help, but Lena never heard of them having any meaningful presence in Eteris.

Most suspected the wraiths had found their way in since the Goddess's magic no longer existed to protect them, but the truth was nobody knew why she'd left or anything about the world the wraiths came from.

Lena's heart ached knowing there was nothing she could do for the others. Mostly elderly evacuees from Dovia, they'd decided to settle in the once-abandoned village because it was the closest settlement available that was also considered a safe distance away from the fallen capital. Her mother had refused to leave them and became the village healer, ensuring supplies were delivered and using her connection with the Healer's Organization to make sure their needs were met.

Lena didn't remember walking back to the house where the remnants of her old life lay dying. She packed a bag, making sure to grab her mother's traveling cloak. The emerald broach pinned onto the clasp glinted with the light of the sun, another reminder of all she'd lost.

Making her way over to where Henry’s body had lain, she did her best to ignore the blood staining the floor and pried open the loose board. Gold, ornate double loops, like an infinity symbol or a stretched figure eight, lay inside a linen cloth. Colored crystals hung from it, not unlike the two thin crystals that hung from the emerald broach. There were many types of crystals in the land of Reimar, but she’d never seen ones like this before. She packed it into her bag, wondering how the strange metal object could be considered a journal.

Finally, she made her way to Henry’s room. While the rest of the house had been destroyed, his room remained untouched. It still smelled of him, like a sun-kissed wind or baked earth. She sat on his bed and ran her hand over his pillow, remembering the nights she’d helped her mother put him to bed, the countless stories she’d told him, and soothing words she’d whispered when he awoke terrified from a nightmare.

While she would have liked to spend a few more moments amongst Henry’s things, it was getting late. The trip to Enora would take her several days on foot. It would be grueling and dangerous, but nothing scared her more than losing her brother’s soul, not even the infection that would eventually gain control over her body.

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CHAPTER

FOUR

Lena had just set off into the eerie silence of the day, pack slung over her shoulder, when she heard a soft boom. She froze, the wild beat of her heart thumping loudly against her ribs. Lena willed her legs to move as she eyed the distance between where she stood and the safety of the forest. *Not enough time.* Lena cursed herself as she realized her mistake too late.

It was common knowledge wraith attacks drew mysterious creatures to the area, likely drawn by their energy. But nothing would be more dangerous to her than a soulbound soldier, the brutal warriors tasked with ridding the land of the infected. Indecision kept her frozen in place, the seconds ticking away. She only had one option: hide.

Lena made for a small house at the edge of the village. She'd barely made it through the open doorway when she heard soft footsteps round the corner. Lena ducked into the kitchen, ears straining for any sound that might indicate the need to run. Unlike the houses at the center of the village, this one was undisturbed, as if the people who had lived here merely stepped out for an errand. Lena thanked the Goddess she'd chosen this one, noting that it would be easier to escape if she didn't have to dodge any obstacles.

Light footsteps paused right outside the home. And then silence. Gathering her strength, Lena willed her heart to slow and her lungs to draw in air. Finally, after what seemed like an age, in what was either luck or chance, the footsteps receded.

Knowing that whatever was out there might decide to return, she made her move. Securing her pack to ensure it wouldn't make noise, she crept to

the nearest window. Standing where she had been only moments before was a woman with long, white hair flowing down her back. Distorted limbs unfolded from her back and materialized into black, leathery appendages. She turned then, seeming to inspect the decimated village, and Lena was stunned to see that she was beautiful. But the fury in her onyx eyes and contorted features of her face immediately negated her beauty.

The unearthly roar that erupted from the woman confirmed Lena's instincts. She stretched out her wings and the leathery skin disappeared. White and gold feathers filled where the black, leathery skin had been. Lena blinked. The woman scanned the area one last time before she bent her knees, and with a mighty flap of her wings, launched into the air.

Legs trembling beneath her, Lena could only stare after the woman, growing ever smaller in the sky. Eteris had always been known for its monsters, even before wraiths arrived and began to infect the beasts that inhabited her world. Some of them were so strange, rumors said Ferah, the Goddess of wild things, had created them and gifted them to Quintessa. Even some of the plants in Eteris would eat you, albeit slowly. But the beasts native to the lands of Reimar kept mostly to themselves, remaining hidden in the forests or scattered throughout the plains. Lena had never seen a creature like this before, one who could almost entirely pass for human. It appeared she'd been wrong. There were indeed more terrifying things in Reimar than soulbound soldiers.



LENA SPENT the night in the forest, just off the dirt road that connected most of the villages in the area. Initially, she'd been too terrified to sleep, but exhaustion won out near dawn despite the strange noises deep in the trees.

She had a meager breakfast of dried fruit and tended to her needs before she started moving, often scanning the skies for the flying creature she'd seen in the village. After walking for the larger part of the day, Lena finally crested the hill that allowed her to glimpse Dovia. A sense of dread wrapped around her as she took in the sight.

She'd known she was growing closer to the city, the forest gradually changing as she walked, a sign of her proximity to it. The trees in the surrounding wood were enormous, having grown to incredible heights after

the city fell. Those who had witnessed the transformation over time speculated their continued growth protected the rest of the land from the seeping dark. Once the glimmering capital of the realm, Dovia was said to be cursed after a black mass erupted from the castle grounds, killing every living soul that resided there and leaving nothing behind. Not even ash.

The sun had just set behind the tallest spires of the castle, the obsidian stones now backlit by an eerie red glow. Now she understood why it was often referred to as Obsidian's Cradle. The mountains rising up behind the castle gave the illusion that it sat cradled beneath the towering peaks. She couldn't help but feel like the sight was a bad omen, the crumbling spires reaching into the darkening sky like claws set to rip out the very heart of Reimar. As she approached, she could make out the temple, nestled below the castle in the heart of the city, now with a gaping hole in it. Black lines appeared to have been drawn up the sides. She recognized them now as vines that crept up, up, up, finding purchase in the cracks and blown out windows. They looked eerily similar to the black veins spiderwebbing away from the wounds in her chest. The wraithwound.

On the other side of the city, she could just make out the large circular structure that had once been the library. Not much remained of the building but the outer walls, constructed of pointed arches. The largest of the arches housed the main doors to the building, which stood intact. Her grandfather had told her the smaller arches had once framed beautiful stained-glass windows that would reflect the most brilliant shades of color on all manner of scrolls and tomes. Despite the damage the buildings had sustained, the remains of both buildings still towered over the once fine homes sprawled at the base of the castle. Lena could hardly believe the stones used to construct the city had once been white. It seemed not even the stones had escaped the power that decimated all life there.

Grief clung to her heart and exhaustion to her bones, but Henry's last words kept her legs moving. As she drew closer to the city, the defensive outer wall, once beautiful with its ornate ogival arch gates, now served as a sinister reminder of how sometimes the very thing meant to keep evil out could, in fact, trap it in. Rumors said the city had developed a sort of sentience, the gates now working to alert the city any time someone entered.

Lena shuddered at the thought of her mother having walked through the gates before she disappeared. The emerald broach seemed to grow heavier

on her cloak as she thought of her. She missed her so much it hurt to breathe, and she wished for nothing more than to be able to embrace her, to ask her for help. To feel less alone. But she knew she couldn't think about it now or she might collapse and never get back up.

The idea of spending another night alone in the forest was daunting but still better than entering the city. Her wounds throbbed so fiercely now that she had to grind her teeth to keep from sobbing. Just as she noticed a peculiar prickling sensation coming from the wraithwound, she heard a high-pitched squawk from the trees, followed by a deafening roar. As if in response, a blinding spike of pain lanced through her chest and shoulder. What in the name of the EverGods was that?

Frozen to the spot, Lena's heart hammered in her chest. Every instinct in her body told her to run, to hide. A loud crack from branches nearby jolted her out of paralysis. Lena whipped her head around, turning in a circle as she looked for some place that might be safe.

She stood in the middle of the dirt road. The fork to her right led into the city while the other led past Dovia to Enora. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, except—

Once the second roar split the air, accompanied by the groan of trees being felled in the forest, she made her choice. Lena ran towards the abandoned city. Darkness loomed on the horizon, and she ran straight into its embrace.

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CHAPTER

FIVE

Lena ran through the ornate metal gates that hung askew, open in silent welcome. The whorls and curls in the metal foretold of the convoluted twists and turns of the city streets, but instead of running toward the center of the city, she took a path to her immediate left. It was one thing to go in; she also had to ensure she could make it out.

Where is it? Where is it? Where is it? The thud of her boots echoed loudly on the onyx cobble stones, like a drum alerting to her location. Every step was agony; her failing strength leeched out with every gasping breath. The impending darkness absorbed the last of the sunlight and made her surroundings harder to see. But she hadn't run into the city on a whim; Lena vaguely remembered learning of a sprawling manor that sat at the edge of the city. One of her favorite patients and a family friend, Ada, had told her about it long ago; it had its own separate entrance through the defensive wall. The King's Master of Magic used it often to travel the realm looking for skilled magic users and artifacts. Ada had lived in the city for many years working as a tailor that specialized in garments made with opalsilk, but she'd left before the city fell.

This gamble would most likely end in certain death, as monsters had reportedly inhabited the city after it fell, but it seemed like the safest place to hide from whatever danger lurked beyond the gargantuan trees. A third roar split the air, and the ground shook, almost knocking her off her feet. Mere seconds later, a blast of energy exploded on the other side of the wall.

Magic.

Awe and terror struck her at once. Magic that wasn't linked to the healing spring was incredibly rare. While there had once been those born

with magical abilities in Reimar, they too were rare. Before his death, the King had hunted them to extinction. Or near extinction. Nobody knew for sure. There were always rumors about those who'd fled or hid to avoid capture.

Lena had only ever learned about Seers and Casters, abilities attributed to the ancestral lines of the Maiden, a woman who was blessed by the Goddess long ago. Currently, only one person was known to still hold magic, but nobody had ever met the sorcerer. His magic was said to be odd and dangerous. Not of the Goddess, the source of his power was unknown. It was he that created the soulbound soldiers and set them free upon the land to hunt down wraiths.

Just as Lena began to question the accuracy of her memories, an imposing structure rose up from the wilted earth. Constructed of roughhewn stone, the manor had a steep, pitched roof with multiple gables and chimney stacks. Its deep-set windows stared back at Lena like depthless, unblinking eyes. Crumbling pillars punctuated the entry way, kept upright only by the thick black vines that seemed to slither around them. Heavy oak doors, stained in the same shade of onyx, waited for her beyond them. The manor seemed to whisper to Lena, as if luring her inside.

She pulled herself over the low stone wall that surrounded the property. As she landed on the manor grounds, Lena's initial panic started to fade and was slowly replaced by intrigue and curiosity. A sense of familiarity washed over her, a tugging in her gut that led her towards the front doors. Overgrown paths branched off the main one to other parts of the property. Distantly, she knew she should find a place to hide that was close to the wall, as that would give her the best chance of locating the exit, but her feet kept pulling her towards the main entry way of the manor.

Lena blinked. She didn't remember arriving at the front door. A blast just beyond the city's defensive wall had Lena reaching for the large decorative doorhandles. It took some effort, but she managed to tug the heavy doors open. The manor's grandiose entryway greeted her; plush sitting room furniture and intricate wood paneling hinted at the immense wealth of those who'd lived here. A few family portraits still clung to the wall, the canvas damaged as if ink had been spilled onto them, but one of the paintings caught Lena's attention. There was a young family oiled on canvas. The man's face had been blotted out by the inky splotches along with one of the children, but the other two figures, the mother and the

youngest son, were clearly visible. The woman with auburn hair cascading over a royal blue dress held him tightly. He looked familiar somehow, the young boy, until Lena realized it was a reflection of her grief. A mother with her youngest son. A depiction of those she missed so fiercely.

Lena wandered further into the manor, past a commanding fireplace built of stacked stone with a wooden mantel. In the next room, a partially shattered chandelier still hung from the ceiling, its tear-shaped crystals the color of smoke. She imagined that at one point, the undamaged crystals might have reflected the full spectrum of the sun into the room, bathing it in radiant light. A grand staircase filled the rest of the room like two elegant arms sweeping towards her, frozen in what would be a graceful embrace. They led to a large overhanging balcony where pieces of the intricately carved banister were missing.

But a glint of gold hidden in the shadows beneath the balcony caught her eye. Most of the hand-carved frame was black, but a small corner seemed to have retained its original luster. It was the same woman she'd seen before, but this time, she wore a haunted expression. Just as she was about to turn away, Lena noticed a gap in the paneling to her left. A small well-worn area to the side of the paneling suggested it might be a door. When she blinked, the door was open. Lena stepped back in horror. She didn't remember opening the passageway. This was wrong. Something wasn't—

Her consciousness returned slowly, but her vision did not. Lena reached out, the darkness so impenetrable she couldn't see, and was met cool damp stone on both sides . . . some sort of tunnel. Gradually, she felt movement return to her legs, fear flooding her body at the same time. Lena went to turn around but hesitated. Something was calling to her, a whisper she couldn't quite make out, and then the feeling turned into a soft hand at her back pushing her onward. Then, for the second time, her world went black.

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CHAPTER

SIX

Lena woke to watery light streaming in from a long, rectangular window high above. Cold, hard stone bit into her cheek, and her body was so sore she could barely move. Her muscles screamed in protest as she got up, the musty air making it hard to breathe.

The chamber was covered in cracked stone blocks blanketed by a layer of dust. She couldn't make out much of what lay at the far end of the space. There seemed to be an odd disturbance in her field of vision when she glanced over. Tears pricked her eyes as she took in the room around her and considered her circumstances. Lena didn't want to think about how or why she'd ended up beneath the manor although a part of her suspected what had occurred. It was the same part of her that detected something foreign growing inside her, seeping into her consciousness. She knew one thing for sure; she'd spent the darkest hours of the night inside the fallen city.

"Are you okay?" a voice asked.

Startled, Lena backed into the shadows behind her, almost tripping when something brushed past her legs, but she recovered quickly. Scanning the area, she found there was a hand waving to her from across the room. Lena didn't move. As her eyes continued to adjust, she realized there was a man pinned under a large block. It almost obscured him completely from sight.

He looked to be middle-aged and wore a long-sleeved linen shirt. He had brown eyes and brown hair cropped close to his scalp. Just like the space around them, he too was covered in a layer of fine dust. The man leaned against the wall behind him; his broad shoulders slumped.

"Who are you?" she rasped, her throat dry from disuse.

“I’m Leonid,” he whispered.

“That’s not what I meant—”

Leonid held a finger to his mouth and pointed to a gaping hole at the far end of the room. From her position at the wall, she could see it clearly now. Lena took several steps away from it and moved closer to Leonid.

“I was here looking for something when the ground began to shake, and stones came loose from the walls,” he continued in a low tone, his hand gesturing to the cracks in the walls and missing pieces of stone.

Lena eyed him warily. Looters were known to enter the city in search of healing crystals or other valuables that had been left behind when the population was wiped out. Some got lucky, making a fair bit of coin, but others never returned, like her mother.

“Searching for valuables, then?” Lena whispered back.

“Something like that,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Lena considered. It was unwise to talk to strangers under normal circumstances— anonymity was highly valued in Reimar—but this was not normal.

“Lena,” she said after a moment.

A skittering noise up above them sent chills down her spine, and her head snapped up. When she looked back at Leonid, he was pale.

“There’s something else in here with us,” he said, in a barely audible whisper.

She considered fleeing. EverGods knew it was probably safer than sticking around, but the healer in her kept her rooted in place. Or maybe it was the fear coursing through her that did that. Either way, she couldn’t leave him.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she said.

Leonid shook his head and pointed down at his thigh.

Against her better judgement, she walked over and crouched down to get a closer look. As she did, a sharp chittering noise broke the silence. Lena looked around, trying to locate the source of the sound when her gaze snagged on a distortion in the air above the strange hole. It was beginning to ripple. Leonid followed her gaze towards the end of the room, his mouth falling open in horror as a claw-tipped hand began to emerge.

“Go,” he mouthed at Lena and pointed towards the window at the opposite wall.

But she shook her head. She wouldn’t leave him down here, with *that*. Lena inspected his leg again and was relieved to see it wasn’t broken, just pinned. She held her hands up and made a pushing gesture, not daring to speak. She was beginning to panic too, the edges of her vision turning black.

Leonid froze, his face draining entirely of color.

She blinked, shaking the dark spots away and waited. When he didn’t reply, she made the pushing gesture again. The skittering noise echoed in the chamber closer this time, which seemed to snap Leonid back into action, and he nodded frantically.

Lena placed both hands on the boulder and used her remaining strength to push, knowing full well the agony this would cause her wraithwound. The stone didn’t budge. As if on cue, both turned to the terrifying sight at the end of the chamber, but the claw-tipped hand hadn’t emerged any further.

Releasing a shaking breath, Lena placed her hands back on the stone. Leonid joined her, placing his free hand on the boulder to push across his body. It was so incredibly heavy, and she was *so so* tired. When the stone didn’t budge, she stole another glance at the far end of the room. To her horror, the hand suspended there flexed, fingers curling into a fist, and then continued to emerge. A spike of fear lanced through her so sharply that her field of vision narrowed as black converged at the edges. Convinced she was close to blacking out again, she returned to the stone and *pushed*, clenching her jaw to avoid screaming with the effort. At last, the stone shifted, scraping against the other stones below it. The black edges in her vision were slow to clear, likely a sign of her flagging strength, and yet, Lena couldn’t tear her gaze away from the leathery black fingers. The slightly curled claws made her shiver.

She distantly heard Leonid’s grunt of pain as he shifted his body, and then a firm, warm hand grasped her wrist. Settling into that feeling of warmth, Lena blinked and saw what might be considered an elbow break through the translucent film that covered the inky black hole. Leonid whispered her name, urgency evident in his tone.

“We have to go! Now!” he mouthed.

Leonid released her wrist and pulled himself up using the wall behind him for support. He moved with a deep limp but seemed mobile enough. He tugged gently on her arm, and they made their way to the opposite wall

where Lena had woken up. Silently, they mapped a path up the wall using a pile of rubble that reached just beneath the window. Lena tested a large block towards the bottom that was angled precariously on another. It held. She looked down at Leonid to see if he might need assistance, but he only waved his arms in a shooing motion urging her to continue. Lena pulled herself up block after block, scraping her arms on sharp edges and breaking her fingernails as she worked to keep her grip on the dusty stone. Skittering and scraping noises continued nearby, which only fueled Lena's desperation to escape the stone chamber. Leonid moved slowly but seemed just as determined to get out as she was.

Lena was nearly to the wide ledge of the window when she heard a snarl and a hiss pierce the silence. She flung herself toward the ledge, hooking a leg over the side to pull herself onto it. Leonid was not far behind, his eyes wide with terror. She crawled out, doing her best to avoid the broken glass shards that littered the space. Leonid crawled out of the window right behind her, and together they climbed from the window well into the crisp morning air of a pink-tinted dawn.

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CHAPTER

SEVEN

Lena looked around frantically, uncertain of which direction to go.

"This way!" Leonid shouted, half limping, half running towards the defensive outer wall of the city.

Lena followed him across the property through a field of withered grass and blackened trees and past a crumbling stone fountain in the center of the gardens and ramshackle stables.

"Does this way lead us out of the city?" she asked, eyeing the path through the dry, cracked soil.

"Yes!"

Leonid led her towards a hidden gap in the wall where two sections overlapped, creating a passageway out. It took them to an iron door, secured by a rusted chain and padlock. Lena ran her hands through her hair, her mind racing when she heard the rustle of keys. She peered over Leonid's shoulder to see he had inserted a key into the padlock and was removing the chain.

"How do you have those?" she asked, both surprised and relieved.

"I found them in the stables on the property a while back. Come, let's keep moving," he said quickly.

Leonid peered out of the hidden passageway before heading towards the forest across the road, his limp a little lighter. Lena followed, gaping at the splintered trees that littered the road that would have led her back to Virdeen. Despite their injuries they moved swiftly, the adrenaline aiding their escape. When they were far enough into the forest to feel a sense of relief from the darkness that permeated the city, Leonid stopped.

"Let's take a minute," he panted.

Gasping for air, Lena leaned against one of the massive tree trunks nearby, hardly able to register the thick bark cutting into her back for the terror coursing through her. She brought her hands to her cheeks as she willed her breathing to slow.

“What *was* that? That *thing*?” she asked.

“I think you know what that was.” Leonid leaned back into a tree opposite her, rubbing his leg as he studied her. His gaze dipped briefly to the emerald broach before he locked eyes with her once more.

Lena stared back. Only now did it strike her that she had followed a stranger into the woods. He didn’t make any move to approach her though. Then a softness filled his features.

“How long ago were you attacked?” he asked.

Lena’s breath hitched. She considered running; she was exhausted and out of breath, sure, but he’d never catch her with an injured leg.

“How did you know?” she asked instead.

“Like calls to like. Besides, you didn’t seem like a thrill seeker or a looter when you entered the chamber last night,” he said.

Lena shivered, remembering what it felt like to lose control.

“Is that where they come from then? Wraiths?” she asked, goosebumps rising across her flesh as she asked.

“Would explain it, wouldn’t it?” he said, and then he lowered his head and sighed. “But I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

An image of the sickly appendage emerging from the hole flashed in her mind, and she shook her head, desperate to be rid of it.

“So…how long?” he asked again.

“Three days.”

“Three?!” Leonid gaped at her, and then his expression changed into one of knowing. “Who then?”

“Who what?” she asked, confusion crinkling her brow.

“Who was your first? Your first soul? You wouldn’t be functioning very well today, much less have been able to spare me, if you hadn’t already fed it.”

Fed it?

Lena’s stomach lurched, and bile rose in her throat. Leonid must have noticed her expression because his face softened, and regret crept into his features. She couldn’t help the tears that welled up in her eyes then.

“Okay, it’s okay. You don’t have to tell me. It wasn’t purposeful then, you feeding it?”

“Can we not call it that, please!” Lena snapped.

Leonid held his hands up in apology. “You’re starting to turn,” he said, more a statement than a question although she could tell it was both.

It was one thing to admit to having a wraithwound but another all together to openly admit she was turning. Lena had suspected as much when she woke up in the tunnels, and then again some moments ago when her vision went black around the edges as she worked to free Leonid. As much as she wanted to think it was due to exhaustion and her injuries, she knew deep down that wasn’t true.

But she didn’t know this man. She didn’t know if she could trust him or what he might do if she confirmed it. If he happened to be a member of the militia, it would be his duty to kill her before she turned. She chewed on her lip, considering what she knew about him. It was unlikely. Militia members weren’t known to go into the fallen city for any reason. Most of them were cowards hiding behind the authority they were given and using it to perpetuate cruelty, just like their leader.

In the absence of a legitimate ruler and propped up by the chaos and fear that swept through the land after Dovia fell, a group of mercenaries had taken control of Reimar. First, they’d focused on stifling any political dissent, and then they had systematically disseminated propaganda to influence the elders of every town into accepting their control as the only way to keep the people safe. Initially, they had sent out patrols to guard the cities, but once the infiltration was complete, the beheadings began.

Not long after, one of the mercenaries had decided to consolidate his power, slaughtering everyone who had helped the group ascend to power, along with anyone else who might have challenged him or knew his true name. He became known only as the Commander and focused on building a small army made of separate militias to protect his power. He accepted anyone who was willing to fight on his behalf. The Commander’s army was second only to soulbound soldiers when it came to ridding the realm of wraiths, but effective, nonetheless.

Lena took in his appearance. With thinning hair, chestnut eyes, and a strong nose, Leonid’s face looked sun-worn like he’d spent a lot of time outside. A traveler perhaps.

His lips thinned as he waited for Lena’s response.

Deciding that it would be worth the risk to learn more, she nodded slowly, lifting the cape of her cloak. Leonid's head fell.

"What do you know about wraiths?" she asked.

Leonid sighed, stretched his neck, and sank down to the forest floor. "Not enough."

After a moment, Lena followed opposite him. They sat among the ferns and towering trees, their trunks as large as houses. The almost-bare limbs reached up to the brightening sky.

Leonid pulled out provisions from a small pack and started rummaging through a bag of dried fruit, skipping what she thought might be dried cherries for the apricots. She did the same but found her food tasted like rubber on her tongue. The saltiness of the dried meat was now reminiscent of disinfecting solution.

"Anything you could tell me would be helpful." Lena swallowed the food quickly, trying not to gag.

"Of those that survive the initial attack, most die within days. If they don't, they turn," he said, a grim expression on his face.

Hearing it out loud made her situation feel all the more real, even if she'd already known. "What can you tell me about the timeline? Do you know anything about that?"

"It seems to be different for everyone. Since you've already started to turn, I would say you likely don't have much time left. Two days, if that."

Lena's heart sank, and Leonid gave her a pitying look.

"To stay alive, you would have to keep the infection *not hungry*," he said, choosing his words carefully, "which, from what I've seen, can delay the turn for a time. But if you are giving it what it needs, it gets stronger within you, decreasing your chances of fighting it."

If what Leonid said was true, it was unlikely she would make it to Enora or survive long enough to figure out how to free Henry's soul, but she had to know.

"How many did—how many souls—" Lena couldn't finish her sentence.

"Well, there seem to be different types of wraiths. I've heard some speculate that it depends on how strong the infection is," he said slowly, studying her face. "The logic behind it being that the stronger it is, the more it will require. The most I've heard a wraith consume is three souls, but in

that case the person couldn’t fight it and was . . . lost.” Leonid got quiet, picking at the fruit now.

Lena was horrified at that thought. She couldn’t imagine actively working to feed the wraith. A part of her wondered how Leonid knew so much, but now was not the time to question it.

“Do you know anyone who has . . . ” Her voice trailed off.

A gleam of understanding lit his gaze, but he didn’t answer. Lena picked up the dried meat and ate a few more pieces. It settled like rocks in her stomach, but she needed the sustenance.

“Do you have a plan?” he asked tentatively.

“A plan?” Lena repeated.

“Yes, you know, what you plan to do before you turn fully,” he said.

A somber mood settled around them, the adrenaline from the morning’s escape a distant memory. Despair’s familiar hold began to tighten its grip on Lena, her thoughts beginning to race. If she couldn’t stop or delay the change medicinally, staying alive long enough to figure out how to free Henry’s soul would require feeding the infection.

Human souls.

No. She could never, would never, let it get to that. But also, she’d been so focused on making it to Enora, she hadn’t considered what would happen if she turned before then. Already having lost control once, it was a valid question.

“Many decide to end it before it’s too late,” he said, a little more quietly.

Lena nodded. It might be the best option. At least if she turned before reaching Enora. But as long as she was still human, she would keep going.

“ . . . go to next?” Leonid asked.

“Sorry?”

“Where are you headed next?” Leonid asked.

But Lena didn’t answer; she had already disclosed too much. And because heading to a city full of people with a wraithwound would be . . . risky.

He nodded once, face dire.

“Do you know of anyone who has managed to survive the change?” she tried again, desperation leaking from her tone.

Leonid shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry.”

It’d been foolish to ask. She’d already known the answer to this question, too.

“Stay hidden in the forest,” he said. “It’s not much safer but better than the roads. There’s been an increase in patrols in this area. They’ll take your head. And if it’s not them, it won’t be long until soulbounds come looking. They’re usually not fond of the Commander’s men, but they’ve been known to work together if the occasion calls for it.”

Lena nodded. She knew he was right. She’d heard the same things. Even as sheltered as she’d been in her village, news always found its way into even the most remote locations in this Goddess forsaken land.

Leonid was packing his now empty bag of dried fruit. He used the tree at his back to stand, rubbing his thigh as he did. Lena stood carefully, mentally assessing the state of her body and newer injuries.

“Thank you. For helping me in there.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, staving off another shudder at the thought of the ghastly, claw-tipped hand.

With a nod, he turned and started walking away. Lena did the same. She made it several paces before Leonid called out to her.

“Lena.”

When she turned, Leonid held out one finger. “I *do* know one. I don’t know the *how*. But one.”

Know one? It took her a moment to figure out what he meant, but then understanding crashed over her. Her eyes grew wide, questions rising in her throat, but Leonid was already walking away.

“Good luck, Lena,” he called over his shoulder.

And as she resumed walking, a tiny seed of hope grew in her heart. One person had managed to survive a wraith attack and keep from turning. Somebody had figured it out. It was enough.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

The slight throbbing in her left arm slowly morphed into an itching sensation that reached all the way to her fingertips. She did her best to ignore it. But she wasn't able to ignore the stiffness in her limbs and the throbbing of the bandaged wounds on her chest. Instead, she focused on increasing her pace.

Despite the slight chill in the air, the sun burned through the sparse canopy, warming Lena as fatigue began to set in. Fall was well underway in Reimar, the forest floor now covered with giant brown leaves that crunched underfoot and whispered when the wind slinked through the trees. Despite the enormous branches that crisscrossed above her, it felt increasingly brighter outside the longer she walked. Her eyes strained against the light of the sun, intensifying the headache that was slowly taking root at the back of her skull. Lena pulled at her cloak, hoping to get some air to flow through the thick fabric.

The movement stirred her mother's scent, the earthy perfume enveloping her. The thought of her mother stole the very air from her lungs, making it painful to breathe. Lena inhaled deeply trying to fill her lungs and winced at the stretching of the skin on her chest and shoulder. The injury was getting worse, heat now rolling off the enflamed flesh. Her wound had become infected, and she wondered what might kill her first. The mortal infection, the wraith, or something else.



AFTER SEVERAL HOURS of trudging through the forest, she heard voices filtering through the trees. At first, they were barely audible, but eventually raucous laughter and jeering reached her ears. As she grew closer, the destroyed flesh of her chest began to prickle, and Lena's mind flashed back to what Leonid had told her.

Avoiding the largest of the leaves, Lena took small, deliberate steps towards the base of a tree. She listened intently to get a sense of who might be out there, but she didn't have to listen long to confirm her suspicions. Lena glanced around, hoping to spot a way around the area when a woman's voice caught her attention. Lena's curiosity warred with her sense of self-preservation, and she halted.

"Let me go!" the woman demanded. "I'm not infected. You've held me in this cage for two days now. You'd already be able to tell if I were!"

"You still haven't told us what you're doing in these woods. Nobody enters the Overgrown unless they're trying to stay hidden—" said the gruff voice.

"—or hiding something. You'll tell us, eventually," finished another voice.

The exchange was followed by a bang at the metal bars, like the woman had slammed her hands into them in frustration. Lena *could not*, *would not*, end up in a cage, but she had no idea how she was going to get away from this group without being seen. She might be able to wait until dark, but traveling the woods at night was not wise. Leonid had not been exaggerating when he said there were more patrols in the area.

Lena crept around the base of the tree looking for someplace to hide. She found a crevice in one of the undulations that lined the base and squeezed into it, summoning the courage to peer out. Dread coiled in the pit of her stomach as she counted. There weren't only two militia members out there; they were a party of five. A mobile wooden platform was parked towards the back of the camp with a large metal cage set atop of it. Inside was a small, short-haired woman. The men lounged around the fire; a couple of them sat cleaning weapons while another tended to a pot suspended above a blazing fire. The only exception was a larger man who stood at the base of the occupied cage, likely the one that had been threatening the woman.

The loud crack of a tree branch snapping nearby made Lena jump. Everyone at the campground turned to look in her direction. She cursed,

wondering if she'd pulled back in time to keep from being discovered.

As she was debating whether to run or wait it out, a large shadow fell over her. Lena looked up to see an enormous animal step towards her on its hind legs. Most of its body was covered in matted fur slick with oozing, black blood, but on its left side, deep lacerations exposed open flesh. The animal stunk of infection, rot, and another familiar stench that she couldn't place. The healer inside her recoiled at the state of it. An *ursus*. Large, round head, small ears, and a protruding snout with a black nose, this was the type of animal that you'd hear about in passing but could expect to live your entire life without seeing. Living deep in the woods, they weren't known to approach humans.

Making herself as small as possible, Lena backed into the crevice and pressed her body into the tree. The creature stood there assessing the camp in front of it before its head angled slightly, and its nose twitched in her direction. Lena froze, expecting the beast to attack, but it merely stood there for another moment before coming down on all fours. The creature swung its head toward her, revealing wholly black eyes and a gash that cut straight through its brow, had missed the eye, and continued down the muzzle.

Lena stood there, face to face with an infected ursus, and while she recognized a sense of terror pulsing through her, she also felt something else. Something like recognition tugging at the back of her mind. She felt sorry for the animal, both awestruck and mystified by what this creature might look like if it weren't so badly injured or hadn't been infected. But it was. Then, without warning, the animal charged into the camp with an otherworldly roar.

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CHAPTER
NINE

The shouts that replaced the crude banter in the camp intermingled with the panicked whinnies of horses tethered nearby. Embers from the campfire exploded into the air, along with steaming hot liquid, as the beast ran straight through the fire at one of the men. Lena considered her options; it was likely she'd already been spotted, and going around the camp might lead her into another patrol's camp. After a moment's hesitation, Lena burst from her spot by the tree into the chaos of the camp.

As she sprinted through the campsite, she heard the sickening crunch of bones and squelching flesh, directly followed by a pained scream that was cut short. She made it three quarters of the way when a rusted cage crashed in front of her, blocking her path. Lena threw her body sideways to dispel her momentum and landed roughly on the damp earth. She groaned and rolled onto her back, squeezing her eyes shut to manage the pain. Not even that last shot of adrenaline was successful at keeping the exhaustion and fatigue at bay. The events of the last few days had taken their toll, since prior to that she'd spent the last several months in bed and apathetic to life around her. Lena barely managed to get up and begin limping towards the trees, secure in the knowledge that the beast was still wreaking havoc in the camp. But then a cold, commanding voice rose above the chaos.

"Manning, Trevor, flank the beast! Now, GO!" A voice commanded before adding, "Vince? VINCE?"

"He's dead!" yelled another voice in response.

"Kelvin! We have another visitor. Retrieve her, NOW!" the first voice ordered.

"Yes, Jarek, uh, sir."

Lena ran faster, urging her body past the exhaustion and the pain. Pounding footsteps sounded behind her, and she turned to see a fist flying towards her face. The impact knocked her back, upending her world. Stars exploded in her vision, and a scream escaped her throat. As she was dragged back towards the camp, thick fingers threaded through her hair. The metallic tang of blood on her tongue provided some insight regarding the extent of the injuries she'd sustained although it was difficult to think through the acute throbbing in her face.

Lena was thrown against the metal cage that lay at an odd angle on the ground and felt a boot to her stomach as Kelvin bent over her and shouted something indiscernible at her. The rough scrape of rope tore at her skin as it was fastened onto her wrists and pulled against one of the bars. Lena panted, willing her vision to clear as she struggled to take in the scene around her.

Three men surrounded the creature, but then, Lena blinked and there were only two. Scanning the area, she found him quickly, or at least, what was left of him. From the looks of it, he'd been slammed against a tree and now lay crumpled at the bottom of it. A smattering of bright red blood marked the place the body had hit before it fell to the forest floor.

Lena watched on as the men attempted to take down the beast, panic filling her veins. She tested the strength of her bindings, shaking and twisting her wrists frantically as she tried to loosen the ropes. Despair's icy grip clamped down on her as she realized she might not be leaving this camp. Worse yet, if that came to pass, Henry's soul would be lost.

Groaning from inside the cage caught her attention, and she turned to see two women inside. She stared at the small girl lying in the cage next to the short-haired woman. Lena twisted her bound hands carefully around the bar and touched the young girl's arm. She didn't stir, but the woman next to her did.

Lena was amazed that the woman was still alive, especially with how violently the cage crashed after being launched from the platform. But she didn't have a chance to think about it as another deafening roar split the air. She had no idea where the men were, and she didn't care. In a strange turn of fate, she found herself rooting for the crazed animal, feeling more terrified of the men than she did of it.

Lena looked back at the cage to see the woman was reaching for something inside her boot. When she drew her hand back out, she was

holding a finger-sized crystal. Lena's eyes grew wide as she realized what she was looking at. The woman snapped the top off the delicate hollow rock and sent the contents down her throat. Lena heard the distinct wet rasp in the woman's breathing ease and then disappear.

A loud chittering sounded from above, and Lena tore her gaze away from the woman to scan the trees while tugging at her restraints with increased fervor. The woman in the cage had gotten up to check on the girl. Lena realized she must have been passed out in the cage next to the woman the entire time. But the girl didn't move. Face unreadable, the woman turned and started evaluating the integrity of the bars. The cage was badly damaged, and some of the bars on the back had separated from the frame.

The woman's hands were also bound, but she managed to grip the bar and push, leaving bloody smears on the half-rusted metal. When that didn't work, she wiped her hands off on her clothes and braced her hands on the top. She kicked at the weak spot in the back until one of the bars flew off with a clang. Lena turned to make sure the men hadn't heard, but they were still fighting the enraged beast. Then, she came around and started working on loosening Lena's bindings.

"Thank you!" Lena breathed.

The woman said nothing, intent on her task. Her short, sand-colored curls bobbed as she looked between the ropes and the status of the standoff nearby. She had a swollen lip and fresh purple bruising along one of her cheekbones that was healing before Lena's very eyes. She couldn't help but stare.

A garbled scream made its way over to them and sent a little spark of hope through Lena. Maybe the animal would rid them of these cruel men. If she had her pick, she'd choose the beast. Lena's hopes were extinguished almost as quickly as they had ignited.

The beast was moving slower, each movement requiring immense effort. It lumbered towards the man in the camp, still roaring. The man lunged, side-stepping what would have likely been a fatal blow as the creature swiped at his face with its claws. He pivoted, raising his sword and sinking it deep into the beast's open maw through the soft flesh there and into its skull. Stunned, she stared as the beast stumbled sideways and then toppled over, sending a tremor through the land and taking the man down with it.

She held her breath, hoping the man would not get up again. But he did. Bloody and swaying, the man pulled on the sword still stuck inside the animal's skull. A sense of sadness pulsed in her heart for the once magnificent creature. Just then, Lena felt the ropes on her wrists fall away, and she turned to see the woman who had aided her flee into the trees.

Lena followed, moving achingly slow, every step a force of will. She heard the pounding of boots behind her and turned sharply, hoping to find a place to hide. Her heart drummed in her chest, and black returned to the edges of her vision as she crouched by a tangle of thick, overgrown roots. A burst of intense prickling from her chest seemed to urge her to quiet her breathing and focus on her surroundings.

Movement from the base of the tree in front of her caught her attention. She squinted trying to figure out what she was looking at and realized a pair of brown eyes were trained on her from across the way. The woman from the cage squatted behind the ferns. She hadn't made it very far. What was she waiting for? Then, it dawned on Lena. The girl. Had the woman been trying to draw the danger away?

Lena noticed the woman's hands were still bound and remembered she had her herb knife in her pack. It was a small tool but would be effective in cutting rope. Lena quietly reached into her pack, feeling for the small tool. Once it was secure in her palm, she flipped her hand over and offered the knife to the woman. Her eyes grew round with recognition, and she gave Lena a small nod.

Lena shut her eyes, straining to get a sense of where the man might be. When only silence greeted her, she pulled her arm back and chucked the knife over to the woman. It landed on the ground right before her with a soft thud. Both women froze. Lena waited to see if the footfalls resumed but heard nothing. Seemingly satisfied with the absence of sound, the woman reached over and snatched the small blade off the ground. She began sawing at the rope, giving Lena a big smile as she did, but the small moment of victory was interrupted by rustling and then the crunch of leaves. It was ruined completely by the sound of the man's voice.

"Where are you, you evil bitch? I know you brought that animal into our camp to save your friend, and now my men are dead!" he raged. The forest became quieter, as if the trees themselves now listened to the hatred he spewed.

“Do you know why I joined the militia?” he continued. “It was because I realized that cowardice is the reason this darkness has spread. My entire village was decimated by two wraiths that turned from the town over. It could have been prevented. My family would still be alive, if those *COWARDS* had done the right thing.”

Guilt wormed its way into the pit of her stomach.

“You must be real close to turning if you can command beasts. Let me help you. It’s obvious you’re too afraid to take your own life. Let me end it before it’s too late. I’ll let your friend go.”

Lena didn’t dare move, but the woman across the way from her did. She slowly retreated further into the trunk of the tree, keeping her gaze fixed towards Lena’s right. Lena’s view was obscured by the undulations at the base of the tree, but she understood that danger was nearby. She retreated too, suddenly very aware of her current circumstances. Lena was injured and exhausted, her body unused to the mental or physical strain she’d been forced to endure. Her ability to successfully fight off an attacker in this condition was next to none. Lena’s hands began to tremble, and before long, her entire body shook with fear. She closed her eyes and held her breath, hoping he would continue through the forest, and they could flee, but by the time she picked up on the near silent crunch of leaves before her, it was too late.

Lena stumbled backward, fear flooding her senses. He reached towards her, extending a thick, muscular arm and plucked her from the base of the tree like a child. Once he’d pulled her face close to his, she realized he was covered in severe burns. The raw skin around his eye and cheekbone was one, large, weeping blister, and it looked like part of his scalp had melted.

Lena gasped, unsure of what was more frightening, the man’s appearance or his resolve. Lena gripped his wrist, using her fingernails to scratch feebly at his arm slick with his own crimson blood.

He held his sword out, remnants of black blood beaded along the edge, but he didn’t raise it. He didn’t need to. His grip, viselike around her neck, tightened. He was choking the life out of her, darkening the memories she was desperate to hold onto. Lena pulled them closer and focused on them.

On the swing of her mother’s ponytail as she turned in the kitchen to reach for a new jar of herbs. The way the sunlight illuminated her medical journal as it lay open on the well-worn wooden table. The way she tucked Lena’s hair behind her ear when she was little.

Henry at ten, his hair mussed after sleep, telling her stories of fantastical creatures he'd made up. The way his nervous smile looked more like a grimace when he was getting into something.

Her grandfather's face crinkling as he laughed, the movement accentuating the creases at the corners of his eyes. The first time he pulled a God's Eye flower out from behind his back. Nights he would tell her stories about his patients and new discoveries he'd made in his travels.

The face of her best friend and the warm smiles of those she'd once treated.

She would die in this forsaken forest, having failed the people she loved most. A heavy sadness crept over her as she shut her eyes, only to open them again as the man's hand disappeared from her neck.

Lena crumpled to the ground, gasping for air. He turned slowly, pulling a small crossed double blade from his shoulder, to face the woman. Lena saw fear flit across her face and then settle into something like determination. Despite the man's towering form, she stood her ground and was ready for him when he took a swing at her head. She ducked and spun, avoiding what would have been a devastating hit.

Lena forced herself to stand, desperation building in her chest. Then, just as she found her footing, she completely lost control of her body.

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CHAPTER

TEN

Lena’s consciousness was yanked back, pulling her from her body and into her mind. She watched helplessly through her eyes as something *else* took control. Panic filled her as she realized two things: the wraith had seized control of her body, and she had no idea *how* or *if* she would ever get it back.

Lena’s right leg dragged involuntarily toward him. He hesitated and glanced over his shoulder, confusion settling across his features. Her other leg pulled forward, managing a second step. He turned to face her, as if he couldn’t quite wrap his head around what was going on. Her eyes focused on the man’s broad chest. Then, her gaze rose as her face slowly angled upward to meet his eyes.

Stunned, he stared at Lena for a moment, almost as if he were entranced by her, but recovered quickly, shifting to lift his sword.

“Fucking demon!” he spat, his face contorting with rage. But before he could lift his sword any further, the woman sprang up from behind and grabbed his bicep, pulling both his arm and his attention away from Lena. Lena’s arm thrust forward, fingers spread, aimed toward his chest. A sharp burst of pain erupted from her fingertips. Surprise and shock bloomed inside her as warm, wet liquid poured through her fingers, followed by the scrape of bone, as she reached into the man’s chest and pulled out his still beating heart.

His body crumpled to the ground in front of her, revealing the woman who had been standing behind him. She had gone pale, her eyes bouncing back and forth between Lena and the heart still clenched in her fist. The woman retreated several steps, moving slowly.

Lena fought to regain control of her body, pushing at the entity that had expanded into her consciousness, but it seemed to wrest more and more control from her, needy and desperate. Just as Lena seemed to gain some traction, pushing her mind outward, a shimmering mass appeared in her vision.

No.

Lena watched, repulsed, as a bloody, claw-tipped hand, *her* hand, reached forward into the mass. Fingers open, she gently waved her hand through it. The mass entered her body, soaking into her skin. It felt like a heavy mist had descended upon her. The eerie sensation lasted only but a moment before it disappeared, and she felt the wraith get stronger, planting a foothold in her mind. It was satiated, at least a little, after having consumed another soul. Distantly, she knew the soul had stabilized her physical body *and* the infection within her. She didn't have any time to dwell on the horror of it before she realized her body was getting ready to move once more.

No, no, NO!

Desperate, Lena pushed and pushed, trying to expand her consciousness. To regain control of her body. Lena felt her legs move as her body stepped jerkily over the heap of the man who lay at her feet. But the woman seemed preoccupied by something above them. *Fool!* What else could she possibly be looking at when Lena, the wraith, continued to approach her? Bile rose in her throat as she realized the woman had picked up the dead man's sword.

"Fight it!" the woman commanded, but Lena didn't know how.

Anguish filled her as she anticipated what the wraith might do.

Shoved into a small corner in her mind, she was helpless to do anything but watch. Pressure pushed down on her as the darkness expanded slowly around her, but when she thought it would take over completely, an earsplitting screech cut through the heavy silence.

Adrenaline flooded her and not just her mind, her body too. She wasn't sure if it was her or the wraith that snapped her head up to scan the branches above. As she did, she felt the pressure loosen. She could feel the entity inside her was distracted. Lena took the opportunity and pushed. Her legs became leaden. The darkness in her mind pushed at her, and she pushed at it, making her body freeze in an unnatural position. Lena could see the moment the woman figured it out. She approached tentatively,

raising the sword. Lena had just enough time to hear the woman's parting words as she lifted the sword high into the air.

"I'm sorry," she said as she brought the pommel of the sword down hard on Lena's temple.

The words barely registered through another piercing screech as pain burst from the side of her skull, and once again, her world went black.

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CHAPTER

ELEVEN

She dreamt of her mother. Dressed in black with her hair pulled back and a gleam of determination in her eyes, she bustled about the kitchen, collecting several items for the day ahead. Lena watched her pack several days' worth of food, some bandages and salves from the shelf. *Just in case*, she had said as she grabbed an extra cloak. She finished up by sheathing a dagger at her waist and kissing both Lena and Henry on the cheek.

She'd been adamant it was important to retrieve a healing crystal for Neema. The elderly woman had lived many years. Like most who grew up when the healing spring existed, the citizens of Reimar enjoyed long lives. But after the healing spring dried up, many succumbed to old age or illness.

Neema had left behind many valuable items when she fled and asked Lena's mother to go get them after being sick for months. While it was possible the items had been looted long ago, Neema seemed confident her family's stash of healing crystals would still be there. Marisee hadn't hesitated.

Lena burned with shame after suggesting to her mother that, perhaps, it wouldn't be worth the risk only to lengthen Neema's life for a little while because while the crystals healed sickness, they didn't prevent death from old age. Her mother had been horrified at Lena's suggestion. She had never forgotten the way her mother looked at her. But even at Lena's most impulsive, when she was younger and felt invincible, she had never dared enter the city.

The scenes playing in her mind seemed to freeze, focusing on the look of farewell Marisee gave them before she left. It was the last time she

would see her mother. Marisee had never returned, and Neema had died almost three years later, having survived longer than anyone had guessed she would.



THE HEADACHE LENA woke up to had a life and rhythm of its own. She went to reach for her head but quickly pulled her hand away, afraid she would cut herself. Looking down at her hands though, there weren't any visible claws. But her skin was filthy, her right hand more so than the other; it was sticky with dried blood and dirt. And then the memory returned. It was the hand she'd used to—

As if summoning the pain with her focus, her fingertips began to throb, and she looked past the dirt and blood to realize she'd lost her fingernails. All of them. Cradling her hands against her body, Lena looked around. The sun was low in the sky. She estimated only a couple of hours before the sun set, blanketing the forest in night. The insistent buzzing of insects nearby made her turn, trying to locate the sound. Then her stomach clenched. Behind her was the body of the man still crumpled on the ground. The man she had killed.

Bile rose in her throat, and Lena vomited, heaving the contents of an already empty stomach onto the earth in front of her. Shock blanketed her senses as she sat there, willing herself to breathe. Careful not to use her hands, she wiped her face on her sleeve and stood. She took a few stumbling steps away from the corpse behind her before the pain in her body eased the state of shock.

Tightness up by her eye and cheekbone, plus the stinging in her lip, reminded her she'd received a hard blow to face. Then, her attention shifted to the pain in her ribs, and she knew one or two might be broken after having been kicked. She had to find a way to stabilize her injuries but not here. The death in this place called to her, and that was frightening.

Lena pushed on, still cradling her hands as she wandered through the forest. She had to find a safe place to rest for the night. Emotion clogged her throat as she took step after step. She missed her mother and brother so fiercely she felt her heart might stop in her chest. *Why had she ever thought she could do this?*

Lena tracked the sun in the sky as it continued its descent. The silence was deafening, highlighting the absence of normal wildlife in the woods. She would be alone in the Overgrown Forest at night. Lena shuddered at the thought but pushed it away, shifting her focus to what she should do next. She wondered briefly if she should head toward the road instead, but Leonid's warning echoed in her mind. No. She would take her chances in the forest.

Tired and aching, Lena trudged on until twilight greeted her beyond the branches above. The stars looked closer somehow, brighter, although she wasn't sure if she was imagining it or if it was a side effect of being concussed. She looked around at the trees nearby, hoping to find safety at the base of one of the towering giants, but when she started clearing some of the leaves on the ground near the roots, a chittering from above had her thinking better of it. Instead, she decided to climb a large boulder that protruded from the forest floor.

By using the deep grooves and cracks in the face, she used her forearms to pull herself up, making sure to avoid the tender tips of her fingers. The boulder was about twice her height, and the top was somewhat flat, offering a place to sit or lie for the night. It would also give her a better vantage point of the forest and keep stinging bugs out of her clothes.

Lena settled on the rock, pushing her back against a piece of stone that jutted up from the boulder. She had just enough light to tend to her hands, using the water in her pack to rinse off some of the blood and grime and add a disinfecting salve. By the time darkness fell, Lena was ready for it, having steeled her resolve. She was surprised to learn the darkness wasn't as impenetrable as she thought it would be. Lena spent the night scanning the forest, repeating her mother's words for comfort.

Our worst moments don't last forever. Eventually, they retreat, making space for something new.

Her mother had whispered these words to her almost every night after her grandfather died. Lena had never realized that perhaps her mother was saying them for herself too. Lena had adored him. Everyone had. He had filled the role of a father since hers had abandoned her and her mother before she was born. And then one day, he was just gone.

Lena had endured so much loss. She would not lose Henry too. She put her hand over her heart, imagining that's where Henry lived inside her, but then the memory of the dead man's heart beating in her outstretched hand

flashed in her mind, and she pulled it away. He would have killed her, she reminded herself, and killed Henry if the wraith hadn't taken over.

Lena released a shuddering breath and pulled her knees up to her chest. Exhaustion pulled at her, making her eyelids feel leaden and her head loll. She considered closing her eyes when a small flash of light deeper into the forest caught her attention. She blinked, wondering if she'd just been imagining it—but no, there it was—*they* were again. Were the lights twinkling? As they grew closer, they disappeared momentarily and then reappeared. Immediately, she recognized a pattern. Lena's heart started to hammer in her chest. Because those weren't twinkling lights; they were *eyes*.

Lena pressed herself farther back into the stone as she watched the creature get closer. It blended in almost entirely with its surroundings. The only thing that gave it away were its eyes and the ferns that swayed as long jerking limbs disturbed the greenery. Lena realized then that the sky had gone black, the lighter colors and bright stars having winked out, taking the light they offered with them. The temperature dropped suddenly, and a cold mist drifted in. Lena didn't dare move, didn't dare tear her gaze away from the creature, not even to pull her cloak tighter around herself.

It continued to stalk toward her, the mist slowly closing in behind it. Lena held her breath, hoping the creature couldn't scent her or the blood she'd washed off her hands earlier. But a sinking feeling in her stomach told her that was exactly what had drawn this monster to her.

It halted. Even the ferns stopped swaying, and she lost sight of it. It was so dark. Without the glowing eyes, she had no idea where the animal was. Lena scanned the forest, hoping to catch a glimpse of it, of a swaying fern, anything, when the creature emerged from shadow to stand on a fallen log, its eyes trained solely on her. The thing roared and crouched down on its haunches, preparing to jump when an enormous root burst forth from the soil and came down on the animal from above, silencing a piercing screech. Lena clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming and watched, eyes round, as the root came up again before slamming into the log once more, burying it and the remains of the creature below the earth. And then the forest floor *rearranged* itself, the ferns crawling around, tree roots slithering beneath the surface as if to hide any evidence of what had just occurred.

Lena sat atop the boulder, shaking like a leaf as realization descended upon her. The rumors about the Overgrown Forest were true. Lena looked down at the forest floor once more, now clear of the eerie mist, the sky brighter with the reappearance of the stars above, and wondered if that would have been her fate tonight if she hadn't decided to climb atop this boulder. Because as the creature drew nearer, she had sensed a familiarity, something *known* to her, although it had felt different, *wrong*. Whatever that creature had been, it was infected, corrupted. And the forest had known.

Lena spent the rest of the night shivering atop the boulder despite the absence of the strange chill, continually scanning the forest for other creatures that might be drawn to where she sat.

When the sky finally began to lighten, she felt the silence retreat as well. It was still deafening but not as pointedly, no longer dangerous. Still, she waited a while longer before she tentatively hopped down, ready to climb back up the boulder if anything moved. When nothing happened, she set off into the forest, praying to the Goddess she wouldn't have the misfortune of encountering any more men or monsters.

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CHAPTER

TWELVE

The next night, Lena easily found a large boulder to rest on and despite hearing disturbing noises in the forest, she hadn't seen any creatures or been witness to the forest's magic.

The night after that, though, Lena had difficulty finding an elevated spot and ended up having to backtrack, sprinting through the dense foliage to a spot she had marked earlier that afternoon. She had just hauled herself up the large stone, fingertips screaming, when the silence grew deeper and the last of the day's light winked out. Every day, the pain of her wraithwound intensified, the flesh hot and tender to the touch. Each time the fabric of her tunic brushed against the bandaged wound, she had to bite her cheek to keep from crying out.

When she finally caught sight of the road that would lead her into Enora the day after, she almost wept in relief.

She hadn't lost control of her body in the last three days and felt confident she could enter the city safely to seek out Ahgrie. She replayed Leonid's words in her mind and hoped he'd been right when he told her feeding the infection would delay the turn.

As she grew closer, she heard the gentle rushing of a small river that flowed past the city walls. Such a beautiful, serene sound, which was in direct contrast to the danger that lurked inside the city. She didn't have to look to know there would be a group of young women dressed in silver robes collecting vials of water to take to the temple.

Ever since the healing spring dried up, those desperate to regain access to the Goddess's healing magic had formed a separate group, a cult really,

of those who thought they might be able to bring magic back by shifting their loyalty.

Instead of trying to regain the Goddess's favor, the High Priest and his moon maidens worshipped Lunis, the goddess of the moon, for it was believed she commanded the tides. The women were tasked with making sure the waterways were clear of debris and ran unobstructed, and they studied the water for any hint of magic. Lena didn't want to think about what might inspire a young woman to join a group plagued by rumors of strange rituals and odd recruiting practices or to worship a goddess that had never made her presence known in Eteris.

Lena stepped off the road and veered into a denser part of the forest, careful to avoid being spotted by area patrols and hidden archers in the trees. She knew to expect questioning at the city gates along with an inspection of "health." The guards claimed it was to keep the city safe from those who might become unwitting hosts to an infection, and while she knew inspections started with the safety of the city in mind, the roving hands and lingering gazes from those tasked with doing them had become a perversion of the original intent.

Disgusted at the thought, she shifted her focus to cleaning herself off using a cloth from her pack that she'd dipped in the river and replacing her tattered blouse. She would have to come up with a convincing story about her injuries. Especially the swollen cheek and black eye. Unable to run her fingers through her hair, she settled for patting it down and dusted off her clothes. Pulling out some of the healing supplies she carried with her, she opened a familiar vial and began to rub a thin stem with small, round leaves over the skin that would most likely be exposed during the health check.

Arms, *chest*, *stomach*, *and legs.* It would be miserable to endure Hollow's Leaf and the red itchy welts that would soon form all over her body, but it was a small price to pay for Henry. She remembered the first time she had come in contact with the plant while out with him. A sad smile greeted the memory of Henry's endless teasing, even while she was crawling out of her skin. Snorting at her between the raucous laughter, he had compared her to the bloated, pink pigs that ran wild near Virdeen, but she knew he was just trying to keep her mind off the insufferable itch. As bad as it was, looking back, she'd been lucky it was only Hollow's Leaf she'd fallen into because its sister plant, the Knife's Edge vine was a sinister variation, with its poison-lined edges and leaves sharp enough to

slice into a person's flesh. The poison would slowly work its way to a person's heart, stopping it cold.

Finishing up with the herb, she let it fall to the ground. It almost felt like discarding that memory of her brother. Lena winced as she pulled gloves over her hands. Ignoring the pain that radiated from what felt like every part of her body, she straightened her shoulders and found her way back to the road.

Approaching the gate, Lena knew immediately that something was wrong. There had never once been a line when she'd come to Enora to retrieve supplies for Virdeen. Hushed murmurs and whispers went silent as she approached. Lena overheard a word that sent a chill down her spine: *attack*. Had there been an attack on the city? Ears straining, she leaned in closer to a pair of travelers in front of her, and when they fell silent, she thought it better to ask than to risk being caught unawares.

"Do you know what's going on today? Why there is a line, I mean?" she asked.

The pair stiffened before turning towards her. The older man surveyed her with wary eyes, his gaze lingering on her face. He looked around and, upon realizing that she stood alone, appeared to relax. A younger man with the same eyes and proud nose surveyed her as well. He looked over to the older man, his father, she guessed, who gave him a nod.

"A unit of the Commander's men were attacked in the forest," the younger man said.

"Some sort of beast," the older man added. Lena's blood ran cold.

"A b-beast?" she stammered, her mouth dry as sand, the itching starting to take root.

"Rumor is it was commanded by a demon, wearing the skin of a young woman. One of them managed to escape and returned to the city just after nightfall." The older man looked her over again, most likely wondering what had caused her injuries and why she was traveling alone.

Lena shuddered, unable to contain it. Let them think it was due to fear.

"Did somebody do that to you?" the older man asked softly.

"Oh! No. I fell off my mare near Sunsur. She got spooked and ran off. Had to make it the rest of the way on foot." After a moment, she added, "Do you know if there have been any disruptions to the healer's supply wagons?"

The older man's face eased a bit. "Are you a healer?"

“Yes.” Lena smiled awkwardly. EverGods, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d smiled. Lena hoped it didn’t look like a grimace.

The younger man did not return her smile, suspicion evident on his face, but it was slowly replaced with sadness. Lena waited.

“My sister was a healer,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Well, before she joined the moon maidens.”

Lena looked between them. “Did something happen to her?” she asked, although she already knew what he was going to say.

The father sighed, anger replacing the concern he’d displayed when he’d inquired about her face. “She disappeared, just shy of three months after swearing her vows. She’d written home telling us about the work she was doing and expressing her distaste for the Commander’s men, but it was more than that . . . we haven’t heard from her since.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lena breathed. “Are you here to look for—” The rest of her words were drowned out by shouting from the head of the line, and all three of them whirled toward the commotion.

One of the guards held a dagger against the sensitive flesh of a man’s throat. The man stood deathly still, his arm extended in front of a woman standing next to him as if trying to tuck her behind him.

“You’ve looked enough. I will not stand idly by as you put your hands on my wife and tear at her clothes. She is not one of them,” he said.

The guard’s face contorted with rage, and he shifted his weight to press the blade harder into the man’s throat when his partner shoved him away and struck the man instead. The man took the blow, refusing to reach for his face. The guard stepped close to the man, his voice falling to a deadly whisper as he spit words at the man. Lena didn’t have to hear what he was saying to know they’d likely been threatened with death for questioning the Commander’s laws. With that, he stepped aside to let the couple through. The rest of the line crept up in silence.

The procession of travelers continued to move, and those standing in line before them were let in without incident. The two men before her kept glancing at each other and back at her as if in silent conversation.

She considered excusing herself from the line, wondering if she could find another way in. She couldn’t be sure that the two men in front of her weren’t going to air any suspicions about her. As if in response to her thoughts, the wounds on her chest began to prickle, and the itching intensified. Lena rolled her shoulders to keep from clawing at her skin and

pulled her cloak tighter around herself. Perhaps it would be easier to enter at night or to wait until the next set of guards came on shift. She continued to creep up with the line, deciding that she would show them her splotchy skin and convince them. For Henry. Because being caught here meant her head would roll on a wooden platform.

And then, the two men in front of her were at the front of the line, the guards asking gruffly, “Announce yourselves and your business here.”

“I am Oscar, and this is my son James”—Then he turned towards Lena and gave her a look, one that said *play along*—“and this is my niece, Vera.” He held out an arm towards Lena, ushering her forward between them. She blinked, the only indication that they’d caught her by surprise.

No, no, no. Sentimental fool! What was he doing? If she was discovered to be a wraith, they’d be killed right alongside her. Lena kept her face open, neutral as she nodded.

“State your business,” the guard said again.

“We are here on healer’s business,” Oscar said.

“Yes,” Lena chimed in. “We’re from the southern region, a small village there.” She racked her brain for the name of a small village she’d visited long ago. “Lundar. We’ve run out of most tonics and salves and were hoping to purchase more at the market.”

“What happened to your face?” the other guard interjected.

“The girl doesn’t know how to ride, she—” Oscar started.

“I want to hear her tell it.” The guard held up his knife and pointed at Lena with it.

“It’s true, our mare,” she said. “The ornery thing bucked me off, and we lost her to the forest. I ended up falling—”

“Health checks, then, on with it,” the guard said. He looked around, scanning the line, as if already disinterested.

Oscar went first, rolling up his sleeves and then lifting his shirt and working his way down to roll up the ends of his trousers. He winced as he bent over, and the guard flung out a hand, grabbing his forearm to halt his movements.

“What was that there? You made a face. Is it from an injury?” the guard asked.

“No, injuries,” Oscar said calmly, “just an old man with aching joints.” When the guard didn’t respond, he added, “Might I show you?”

The guard eyed him wearily but released his arm. Moving slowly, Oscar went on to complete the health check. James was next.

Lena was nearly trembling now with the itching but understood that these guards were more than mere brutes. They were trained to observe body language and facial expressions. She didn't want to trigger any suspicions that might lead them to disrupt her wounds or rip at her clothes. Then James was finished with his health check, and it was her turn.

She looked at the guards, meeting their gazes as she began to roll up her sleeves before saying, "Have either of you heard of devil's weed?" The men looked at each other, clearly perplexed, but she continued. "Perhaps you've heard it called something else, Hollow's Leaf?"

Both guards recoiled, and Oscar and James went stiff at her sides.

"You see, when our mare bucked me off, I ended up falling"—She stretched out the words as if pointing out to the guard that she'd been trying to say that before he cut her off—"into a patch of it."

Lena willed a flush to fill her cheeks.

"That mare was afraid of her own shadow. More trouble than she was worth," Oscar said. James just nodded on her other side.

Lena lifted her skirts next to show them her legs, red and splotchy, and then moved onto her neck and chest, making sure to keep her movements smooth. Stuffing the pain in her ribs, her chest down, down, *down*, Lena used her index finger to pull the neck of her blouse away and showed them the inflamed skin there.

"That there, is that a bandage, what is that?"

Lena's heart stuttered in her chest. She thought she'd been careful enough to avoid the bandages on her chest.

"It is. Here, let me show you," she said quickly, as she made to reach for her bandage. "I developed some large blisters here. They're currently oozing a bit but—"

"Enough!" said the first guard with the knife in his hand. "Don't you think I know the rash bestowed by Hollow's Leaf is contagious? Are you trying to infect us with it?"

"And how is it that you aren't tearing your own skin off?" said the other, a mix of awe and suspicion on his face.

"I used a numbing salve on it," she said, reaching into her pack and pulling out a small tin.

She could have, in fact, used the numbing salve, but hers was laced with an anti-inflammatory that would have reduced the severity of the rash.

“I merely wanted to assure you that I am not infected,” she said, holding both of her hands up in an apologetic gesture.

“Move along then,” the guard said before giving them a curt nod.

“And make sure you head straight for the Healer’s District to get that treated before you do anything else!” said the other.

Lena nodded in return, not daring to breathe as she returned the tin to her pack and walked past the guards, entering the city with Oscar and James at her sides.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Once they were safely ensconced within the crowds on the city streets, Lena took Oscar by the arm and pulled him into an alley. James followed closely behind his father. Lena rolled her shoulders again, willing herself to think past the itching for just a little longer. She gave him an incredulous look. Oscar scrubbed at his face before looking at Lena as if hearing the unasked questions there.

“I’m sorry to have caught you by surprise. It was a last-minute decision,” he said.

Lena nodded, understanding flooding her.

“Is Vera your daughter?” she asked, the adrenaline in her veins banking.

“That’s her middle name,” Oscar said.

“Camille is her first name,” James added.

“And you’re here to look for her?” Lena asked.

Oscar nodded before adding, “And we believe the Commander’s men, his militia, whatever you want to call them, had a hand in her disappearance. In the disappearance of so many.”

“Father,” James warned.

But Oscar continued, “We didn’t want to give them any reason to believe there was yet another woman here they could harm. Women who travel alone are easier targets.”

Lena nodded again. Fools, both of them, and yet, she was grateful that they would risk themselves to look after her. It made her feel less alone somehow.

“I have friends in the city,” she said by way of reply. “They live in the Healer’s District. Their house is the only one built of white stone, and a

healer’s banner flies above the door. If you have need of a healer, you can find me there.”

Oscar nodded, but James still stared at his father in disapproval. Lena understood. It was unwise to share information with strangers, especially if it went against the people in power.

“Thank you,” Lena whispered. “May the EverGods aid you in your search for Camille.” Despite her complicated feelings about the Goddess’s absence, the saying was known to bring others comfort.

Unable to stand the itching any longer, Lena slipped into the busy city streets, aiming for Ahgrie’s house. The house of her mother’s longest and dearest friend, which also happened to be the house of the woman she’d once been close to.



ONCE SHE’D WALKED past the busy market stalls and food vendors, Lena found that the City of Enora became a different place entirely. Fear and suspicion leaked from the windows of the residences, set forth by curious eyes and wary citizens who had never fully recovered from the events that had wiped out the capitol. Distrust was both currency and strategy here, and people were quick to turn on each other, fearing that death might creep past their devout vigilance.

While many ran their mouths, spewing rumors and wild assumptions, another part of the population had become incredibly superstitious. They refused to speak of anything related to the day Dovia fell, including the wraiths that wrought so much terror and destruction, or even mention the name of the last reigning king. It was easy to tell The Veiled apart from the rest, as they openly signaled their beliefs by wearing a sheer white veil that sat over the bridge of their noses and hung over their mouths. It was also common to see them setting their index fingers over covered lips to indicate their vow of silence on those matters.

It would be dangerous to seek information here, but Lena was quickly learning what life looked like when you were too afraid to take risks. She pulled her hood down further and quickened her pace. Keeping her face angled away from the windows of the squat houses that made up most of the residences, she carefully dodged strangers on the streets. It was an effort

not to run all the way to Ahgrie’s house, but doing so would draw unwanted attention.

When she finally caught a glimpse of the Healer’s District, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She approached the sun-worn door, the healer’s banner still in the chill air, and had raised her fist to knock, when the door swung open. Standing there was Jessa, ash brown hair limp around her pale face, confusion crinkling her brow.

“You’re wearing her cloak, I thought—” She motioned for Lena to come in and peeked down the street behind her. Looking for Henry, she realized. The only thing that kept her from falling into the yawning black pit that was her grief was the intolerable itching.

“Can I use the washroom, first? Then, I promise I’ll tell you everything.”

Jessa motioned to the washroom at the back of the house. Lena gave her a grateful smile before walking past the hearth and quaint living space opposite it to the small washroom.

Once she was inside, Lena ripped her pack open and thumbed the lid off the tin, avoiding her still tender fingertips. She yanked at her clothes and began slathering herself in the numbing salve, trembling in restraint. After a long moment that felt more like an eternity, she began to feel the effects, her shoulders sagging with relief.

Once she no longer felt like she was going to claw her own skin off, she quickly inspected the bruising on her ribs and wounds on her chest. It was just as she suspected. The wraithwound was infected, the skin puffy and oozing. She would have to tend to that soon.

Lena stepped out of the washroom and into the living space. The small room was so inviting. She hadn’t remembered how many herbs hung from every shelf, both in the living space and in the kitchen. Almost every surface was covered with notebooks, jars, and discarded greenery just like her mother’s worktable had been. It sent a pang of grief through her. Layered woven carpets in bright colors made the space feel cozy, and in front of the fire was Jessa, waiting for her on the sofa.

“Tell me,” Jessa said.

So, Lena did. Lena told her everything, stopping when she got to the part about Henry. She couldn’t bring herself to tell Jessa that Henry had given her his soul, or that she’d taken a life in the forest. She wanted to tell her friend these things, but shame made her tongue feel leaden.

They’d been so close growing up, but after Lena’s mother had disappeared, Lena stopped talking to her. She stopped talking to everyone. Jessa had sent letters and even rode out to check on her, but Lena had withdrawn. Given herself to the grief consuming her. Jessa had taken it personally, and after a while, she’d stopped sending letters or visiting all together. That had been more than two years ago. Now, Jessa sat across from her in stunned silence.

“Let me see,” Jessa said after a moment.

Lena pulled back the neck of her shirt, securing it over a shoulder, and peeled the bandages back. Jessa stared at Lena’s mutilated skin, her eyes wide.

“You would come here, with that? A wraithwound? Lena—” Jessa whispered, stunned.

“There has to be a way to reverse this or at least delay it,” Lena said.

“How is it that you haven’t turned yet?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” she lied.

“Doesn’t that make it more likely that you’ll turn here? Didn’t you consider—of course you wouldn’t! Because since when do you consider how others feel?” Jessa scoffed and shook her head. Shame set Lena’s cheeks ablaze.

“I wouldn’t be here if I thought I’d be a danger. I just need to talk to Ahgrie, see if there’s anything that might help . . .”

Lena trailed off hearing her words out loud for the first time. Because the truth was, Lena wasn’t sure that was true. She’d only *hoped* she wouldn’t be a danger.

Jessa searched her face, seeming to catch the uncertainty in her statement.

“You have some nerve.” Jessa let the silence hold her disapproval. And then after a moment, she sighed and her shoulders sagged. “Mom’s out right now.” Jessa ran a shaking hand through her hair. “Have you eaten?”

Lena shook her head, unable to remember when she’d eaten last. Jessa slipped into the kitchen, returning with a bowl of hot stew that Lena promptly finished. Jessa took the empty bowl back into the kitchen and returned with another steaming portion that she handed Lena before taking her place on the sofa.

Sitting there in uncomfortable silence while Lena ate, Jessa blurted, “How did you get through the gate?”

Grateful for a question to break the tension, Lena told her about the Hollow's Leaf and then Oscar and James and their search for Camille.

"Things have gotten worse since you were last here," Jessa admitted. "People, well, mostly women, are disappearing more often. The Commander's men have only gotten crueler with increased beheadings, health checks, and more restrictions on the use of medicinal herbs under the guise of fair distribution. As if he hadn't already corrupted the intent behind the Goddess's gift." Anger flared in Jessa's eyes. "Not to mention that more and more people have been siding with The Veiled."

"I hadn't realized The Veiled were growing in size," Lena said.

Jessa nodded solemnly. "People are scared. They're turning to whatever will offer them hope. However small it might be. There are those who have been pushing to study —"

The door swung open, letting in a cold gust of air, and Ahgrie rushed through, arms loaded down with bags. Her ash brown hair was pulled back into a knot at the nape of her neck, unruly curls framing her face. The lines around her mouth and eyes were more pronounced than the last time Lena had seen her, but her eyes were clear and bright. Her gaze swept around the room and landed on her mother's cloak, with its sparkling emerald broach gleaming in the firelight, and then on her.

"What's happened?" Ahgrie asked, her voice hard.

"Here, Mom, give me those," Jessa said, standing. Lena stood as well, stepping towards Ahgrie, who opened her arms for an embrace. She held Lena for a long moment before pulling away to look at her face and then motioned for her to sit.

Lena sat with Ahgrie, who slipped her hand into hers gently after noting the missing fingernails. Ahgrie listened to her retelling of the story, punctuated only by the crackling fire in the hearth that occasionally interrupted the sorrowful silence.

When she was done, Ahgrie wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Lee," she said squeezing her hand gently. If she was at all concerned that Lena had been infected, she didn't show it. "Let me take a look at that now."

Lena pulled the neck of her shirt down, peeling back the bandages a second time.

"That's a very active infection. These veins here and here." She pointed at two thick, black veins that spiderwebbed out of the grotesque injury, one

towards her heart and the other towards her throat. “When did they become so prominent?”

“I don’t know,” Lena said, shaking her head.

Ahgrie nodded, continuing to assess the injury and taking note of where it felt inflamed or tender to the touch. Then, she motioned for Lena to head into the kitchen. Ahgrie cleaned her wounds thoroughly, ignoring the occasional hiss of pain and flinching. Then, she turned to the salves and tonics lined up on shelves throughout the space.

Reaching towards the back of a crowded shelf secured high on the wall, she pulled down a small, glass jar.

“We’ll start with this and see what it looks like in the morning,” she said. Thick brown goop was visible inside the jar. “I have to warn you, it smells terrible, but it will combat the infection, reduce some of the swelling, and help the skin, well the healthy skin, to heal more quickly.”

“What is it?” Lena asked, her stomach already churning at the thought of it.

“Crushed khardia seed, mixed with the pulp of vardint leaves.”

Lena took a deep breath in preparation, but no matter what the mixture smelled like, it wouldn’t be as bad at the putrid stench from the wraith’s killing field.

After Ahgrie was finished applying the fetid goop and rebandaging Lena’s wounds, she sat down in front of her, a tight smile on her lips, and grasped Lena’s hand yet again.

“Orvain, the Commander’s healer, has been working on developing treatments for guards who become infected. And he’s had some limited success. Or so he says. I meet with him tomorrow to order more supplies for the organization. Yet another thing they’ve taken control of,” she added, shaking her head. “I can get more information about what those treatments are. Otherwise, looking at the depth and the progression of your injuries . . . ”

Lena knew without her saying so that her chances were slim.

“I’ve never seen injuries as grave as yours, and it’s spreading. It seems like the infection has already established one route towards your heart and the other towards—”

“My brain,” Lena said numbly, realization setting in.

Jessa came to stand behind Ahgrie, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“There is one bit of good news though. Despite your injuries, you’re still *you*. I don’t know how that is, but I don’t care to question it,” she said.

Lena smiled weakly and squeezed Ahgrie’s hand in return, trying not to think about the two souls she’d taken.

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CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

Lena found Jessa on the balcony the next morning, staring off into the city, a contemplative look on her gaunt face. She was already dressed, a warm cloak clinging to her shoulders. Seeing her in the morning light, Lena realized that Jessa looked thinner than when she'd last seen her. As she approached, she noticed a distortion around her friend akin to a faint shadow. Lena attributed it to the exhaustion that still clung to her despite the calming bath and the dreamless sleep she'd managed. Clasping her hands before her, she took up the spot next to Jessa. The shadow had disappeared, but there was a sadness that seemed to radiate from her, and she wore a pained expression on her face. Lena felt a pang of guilt creep into her belly.

"I'm sorry," Lena said. "I'm sorry I wasn't a better friend."

Jessa turned to look at her then. Lena wanted to turn away. To avoid that familiar gaze that reminded her of the children they'd been, but she didn't. Lena held her gaze, willing her to see the genuine apology there.

"I missed you, Lee. I really did, at first. I couldn't help but think I'd done something wrong. With time I realized it was you. It's just what you do," she said.

The words cut through her, but deep down, Lena knew it was true. The distance between them was *her* fault. She'd done the same thing when she was a child, after her grandfather died. She was good at shutting others out, even her mother. The only exception had been Henry.

"Mom wants you to accompany her to a healer's gathering tonight. It's not everyone, just a small group. You can ask her about the details when she wakes up."

Lena nodded, unable to meet her eyes again.

“Help yourself to whatever sounds good in the kitchen. I have some appointments this morning,” Jessa said, pushing off from the railing, but then she halted. “Keep your distance from the barracks. You know what will happen to us, all of us, if someone recognizes you.”

The rest of the sentence hung in the air between them. After a moment, Jessa slipped inside and headed down the stairs. The truth was Lena had no idea where that version of her had gone. Shame and guilt reared up inside her, another monster ready to consume her, but nothing was worse than the absence of warmth between them.

Coming here had been a risk, but she couldn’t give up hope that Ahgrie might discover something to help her. To help Henry. If not a cure, something to slow the turn or ease the infection heading towards her heart and her brain. If she could only figure that part out, she’d have more time to explore options for helping Henry.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

Lena found Ahgrie downstairs sometime later poring over some old healer's journals, a cup of tea sitting abandoned on the worn wooden table. She looked up and smiled at Lena, her greying curls wild around her face. Pushing her silver-rimmed glasses back up her nose, she motioned for Lena to come sit across from her.

"Let's see it then," she said. Right down to business as always. A smile tugged on the corner of Lena's lips as she pushed her hair back and pulled her shirt down to expose the bandages.

"How did you sleep then? The smell keep you up?" Ahgrie asked, reaching for the bandages.

"Exhaustion can trump many things," Lena said.

Ahgrie chuckled, the sound warm and bright. Lena had been afraid she would be plagued by images of a still-beating heart in her hand when she lay down, but after a couple bowls of stew and a bath, she'd fallen asleep quickly and hadn't woken up until morning.

Ahgrie finished pulling the bandages off and smiled again, brighter this time. "I dare say there's been some progress."

Lena scrunched her neck, trying to get a better view of her chest and shoulder. She was amazed to see Ahgrie was right. The swelling had decreased dramatically, giving way to smoother pink skin that seemed on its way to healing instead of rotting. The center of the jagged wounds also looked different. It was more akin to leather now, still discolored, a greyish black, but no longer festering. Hope sparked, clear and bright, in her heart. She knew it was foolish to get her hopes up, but she couldn't help the sense of relief that flooded her.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Ahgrie squeezed her hand twice in return before reaching for the fetid goop. “A small group of the Healer’s Org is meeting tonight, mostly old friends of your mother’s. I think you met most of them when you were a child. They might be able to help us explore other options for treatment.”

“Okay.” Lena nodded. She knew Ahgrie wouldn’t suggest it unless they were trustworthy. And it gave her a measure of comfort to hear they’d known her mother.

“Good. I’ll come back tonight to retrieve you. I don’t think it’s wise for you to leave the house, but if you do, it’d be best in late afternoon. I left some money for you by the front door but stay away from the barracks,” she said with a wink, and headed to the basin to wash her hands.

“Ahgrie, thank you. I—” Lena started.

“Don’t. I would do it again and again. You are our family,” she said sternly. Lena dropped her gaze to the floor unable to voice her regret for how she had treated Jessa, but Ahgrie put a hand under her chin, tilting her face upward. “Grief is but another beast in the shadows. Who’s to tell how we’ll react to it once it shows itself? The good news is there is time to fix it, Lena. Despite everything, you both still have time.”



AHGRIE RUSHED OUT of the house a short time later. Lena begged to her to be safe when meeting with Orvain. She considered asking Ahgrie not to inquire directly about wraithwounds but knew she’d have none of it.

Having nothing else to do and suddenly exhausted, she went back upstairs after breakfast. After using the goop to tend to the tips of her fingers, she lay down, intent on resting her eyes for moment.

When she awoke, it was late afternoon. Lena washed, dressed, and then shifted her focus to taking stock of her supplies. She still had to devise a plan for leaving the city. As much as she longed for the safety, familiarity, and comfort of Ahgrie’s house, she couldn’t stay. Every day she remained in their home put them at risk. She needed some warmer clothes, food that was less likely to spoil, and to ensure her medical kit was full.

Donning Jessa’s clothes, a pair of leather gloves she’d found, and one of her cloaks, she set out for the market.

The sun hung low in the sky, a chill wind winding its way through the city. But instead of the near empty streets she was expecting to see, they were teeming with people, especially closer to the markets. Making sure to avoid those who wore robes and veils, she stopped by a market stall with an older woman arranging soaps and other wares.

“Is there something going on tonight?” Lena asked, raising her voice above the din of the crowd.

“Not from here then?” the woman asked, eyeing her warily. “Tonight is the Moon Festival you dull girl.”

Lena scowled. Oh. *Oh*. That was likely why Ahgrie suggested she meet with the Healer’s Org tonight. With the crowds, it’d be safer for Lena to make her way through the city.

“That’s today? It completely slipped my mind!” she said, letting her voice slip into a higher pitch.

It was the vendor’s turn to scowl as Lena turned and began pushing her way through the crowded streets once more. She made quick work of locating some extra clothes and bandages, but rare herbs, salves, and tonics were sparse. That must have been what Jessa meant when she said the Commander was restricting access to medicine. She had just purchased some dried meat from a different vendor and was thinking about turning back when a rough voice whispered in her ear.

“Lena Morwen Elisande, is that you?”

Lena spun around to see a handsome young man grinning at her.

“Corvin Conover,” she breathed before launching herself at him, injuries be damned.



HE CAUGHT her with sturdy arms and squeezed her tightly, her feet dangling off the ground for a long moment. Corvin was two years younger than she was, but his tall, broad frame made him look slightly older.

“What in the EverGods are you doing here? Buying more onyxwood powder?” he teased.

“Shhh!” She elbowed him, unable to keep the smirk off her face.

“And on the day of the Moon Festival?” he added quietly, his face going serious.

“I won’t be here long. I’m just here for some supplies, and before you ask, I took a fall. But I’m fine,” she said, gesturing to her face. He frowned in response, but then nodded, his golden-red hair gleaming in the setting sun.

“And you didn’t come to us? Also, you smell,” he said, laughter in his eyes.

Lena grimaced.

“I . . . ” she drew the word out.

“ . . . didn’t want to see Aric?” he guessed.

She gave him a reluctant smile.

“I figured. And Henry, is he here, too?” he asked, glancing around the market. It was as if the air had been sucked out of her lungs.

“Oh, you know Henry, here, there, everywhere.” She tried to smile.

Henry had been traveling more lately in an attempt to provide aid to some of the more remote locations in the east. And because he’d begun to cover her territory after the grief had taken over. But there was no reason to tell Corvin otherwise. She was already putting Ahgrie and Jessa in danger; she wouldn’t do the same to Corvin and Aric.

“What are you doing here?” she said quickly, changing the subject.

He looked at her like it was supposed to be obvious.

“Oh, of course,” she said, her cheeks reddening.

“We got in last night and need to offload the delort clove before it loses its potency. I’m convinced one of these days, the Commander’s dogs are going to refuse to let us back in. But for now, we’re still outperforming them in the medicinal market. They need us. We don’t let them forget that.”

“You two have to stop goading them,” she said, giving him a playful shove.

“Says the woman who poisoned half the barracks because *they were mean to Aric*,” he teased back.

“They took a blade to his face!” she whisper-shouted.

“It was a small cut. And besides, he wears that scar with pride, you know. Likes to show it off,” he said, laughter dancing in his eyes.

“How is he?” Lena looked away, her gaze catching on a market stall selling sleep aids.

“He’s fine, Lee. I mean, there was a time when he wasn’t, but he’s moved past that,” he said gently.

Lena met his eyes then.

“He’s forgiven you, you know. No hard feelings.”

She knew. Aric was a good man. Matching his brother’s looks so closely that they could have been twins, he was handsome and sweet. For a time, she’d thought about marriage. They’d both thought that. But in the end, he just wasn’t the man for her. Yet another casualty of her grief and expert ability to shut others out. She was grateful to hear he was doing well.

“I should get going,” she said, her thoughts threatening to drift to all the things she could have done differently. Corvin nodded, stepping closer to hug her again.

“I don’t want to know why you smell so bad.” He laughed. “But stay alert, Lee. People don’t get away with much nowadays.”

“You and Aric too . . . ” Her voice trailed off as movement behind him caught her attention. He followed her gaze back to a merchant selling small bottles labeled as sleep aids. He was in deep in conversation with a young man she recognized from the previous day.

“Those aren’t sleep aids, Lee, they’re sedatives,” he said, lowering his voice. “They’re tracked *very closely*.”

Lena blinked, thinking through what Corvin had just said. A part of her mind still felt muddled, clouded, much like it’d been the last year when she’d been unable to get out of bed. But the pieces slowly came together.

At best, Oscar and James had found Camille and she was infected, and now they were planning on sedating her to get her out of the city. At worst, they planned to use it on somebody else for information, likely one of the Commander’s men. Either way, it didn’t bode well for the men who’d looked out for her when they thought she was just a lone traveler.

“It’s not for me. I mean, I don’t care about the sleep aids. I know that man. He and his father helped me avoid an *extended health check* at the entrance. He’s looking for his sister. She’s missing,” she said quickly, stepping past Corvin.

James was fishing in his pocket, getting ready to hand over payment, a small glass bottle in his other hand. Before he could drop the coins into the merchant’s palm, Lena reached out and halted his movement, intercepting his hand with her own. Startled, James opened his mouth, likely about to tell her off when he realized who she was.

He looked between her and Corvin, who’d followed her over. Lena smiled sweetly, squeezing his hand gently as if to say, *play along*.

“When you came to see me yesterday, I prescribed suen powder for sleep, not this. The stall you’re looking for is over there. I should have provided better directions. The two certainly look the same.”

To his credit, James didn’t miss a beat.

“Oh! This isn’t suen power?” he said loudly enough for others to hear.

Lena shook her head, a placid smile on her lips. “Here, I’ll walk you over to the correct stall.”

The vendor’s face was frozen in rage. No doubt, he’d just lost a sale and a hefty payday for reporting the purchase of the sedative. James turned to him, a sheepish smile on his face and set the bottle down.

“Apologies for the mix up,” he said and turned to follow Lena and Corvin. She continued walking, both men trailing her until she found a quiet alley and could be sure no one else was listening.

“James, meet Corvin. Corvin, James,” she said pacing in the alley. Both men shook hands albeit a little awkwardly.

“Where’s Oscar?” she asked, concern worming its way into her thoughts.

As if on cue, he entered the alley and made his way toward them, glancing between Lena and Corvin.

“Nice to see you again,” he said by way of greeting. Lena gave him a small wave.

“Corvin, can you tell them what you told me about that particular merchant?” she asked, suddenly exhausted.

“The vendor you were engaging with is an informant for the Commander’s guard. Anything sold at that stall is tracked and reported,” he said.

James’s face flushed while Oscar’s paled.

“How do you know that?” James asked.

“I do a lot of business in the market,” was all that Corvin offered.

“Have you found Camille? Has she been infected?” Lena asked.

James and Oscar looked at each other, confused. *Good.*

“The particular sedative you were going to purchase is known for its ability to sedate very large or very *strong* creatures,” Lena said.

When neither man answered, Corvin added, “People have been caught using it to sedate the infected. Guards have tracked sales that led to infected both inside and outside of the city. One such sale was tracked to the

Agricultural District last year and another to the Textiles District just last month. The beheadings extended to the entire family, both times."

James recoiled at the information. But Lena wasn't surprised. That would explain the tension that seemed to suffocate the city and increased efforts by the guards to staunch any dissent.

"James met a guard who frequents a tavern. There's a chance he might have more information about Camille. We thought we might be able to get him alone—" Oscar said.

Lena didn't want to hear any more. She could guess where this was going. Corvin seemed to echo her sentiments. The usual light in his eyes fading into something harder.

"Half the city's residents are informants," he said. "If not for the Commander, then for the High Priest or the Council who, despite their denials, work directly for him. Informants are rewarded for any information they provide, whether the lead is successful or not. The terror they get to bestow, independent of whether the accused is guilty or not, serves its own purpose. Be more careful next time."

"We will," James said nodding.

"We should go," Corvin said, extending a hand to Lena. "I'll walk you as far as I can."

Lena gave them a curt nod before taking Corvin's hand and heading back into the bustling market. They were almost at the exit when a commotion broke out in front of them. Corvin tucked Lena behind him.

"Hey, you!" a guard shouted, drawing a dagger from his belt.

People around them scattered, revealing a young man holding an empty jar.

"Begging in the market has been outlawed." The guard walked over to the young man and used his dagger to tap on the empty jar.

"I— I'm not begging." The young man took a step back from the guard, his face pale.

"Liar," the guard said, eyes narrowing.

"I— I came to buy aloe for my nan. Sometimes the wax sleeves leak," he stuttered.

"If you're not begging, you're doing something else. You don't think I know some vendors have been sneaking irritants to those that oppose the Commander?"

"I don't know anything about that," the young man said.

“Show me your coin then,” the guard threatened, stretching his neck. He towered over the young man, the features of his face set in a permanent scowl.

A sense of dread coiled around Lena as she witnessed the interrogation. Corvin’s whole body had gone rigid, anger leaking off him as he watched.

The young man shifted the jar in his hands and reached for his trousers, patting down the pockets there. His face paled further still.

“Wait—”

A slow smile stretched over the guard’s face as he leaned in. “Liar,” he said again before flipping the dagger in his hand and driving the full length of the jagged steel blade into the young man’s chest.

Lena’s heart stopped dead in her chest as the young man’s eyes grew wide in shock, and he dropped the glass jar, which shattered at his feet. She turned her face, unable and unwilling to watch as another life was extinguished before her. And then the melodic clink of metal broke the stunned silence, the notes out of place amidst the death and cruelty she’d just witnessed. Lena looked up.

Coins.

As the guard withdrew the dagger from the young man’s chest, he’d ripped the fabric of his tunic causing the coins stored in his shirt pocket to fall. The air vacated her lungs, and she brought her arm up to her chest, willing herself to breathe.

The guard laughed, throwing his head back as he did. And then he bent over, wiped the blood off his dagger on the young man’s sleeve, and said into his face, “Too slow.”

The guard straightened and looked into the waiting crowd.

Corvin shook with anger as he reached behind himself, putting his arm in front of Lena as if to keep her in place. Lena wished she could help the young man, but he was already dead.

The guard glanced around at the crowd once more before sheathing his dagger and striding off, a grin still stretched across his face.

Lena stood rooted to the spot, afraid her legs would betray her nerves. Corvin turned to look at her, his face full of pain and helplessness. She knew that look well.

“They’re just— they get away with murdering people in the streets now?” Lena whispered.

“And anyone who tries to help them,” he said.

“What?”

“If you had tried to help, they would have killed you too. I thought you might—” Corvin let out a breath.

“I . . . ” Guilt twisted her stomach into knots. There was a time she would have tried to intervene, but much had changed in Enora, and Lena wasn’t that person anymore.

“Are they just going to leave him there?” she asked.

“They’ll send guards out in a few hours, but they like to leave the corpses in the street to serve as a warning.” Corvin tugged on her hand and began walking. “It’s great to see you, but make sure you leave soon, Lee. They’ve implemented quadrant sweeps. You don’t want to be here for that.”

Lena only managed to nod as Corvin led her out of the market.

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CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Sitting in the cozy home with its colorful carpets and the pops of green from the plants and herbs that occupied the shelves, Lena couldn't help but feel out of place. She stared at the fire for a long while before she got up to get a bowl of stew. It was there that Lena finally gave herself permission to think about what might happen to her and Henry after leaving the city. She knew she had one more chance to probe the minds of the greatest healers in Reimar to see if there was anything else to be done. If not a cure, she hoped they might know a way to slow the wraith's ability to take over.

Deep down though, she already knew what she'd learn because if it was possible to cure an infected person, or at least slow down the wraith's progress, it probably would be common knowledge by now. She supposed there might be some other option she hadn't considered. Lena hadn't known about the sedatives, although she figured someone desperate enough to save their family member wouldn't hesitate to try them.

The door swung open, and Jessa made her way inside. She looked exhausted, her face pale and drawn, something akin to a faint black shadow trailing in her wake.

Lena squeezed her eyes shut before opening them again, thinking the strange aura would clear, but it remained. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she recognized it was vaguely familiar, but she couldn't identify what it was.

"Are you okay?" Lena asked as Jessa set her things down.

"Yes, fine," she replied quickly.

“You just look a little pale,” Lena said, setting her bowl down. Jessa sighed and shook her head as if contemplating what she should say.

“I’m sick,” Jessa said, the words quiet, hard.

Lena’s heart stuttered.

“What do you mean sick?” Lena asked. But she knew. It was how she’d known she was the only living person in the funeral field. Jessa wasn’t just sick. She was dying.

Jessa laughed bitterly. “I found out about a year ago. The healers say it’s likely my organs are failing, but they’re not sure why. Nothing they’ve tried has helped.”

“Jessa, I—” Lena started, but Jessa held up a hand.

“No. Don’t act like you care now. Plus, we haven’t given up hope. That’s why Mom is collaborating with Orvain and his healers. The Commander has restricted access to some of the super rare herbs that might be able to help me. Things even Corvin and Aric haven’t been able to find. By sharing her knowledge— the organization’s collective knowledge with Orvain—Mom gains access.”

Shame burned brightly on Lena’s face as she realized she’d never stopped to consider how things might have changed for the woman she once considered her best friend, what her absence might have meant to Jessa as she faced a terminal illness. While Lena drowned in her own grief, she hadn’t stopped to consider the grief she’d caused *them*.

“I’m so sorry. I’m sure a solution will turn up,” was all she could think to say.

“Maybe it already has,” she said, averting her gaze.

Lena hoped with her whole heart that Jessa was right.

“You’re meeting with the healer’s organization tonight, right?” Jessa asked, changing the subject.

“Ahgrie told me we’ll be heading out after dark.”

“I, more than anybody, understand the desire to live. But you shouldn’t have come here. Not with that,” Jessa said pointing at Lena’s shoulder. “I think it’s best if you leave before sunrise.”

Lena stilled. She’d planned to do just that; she didn’t want to risk staying any longer, but hearing Jessa say it so plainly twisted her stomach in a knot. The truth of Jessa’s statement wormed its way into her gut, confirming what she already knew to be true about herself, what she had so

blatantly demonstrated with her ability to withdraw from their lives so easily. Lena was selfish, only concerned with her own pain.

“Don’t use the main route out of the city. Go through the Metalworker’s District and use the northern gate. The guards there are younger, less experienced. They won’t question you when you go. Most trades use that exit,” Jessa said.

The grid-like city had multiple exits to account for the possibility of an attack with most being positioned by the wealthier districts. It had been grouped this way after the Commander took over, ensuring those with valuable skills had access to more exits and those who did not had fewer.

“Thank you,” Lena said.

“Oh, and try to let Mom sleep in the morning. She’s been exhausted lately.”

“Of course,” Lena said, barely able to speak past the emotion that clogged her throat.

Jessa made her way to the bottom of the stairs. “Don’t forget. The northern gate. Goodbye, Lena.”

Jessa did not look back.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Lena stood in the guest room not long after Jessa retired for the night. A cool breeze gently ruffled the curtains near the bed, and Lena breathed deeply, trying not to let the anticipation of the night's events unsettle her. She focused instead on redressing her wounds and rearranged her supplies for the third time in preparation for tomorrow's departure.

Lena couldn't help but think about all that had come to pass between her and Jessa. She knew coming here would be difficult but hadn't realized just how much pain her withdrawal had caused those she loved. It had been so easy to shut everyone out after her mother's disappearance, an echo of what she'd done after her grandfather had been murdered.

It wasn't often she allowed herself to think about him. Losing him had broken something inside of her. With time and the help of her family, those wounds had healed, or so she'd thought. But after her mother disappeared, she split open all over again, the pain somehow deeper this time. All consuming.

And after, it had only been Henry who kept her tethered. His warm smile and bright eyes, his dry humor and general sense of ease soothed her. He knew exactly when to push and when to give her space, eventually taking over the duties she could no longer fulfill. Or more accurately, gave up on.

She couldn't blame Jessa for keeping her distance. Lena had abandoned her at a time when she'd needed her support, her friendship, the most. Her throat tightened as she imagined what it must have been like for Jessa to learn of her illness. To watch her body deteriorate slowly and to do it alone, abandoned by her closest friend.

Trust was hard to come by in these lands, and making friends was a risky endeavor. Children were taught it wasn't a risk worth taking often, especially when information about your neighbors was highly sought after and, if it led to the capture of a person who'd been infected, was handsomely rewarded. Most of the people who'd been alive when the city fell stuck to the friends they'd made in childhood, having established that trust early on before the darkness suffocated the ability for human connection. For those born after, they were taught to guard personal information at all costs.

Lena stared at her pack, her belongings neatly tucked inside, and reached for her mother's cloak, the emerald broach dark in the faint light. Her grandfather had given it to her mother when she'd graduated from the Schola of Healing. It was meant to symbolize her growth, resilience, and connectedness to her community, the vibrant green a symbol of what healers sought to preserve above anything else: life. The thought of all the lives she was currently putting in danger broke through her defenses, derailing her train of thought.

The stone in the broach had come from a necklace that belonged to her grandmother. Apparently, she'd come to own it under mysterious circumstances, ones even her grandfather had never been made privy to.

Lena hadn't ever known her grandmother, having been born years after she passed. She'd always loved the stories she'd been told about her. Lena couldn't identify with any of the traits her grandmother was known for. Cunning, witty, and with a fierce heart. Her grandmother would have been disappointed to learn that her granddaughter didn't inherit any part of her.

Lena was lost. She had been for a long while, and the only light on her path had been extinguished. Lena shook off the heaviness settling atop her and shifted her focus once again, thinking about her promise to Henry. She had just finished pulling on her cloak and gloves when she heard the front door open downstairs.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Crowds of revelers swept them towards the city square, drunk on cheap ale and the freedom of relaxed restrictions that could only be found this one night of the year. And yet, the scent of sweat and nervous anticipation still hung in the cool air. Lena clung to Ahgrie as they pushed their way through, trying to shield her broken ribs while maintaining her footing on the uneven cobble stones. It was the perfect night to meet with the Healer's Organization as most of the city's prying eyes and ears would be trained on the ceremony while everyone else was busy celebrating.

Lena caught a glimpse of the spot where the Goddess's fountain used to flow in the square. That was before the Commander's men had taken sledgehammers to the glimmering, white stone at the High Priest's behest. *She had betrayed them*, the High Priest had decreed when they made it illegal for Enora's residents to worship at Quintessa's fountain shrines. Stolen pieces of the fountain fetched a high price on the black market, but anyone caught selling the stone was sentenced to death. Only a discolored sheet of rock lay where the base used to be, now cordoned off from anyone who might consider kneeling before it.

She and Ahgrie were making their way across one of the city streets, pushing against the rush of bodies when Ahgrie dragged Lena into a busy tavern. Worn wooden tables were scattered throughout the sea of bodies, and raucous laughter filled the space, the noise rising above the clink of glasses and excited chatter for the Moon Bathing ceremony. At midnight, establishments would clear, Enora's citizens eager to catch a glimpse of the ceremony performed on the balcony of the Moon Temple.

Two maidens would be presented to the Goddess, one to the light of the moon, the other in shadow that represented the dark side, standing exposed on opposing balconies at the top of the holy tower. The ritual was meant to be seen as an offering of devotion and sacrifice to convince Lunis to bless the water.

Mysterious winged creatures called the Aurynn would snatch the maidens off the balcony, flying them into the sky to surrender their spirit. The creatures arrived in Eteris after the Goddess disappeared, claiming to have been sent by the moon herself. So many were desperate for magic to return to Eteris that they were welcomed enthusiastically.

Every year, the maidens worked for the honor of being selected, having been reassured the ceremony was symbolic, not literal. The reward was acceptance to a secret haven promising abundance and safety. Despite it all, something about the ceremony made Lena uneasy. It was likely the part about the maidens having to expose themselves completely before the citizens of Enora to represent the surrender of their spirit. Or perhaps it was that the strange creatures only communicated with the High Priest, refusing to divulge anything else about themselves or the supposed Goddess they claimed to serve.

Ahgrie tugged on Lena’s hand as she began ascending a set of hidden stairs at the back of the tavern. The cheerful glow of the flames in the oversized hearth didn’t reach the staircase, which helped them make their way up undetected.

The floorboards creaked slightly as they went, Lena’s heart pounding faster with each step. Ahgrie slid her hand along the wall, using it to guide their way through the darkness. Lena’s eyes adjusted quickly, noting the details of the narrow hallway that led them toward a door at the end of the landing.

Ahgrie knocked several times, a rhythmic and staccato sequence that punctuated the stillness. The door creaked open slowly, revealing several worn and weary faces, backlit by the glow of a small fire burning in the hearth. Ahgrie motioned for Lena to step inside as the door swung shut behind them.

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Lena stood in a large guest suite. The bed in the corner was dressed in worn red bedding. It may have once been a fine set, but only a layer of dust lay upon it now. A stained wooden writing desk was shoved next to the bed with a small lamp askew atop it.

Lena looked into the worn faces of those sitting in a half circle in front of the fire. A large man in a winged armchair stared intently at her, his small black eyes and greying beard reflecting more than just the light of the fire. On his left sat a smaller woman, who reclined slightly in her chair, seemingly uninterested in Lena, unlike the other two women in the room.

She glanced at the glass of water in front of the large man. He had been served water first, which said enough about his status among the group. It was a custom from long ago, but despite the Goddess's disappearance, it still held weight in some circles.

"Lena, this is Benneck, from Eydon. Next to him is Suhalia from Duskit, Edith from Sunsur, and finally Nora from Bledrock," Ahgrie said.

Lena nodded at the group from her spot at the door.

Reading her hesitation, Ahgrie said, "They know. It's all right. Come sit."

Ahgrie set her things down at the foot of an empty chair and went over to a sideboard concealed in shadow.

Reaching for a steaming kettle on a trivet, she turned to Lena, "Tea?"

"Yes. Please," Lena said as she made her way over to the remaining empty chair.

Benneck spoke first: "We are so sorry to hear about the attack on Virdeen, and for what happened to Henry."

She swallowed thickly.

“Ahgrie sent word that you were attacked.”

It went against every instinct to admit that in a room full of people she hadn’t seen in years, but she knew if Ahgrie trusted them, then she could too.

“I was,” she said.

“Then tell me, how is it that you’ve yet to turn?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” Lena lied.

The members of the Healer’s Organization glanced at each other, a pointed silence filling the space.

“How is it that you’ve managed to keep the turn at bay?” Benneck asked again.

Lena had to force the answer out of her mouth, reminding herself that this information would be invaluable to the healers. She knew they’d been particularly interested in the mechanics of the change, keenly aware that understanding the way the infection worked, how it took over its host, might help them fight it.

“I was attacked in the forest,” she said in answer. She watched as their faces grew contemplative, and then as their eyes grew wide.

“That was *you* who dispatched the Commander’s men?” Suhalia asked.

“All of them?” Edith interjected, shifting in her seat.

Dispatched, Suhalia had said, as if that made Lena any less of a murderer.

“No, there was a beast in the forest that attacked the camp. I tried to get away, but one of the men came after me. I had to defend myself.”

The room seemed to stir in what was left unspoken. Ahgrie handed Lena a warm cup of tea and took the empty chair beside her. The sweet, hot liquid hit her tongue, and she savored it, immediately feeling more relaxed as it eased her nerves. Lena hadn’t expected to be nervous when seeing her mother’s old colleagues, but she hadn’t expected such blunt questions, either. Looking back, it seemed ridiculous that she hadn’t expected it. Healers were known for their curiosity. It was a common trait in their profession.

Lena told them most of what she could remember about her injuries and how her body had responded to the infiltration it was currently undergoing. It was a surreal experience. She couldn’t stomach telling them about Henry, though, or what she’d done to the man she’d killed in the forest. She figured

they knew enough. When she was done, they all sat in silence for a long moment. Edith excused herself to use the restroom while Nora and Suhalia refreshed their tea.

When they came back together, a different energy filled the room. Nora, who had not spoken the entire evening, swept her bright gaze over Lena. She had upturned eyes and short, pin straight hair. Her hands were clasped in her lap. She was shorter than the other women, but Lena could tell she wasn't afraid to take up space.

"Your mother's diary, do you have it?" she asked.

Instantly, the skin on her chest began to prickle. She stared at Nora, unsure of what to say. Why would they be asking about her mother's diary?

"Okay, let's start with something else. Did Marisee ever tell you about her role in the organization? Her *actual* role?" Nora said.

Lena blinked. It was evident she was talking about something *else* that her mother had been doing because, otherwise, what sort of question was that? Nora sighed, readjusting in her chair. The others dropped their gazes to the floor, and a blush crept into Lena's cheeks. Had she been so checked out of her own life she hadn't realized that her mother had secrets?

"She was assigned to one of the six," Nora said coldly.

"Nora," Suhalia warned as the others glanced nervously at her.

"We no longer have time for hand holding. Not one of you knows how much longer she will remain in control of her own body, her consciousness. Marisee would have wanted her to know," Nora countered.

A heavy silence hung in the air. No one spoke, not even Ahgrie.

"Her job was to care for Neema. To do anything in her power to ensure that Neema lived—" Nora said and then waited.

Of course it had been. She often went above and beyond to ensure the well-being of her patients. A sense of dread coiled in her gut as she thought back to her mother's determination to go into the forsaken city.

"—because," Nora continued, reaching out to sip from the lone glass of water on the table, "Neema was the last living caster of the Essence Shield."

Everyone in the room tuned to Lena. Waiting, she realized, to see if her face showed any recognition of the information that had just been revealed. Lena's eyes dipped to the glass still held in Nora's hands.

"At the time when darkness fell, it was not the Commander who *saved these lands from darkness with his steel and wits*," she said in a mocking tone. "It was a group of six women, all descendants of the original maiden

who was favored by the Goddess. Didn't you ever wonder why the smaller villages never sought protection? Why healers could travel to other villages with little chance they'd encounter a wraith?"

"That's a myth," Lena said, her mind racing.

She'd always been told wraiths were drawn to more densely populated areas or that they became disoriented and lost in the woods. But now that the truth was laid out so plainly before her, she realized it wasn't until certain town elders had died that the smaller villages near Virdeen had been attacked. All of these elders had been women.

"It's not. Somehow your mother managed to unite them. We have no idea how that many evaded the King's search, but they were able to combine their power and shield Dovia."

"Not to keep the monsters out, Lena," Ahgrie said softly.

To keep them in.

"Marisee assigned one healer to each caster, who vowed to protect that person with their life. Did you ever stop to wonder why your mother traveled so often or about the placement of the villages she worked in? Why she chose to stay in the speck of a village that was Virdeen?" Nora shook her head, disapproval evident at Lena's lack of awareness. "The last living caster was Neema. We do not think it a coincidence that once she passed, your village was attacked."

A dull roaring filled Lena's ears, and her chest prickled distantly. She couldn't think past the information she'd been given, reality as she'd known it warping before her.

"I—" Lena started, but no other words followed. Ahgrie put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"That's why she went into the city that day," Ahgrie said softly.

And it was that truth that almost unraveled her completely. Her mother hadn't gone to the city just to save Neema. She'd gone because she knew it meant she'd have a chance to save *everyone*. All of them. Lena and Henry. There'd been a time when Lena resented her mother for staying in that tiny village, wasting her time and her talents there. Shame burned brightly on her face.

"Your mother's diary holds secrets we've been working to piece together for many years. Do you have it?" Nora said, more urgently this time.

“No. I didn’t know she had one,” Lena said flatly. Let them think she was stupid, completely oblivious. It wasn’t entirely untrue.

Nora huffed in frustration. “Do you have any idea where she might have kept it?”

Lena shook her head. Unease coiled in her stomach, and the prickling sensation in her wound seemed sharper than before. This meeting felt wrong. She peered over at Ahgrie, who seemed lost in thought.

“Have you considered what you’re going to do next?” Edith asked. The sudden shift in conversation was jarring despite her warmer tone.

She hadn’t. She knew she had to leave Enora to keep Ahgrie and Jessa safe, but this was as far as her plan had gone.

“No. I was hoping to figure that out after coming here. I thought perhaps something new may have been discovered since I’d last visited. Any new information could give me an idea for a cure or some way to delay the change.” Lena looked to Ahgrie, who was still staring across the room.

“There is no way to fight the turn, Lena. You know that,” Benneck said. “You can only hope when you do turn, you don’t harm anyone *else*.”

The harsh words cut deep, despite the truth he spoke.

“There *is* another option. A way that you could continue to serve the Healer’s Organization *and* save lives before it comes to that,” Nora said.

Before Lena could react, Ahgrie’s head snapped back to the group.

“No,” Ahgrie said firmly.

Lena didn’t dare to look at her again.

“We are not asking you, Ahgraphina,” Edith said.

“Consider what we might be able to learn about wraiths, about how they infect, how they survive, if we had someone to study,” Nora said.

“I already said *no*,” Ahgrie repeated, anger lacing her words.

Lena was stunned, and at the same time, she hated that she understood exactly what they were asking.

“If I refuse?” Lena asked.

“We will respect that, of course,” Suhalia said, the others nodding solemnly.

Nora scoffed.

“You speak of respect?” Nora said to Suhalia and then dragged her gaze to Lena. “You come into this city, with a wraithwound, risking the lives of those you claim to love, not to mention countless others, to find a *cure*? Not only is that selfish, it’s utterly reckless.”

“I think that concludes this meeting,” Ahgrie said, already standing with her belongings in hand.

Lena pushed up from the chair, securing her cloak.

Nora’s gaze stilled on the emerald sitting proudly on the clasp of her cloak.

“We are offering you an opportunity to contribute, Lena. Like your mother did. Like *Henry* did,” Nora said, a look of challenge setting her features.

At the mention of her brother’s name, Lena’s restraint snapped. It had dawned on her that the Healer’s Organization had suspected the reason for the attacks on the smaller villages, and yet, they did nothing to warn them before Neema died. If they had, it was possible the residents would still be alive. *Henry* would still be alive.

“Don’t you *dare* talk about Henry!” Lena shouted.

The others in the room shot out of their seats. Benneck stepped in front of Nora, knocking the small wooden table with his knees and sending the glass of water toppling over.

“She didn’t mean it like that,” he said, raising his hands in front of him.

“You’ve gone too far, Nora,” Suhalia chided.

But Ahgrie was already moving, grabbing Lena’s forearm as she pulled her towards the door. Lena’s legs felt leaden, but she willed them to move, to carry her far from here.

“You will only have yourself to blame *when* you end up hurting—” Nora started to say, but Lena blocked it out.

She pushed herself to move faster, nearly running down the stairs. Exiting the tavern was nothing more than a blur of lights and sound. She blinked and realized she was already outside, following Ahgrie away from the tavern. The crisp air bit at the exposed skin of her face. She relished it, sucking the chill night air deep into her lungs. Ahgrie’s eyes darted around, inspecting the empty streets. When she was satisfied that they were alone, she spoke.

“You have to believe me when I say I had no way of knowing they would ask that of you.”

“I know, Ahgrie,” Lena said, letting out a shuddering breath. She hadn’t felt anger in so long. After her mother disappeared, her emotions had slowly slipped into a muted echo of what they’d once been. It was almost

exhilarating, like catching a glimpse of the person she used to be in a mirror.

“I’m so sorry, Lena. I didn’t know Neema was so ill. Her death has changed everything, and Nora…” Ahgrie took off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Orvain is known for withholding information, so I decided to skip him and head straight for his files.”

“You went through his files?” Lena asked, eyes wide, but Ahgrie waved her off.

“They are in search of a plant they believe might cure the infection, or at least delay, or maybe stunt its growth. I hoped to ask the Org about it—now I see how foolish that was. I’m not sure who found it or how it works. Here.” Ahgrie handed Lena a piece of parchment with an unrefined sketch of the plant. “There is something out there Lena, something that could help you, if you find it in time.”

Lena swallowed the lump in her throat. It was a gift, the information Ahgrie was giving her, had risked her life to give her. It was a reason to keep fighting. For Henry. She would not waste it.

“Thank you,” she breathed. The relief of knowing her trip to Enora had yielded something to go off of suddenly left her feeling exhausted, but Ahgrie brushed that off too.

“Go see Ada. She and Eduard know more about rare plants than even the Org does. You do have your mother’s diary, right?” she asked, searching Lena’s face. Having found the answer there, she said, “Good. There’s a reason Marisee kept it away from the Org. Ask them about that, too.” She stopped walking then and readjusted her glasses before pinning Lena with a look. “Lena, only go if you’re sure it will be safe. For all of you.”

Lena nodded, knowing Ahgrie was concerned for Ada and Eduard’s safety because Nora hadn’t been wrong in her assessment of Lena’s actions. The fact that Lena had resisted the infection this long was unheard of as far as she knew.

Ahgrie led Lena through the empty streets, making sure to keep to the shadows. Lena kept pace, knowing that since the festival goers were likely at the square, two women walking through the darkened streets would be deemed suspicious to any patrolling the area.

A roar of cheer erupted from nearby, startling Lena who froze in the center of two intersecting streets. She looked between the rows of buildings to see the silhouettes of two winged creatures in the sky, making their

ascent towards the moon. Lena pulled her hood off to get a better look, mesmerized at the sight before her when a long, sorrowful note pierced the newly fallen silence.

Someone was playing the *Ballad of the Maiden*. Against the backdrop of the violin, the creatures seemed ominous somehow. She'd only heard the song a few times, and while it hadn't ever piqued her interest, in this moment, the music called to her, spoke to her soul, like the memory of a joyful day too soon forgotten.

She must have stood there staring for longer than she'd thought because, not a moment later, she was swept into a crowd of bodies. Lena tried to push against the current, spotting Ahgrie on the other side of the road. She couldn't recall when Ahgrie had gained so much distance from her.

"Lena!" Ahgrie shouted, arm outstretched.

But her shout was swallowed by the noise of the crowd. Lena tried pushing her way back to Ahgrie with little success, her muscles heavy and slow. Her only choices were either to turn and move with the mass or risk falling and being trampled by it.

By the time the mass thinned, she was in a part of the city she didn't recognize. The streets were dark and littered with rotting garbage, the small buildings huddled closely together as if they too sought comfort from the dark.

The skin of her shoulder began to prickle, and she became aware of her mistake. She didn't belong here; that would be glaringly obvious to anyone looking for information to sell. She had to get back to one of the main thoroughfares. The thought was forming slowly in her mind when she was grabbed from behind and shoved into an alley. The world spun as her assailant turned and slammed her into a wall.

Covering her mouth with his palm, he leaned in close to reveal a pale face with cruel eyes and the twist of a sneer on his lips.

"I knew it was you the minute you pulled down your hood—"

Lena struggled and failed to place the man. *Did he know who she was or had he gone too heavy on the pints?*

"—demon," he finished.

Her heart raced as her mind arranged the pieces for her.

"Who are you?" she said, keeping her voice even.

"More importantly, *what* are you?" he retorted.

Before she had a moment to react, he shoved a damp cloth over her face. A sweet smell filled her lungs before her body went limp.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY

She had a vague sense of being carried. The view of the darkened streets soon shifted, giving way to brightly lit homes and cleaner air. The pounding footsteps on cobblestones ceased abruptly and were replaced by the hushed rustle of boots against the browning grass of an empty field.

Lena's head struck the ground with a crack as she was dumped inside a cell. The loud click of a lock and jangle of keys seemed to strike the correct chords to trigger the return of her awareness. By the time the black cleared from the edges of her vision, she realized she was not in a cell but a prison wagon. As she lay there, she took stock of her injuries.

Her throat ached fiercely, and her lungs burned, but she couldn't figure out what type of sedative he'd used. There was something odd about the heaviness in her muscles. Beyond that, her chest prickled intensely, and her fingertips itched. She sat up slowly when she heard voices nearing the wagon.

"You're going to be promoted, Vince. First the beast in the forest and now her!" said a young, eager voice.

"Her beheading will probably earn me a private residence and any moon maiden I want."

Recognition wormed its way into her mind as she studied the rope binding her hands. Vince? Hadn't his men thought him to be dead? The memory of those terrifying moments leaked in slowly, fighting the effects of the drug. He hadn't been the one to fell that beast. That had been a different man . . . one whose still-beating heart she had held in her hand.

"How did you find her?" asked the younger voice.

"I, uh, tracked her. Figured she'd come to the city, ya know," Vince said.

“I didn’t know you were so good at tracking. Can you teach me?”

“Maybe, if you keep your mouth shut about what you’ve seen tonight,” said Vince.

“Of course, I will. Where are you going to take her?”

“Out with the High Priest’s chosen. I’m not about to put her in the dungeons here and have someone else take the credit I deserve.”

“But wouldn’t the Commander want to know about her now?” the young voice added cautiously.

Panic began to wake the rest of her senses. She was being taken out of the city. *To where?* She’d never heard that the High Priest had a separate residence.

“He isn’t in the city tonight.”

“Oh, did he tell you where he was going?”

“No, I heard some of the Firsts talking about it.”

Recollection pricked the edge of her mind. *Firsts* were what they called the men closest to the Commander, those who’d pledged their loyalty first.

“Is that what you’re going to ask for? To be moved into the Commander’s personal guard?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I know there are some vacancies in Third. Next time you see me, I might be running my own unit,” he boasted.

Footsteps approached the wagon, and a slight shift in its positioning alerted Lena that it’d be moving soon. She leaned forward and caught a glimpse of the city lights above the fortifying wall through the small, barred window.

The wagon jerked, and they were off, the city lights fading into the distance, framed by the metal bars that stood between her and the freedom to pursue a cure for Henry.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Lena's hands were bound so tightly she was beginning to lose feeling in her fingers. Her mind struggled to come up with a way to escape, the fog of the sedative still lingering in her body. She still had her pack but couldn't reach it, and there was nothing else nearby that would slice through rope. It was tempting to give up. The feeling of helplessness was so familiar. Her body felt useless, exactly how she'd felt when grief had slowed her thinking and numbed her emotions to avoid the pain of her losses.

Lena squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, hoping the sensation might shake those thoughts loose. Thinking that way wasn't helpful. She needed to focus.

In what felt like both the longest and shortest ride of her life, the wagon began to slow. She wasn't in any condition to fight her way out, especially with her hands bound. But if Vince got her inside, there was little chance she'd ever get back out. Still, she had to do *something*.

"Who've you got there, another conspirator? The two maidens expected tonight were already delivered," said a muffled voice.

"This one's a gift," Vince said.

"Doesn't he already have two in his chambers?" the guard said.

"This one is for the Commander," Vince said.

"Is that so?" the guard asked, curiosity evident in his tone.

"It is, so leave her be. It's your head otherwise. I'll be back to pick her up at first light," Vince said.

"All right," said the voice.

After a moment, she heard the jingle of keys, and the wagon began to move again. She lay back down and pretended to be unconscious. The click of the lock was the only sound before light flooded in.

“You look so innocent for a fucking demon,” he murmured, clamping his hands around her ankles. “But you did me a favor by killing them. If I had to work another day under Jarek, I would have had to kill him myself. Bastard kept confusing me with the other men. And now, you’ll do me another. I’ll finally be offered what I deserve. What’s *mine*.”

He yanked her towards the door, once, then twice. Then she felt hands at her chest.

“And to think, I expected to see you at the northern gate before dawn, wearing that emerald broach. But then there you were, in the middle of that intersection.” He played with the broach, no doubt trying to get a better look at it in the dim light. The two thin crystals hanging from the bottom clinked dully. “Ah, I’ll just take it from the treasury when he tires of it . . . don’t want to be accused of theft again.”

He wrapped his arms around her torso and heaved her over his shoulder, grunting as he lifted her. The smell of hay and manure drifted toward her, and Lena cracked an eye open to see a barn illuminated by rays of moonlight.

Shortly after, she heard the click of another lock. This was her chance; she could try and run. But she would never make it, not with her hands bound and her body still struggling against the effects of sedation. Vince stepped into the barn, her chance of escape evaporating into the blackened night. He took several turns, stopping a few times to adjust his grip on her body before coming to a stop. She heard the squeak of a door before he shoved her off him, her body landing on the ground with a thud. She did her best to absorb the impact without wincing.

A gasp echoed through the space, and then a female voice said, “Are you going to tell us what we’re doing in here, Vince? When do we get to leave?”

“Keep it up, Camille, and I’ll move that demon into your cell,” he said.

A prolonged silence ensued, punctuated by a click of the lock and heavy footsteps retreating. Lena lay there for a long while, unwilling to open her eyes. For if she did, it would be like accepting the pain of betrayal, so sharp and unrelenting that it speared through her, stealing the very air from her lungs. She would have lain there forever, if not for her brother.

Lena was in a dark, narrow cell. Three women sat in a small column of moonlight in the adjoining cell, eyes wide with terror. Scanning the women, she noticed all three were wearing silver robes and their hands were bound. They were also beautiful. Likely a requirement of being a maiden. Lena inhaled sharply, trying to dislodge the pain in her chest that had nothing to do with her wounds, when the young woman with reddish brown hair on the left flinched.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Lena said.

The woman seated in the middle with sandy brown hair appeared a little older with striking features and high cheekbones. She studied Lena, something like curiosity in her brown eyes.

“Is that so?” she asked with a bit of pause.

“Yes,” Lena said, irritation starting to fill the gaps the fog had left behind.

“Because your eyes are glowing,” the other woman on the right said, her grey-blue eyes cold.

Lena blinked. And then blinked again.

“My eyes—*what*?”

“They’re glowing. It’s all I can see from where I’m sitting,” the woman added, her long, blonde hair swaying slightly as she motioned toward Lena with her chin.

Well, that must be terrifying. Her irritation eased some at this, remembering the terror that coursed through her when she’d seen that animal in the forest.

“They’re… a slight gold color,” the blonde woman said.

“Orange,” whispered another voice. The third woman.

She was astonished but also horrified, dread filling the pit of her stomach.

“Who are you?” asked the woman sitting in the middle.

Lena didn’t reply.

“I’m Riley; this is Laney,” she motioned to her right, “and that is Camille.”

Lena looked between the women. They sat huddled close together like they knew each other well.

“Why’d he bring you here? Vince. The fact that he didn’t kill you. What’s he got planned for you?” Riley asked.

Lena considered not answering but then relented. “I’m *a gift* for the Commander. And you?”

“I don’t know why I was brought here,” Riley said.

“I was selected for the Moon Bathing Ceremony,” Laney volunteered, “but I didn’t know . . . I didn’t expect to end up *here* afterwards.” Tears slid down her face as she added, “Maybe I offended Lunis somehow.”

“I didn’t put my name in for the ceremony,” Camille said, addressing Laney.

“You didn’t?” Laney asked, leaning forward to look at Camille.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Camille shook her head. “I thought telling you would just make you a target.”

“But then why . . . ” Laney’s voice trailed off, perhaps deciding that she was no longer interested in the answer.

“It’s going to be okay, Laney,” Riley said, reaching out to lay her bound hands over Laney’s.

The consolatory gesture made Lena’s heart ache as Vince’s words ripped through her once more, *I expected you to be at the northern gate before dawn . . . wearing that emerald broach.”* She didn’t want to think about it. Couldn’t. Not if she was to focus on getting out of here.

The conversation in the next cell faded into the background as she considered her options. Revealing any information about herself when these women knew *what* she was would be risky, but she didn’t see any other options.

“Maybe we can help each other?” Lena tried, lifting her hands up. When they didn’t respond, she remembered they couldn’t see her. “Could one of you untie me?”

“I— I don’t think unbinding her hands is a good idea,” Camille said.

Riley looked at Camille seeming to consider her options.

Lena couldn’t blame them. She likely looked terrifying in the dark, and nobody in their right mind would willingly approach somebody who’d been infected. She hadn’t exactly done herself any favors just now by withholding information, but perhaps she could approach the situation in a different way. Shaking off the cobwebs of disuse, Lena summoned the healer she’d once been.

“You remind me of my brother, Camille. It’s the hair,” she said. Sadness crossed over Camille’s face, silence slowly filling the space between them.

Just when Lena thought she wouldn’t answer, Camille replied, “I have a brother too.”

And then, as if Lena had been struck, she realized who sat in front of her. “James?”

Camille’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know that?”

“I met him and your father,” Lena said, unable to keep the shock out of her voice.

Camille gaped. Both Riley and Laney were staring at her now too.

“I don’t believe you,” Camille said.

“They’re in the city. Looking for you,” Lena said.

“Is this some sort of trick? Some ability you’ve developed since you started turning?”

“They helped me, and in turn, I helped them. In the market. James tried to buy a restricted sedative from one of the Commander’s vendors, but I managed to interrupt the sale.”

“What a fool! Who were they trying to sedate?” Camille asked.

“A guard that frequents one of the taverns,” Lena said.

“If they wanted to sedate a guard, they could have just bought some—”

“—bly root,” they finished together.

Camille sat up straighter. “Are you a healer?” she asked in disbelief.

“Yes. Well, I was,” Lena said.

Laney seemed to wince at that while Camille’s face turned somber.

“You seem like a nice person, and I’m grateful you helped my family, but I still don’t think it’s a good idea to set you free.” She looked over at Riley, whose once curious face now resembled Camille’s, serious and closed off. Laney’s gaze fell to the floor.

“What’s your plan then? Surely you don’t expect things will turn out well for any of you after Vince returns,” Lena said.

Laney looked up at that.

“Maybe we’re just being punished for something that went wrong during the ceremony, and they’ll be back to release us later?” she ventured.

“Laney, ceremonial maidens never return. And they’re not the only ones to go missing,” Riley said gently.

Laney began to cry. Lena didn’t mean to stare, but there was something about her that drew Lena’s attention. She tilted her head, trying to figure out what it could be.

“Don’t look at her like that,” Riley snapped.

“Like what?” Lena asked, taken aback.

“Like she’s prey,” Riley said.

Is that what she had been doing? Lena felt a chill shoot up her spine.

“That’s not. I wasn’t —” Lena started, but she couldn’t finish her sentence.

The truth was she was changing, whether she wanted to acknowledge it or not. She shook her head, a sinking feeling settling in her gut. This wasn’t working. These women would never trust her.

It was nothing short of a Goddess-blessed miracle that Vince hadn’t thought to check for what she carried. He’d only cared about the power and recognition he’d gain from presenting her to the Commander. But she had no intention of being in this cell when Vince returned.

Feeling like she was finally free of the sedative’s effects, Lena twisted her wrists against the rope as she thought. *Medicine, bandages, cleaning cloths, salves, a few live specimens, my mother’s diary, Henry’s effects, a spare set of clothes . . .*

She managed minimal movement due to how tight the bindings were, but desperation aided her attempt. Her wrists were already sore. The three women in the other cell were engaged in quiet conversation amongst each other. *Good.*

If only she’d thought to retrieve her herb knife from the forest floor. Buying a weapon at the market hadn’t been an option, and she’d likely cut herself if she had a knife . . . At least then she might be able to slide the rope—

Carefully, Lena stood, ignoring the new aches and pains in her body, and worked her pack around. It had been secured underneath her cloak. After some awkward shuffling, she managed to obtain access to it. Lena slowly sank to the floor, settling on her heels. She could sense the eyes of the others on her, but she didn’t care. Perhaps it was better they feared her; it decreased the chance they would interfere with her plan.

Lena felt around in her pack, careful to monitor the items to avoid losing any, until her fingers located a small metal tin. Setting it gently on the packed dirt floor, she worked her fingers around the lid and pulled it off. The reek of the goop slowly filled the space, but Lena couldn’t even be bothered to scrunch her nose at it. Taking the tin into her palms, she lifted her wrists and turned it over. The cool, gelatinous substance dripped down

between her wrists. When she was certain the tin was empty, she let it fall to the ground and began working the goop into the ropes.

“Ugh! What is that?” Laney asked from across the room.

Lena ignored her and kept working, knowing it would take time for the substance to soak into the fibers and soften them. She twisted and pulled at the rope, ignoring the pain.

“Riley, look,” Camille said.

When Lena looked up, the moon had shifted, illuminating her in her cell. She gritted her teeth against the pain as the rope cut further into her wrists, but she didn’t stop until the fibers were saturated with the brown goop and her own blood. Finally, she slipped one hand through, and then the other. Letting the rope fall to the floor, Lena sat back against the cell, letting her head rest against the wall.

The three women across the way sat very still, eyes trained on her. It was Riley who spoke first, “What now?”

“I find a way out,” Lena said, scanning the supplies she’d laid out on the floor before her. While the goop that covered her hands, wrists, and forearms would help to heal the broken skin, she had to clean the wounds and make sure none of the rough fibers were imbedded in the exposed flesh. The task was familiar, comforting somehow despite the pain.

When she was done, she took in the details of the cell. There was a small, barred window set high on the back wall. Perhaps there was a way to get the cell door unlocked or hinges she could dislodge. She examined the lock and tested the integrity of the door. It didn’t budge.

Despite her best efforts, she’d still ended up in a cage. She had managed to get her bindings off, yes, but she had no idea how she was supposed to get out of the cell. Lena placed her hands on the bars. The bars that would surely keep her from saving her brother.

She wished she had never come to Enora. It was true that she’d learned about a possible cure, but it was a shot in the dark. She couldn’t even be sure the plant existed. The only thing she was sure about was that she’d failed everyone in her life, and she would likely fail Henry too.

“Don’t do that,” Riley said, approaching the wall between them. “The minute you go down that path, you’re done.”

She gave Lena a knowing look, and Lena was surprised to see no fear in her brown eyes. Lena breathed in deeply, taking a moment to reel herself back in.

“You’ve been here longer than they have,” Lena stated.

Riley nodded.

“How long?”

“Four days,” she said.

Lena thought.

“Suspected of defying the High Priest?” she asked.

Riley’s eyebrows shot up.

“I overheard Vince at the gate,” Lena admitted.

“Ah,” Riley said, leaning against the door of her own cell. “Well, they’re not wrong.”

Two heads snapped in their direction at this.

“Riley, what are you talking about?” Laney said standing, although she didn’t approach.

“I didn’t come here to *appeal to the moon*,” Riley said.

Laney’s face seemed to pale further, her eyes wide. Camille on the other hand just took in the information, not seeming surprised at all.

“In the end, I think I asked one too many questions about the missing maidens,” Riley said. She looked angry, furious, actually.

“Are you some kind of spy?” Laney asked.

“So many have gone missing, and no one seems to be doing *anything* about it. Unfortunately, I didn’t learn much.”

“I didn’t know.” Laney admitted. “Why did you take the vows, Camille?” Laney asked, hurt flashing in her eyes. “You said you didn’t volunteer for the Moon Bathing . . . ”

“I thought if I joined the maidens, and we were successful, so many of my patients would stop dying. But saying that from a darkened cell sounds pretty foolish,” Camille said.

“I’m from Pirn Point, so it doesn’t sound foolish to me,” Laney said. Both Riley and Camille gaped at Laney, even Lena turned to look at her.

“How did you manage to survive the cold?” Camille asked.

Laney settled against the wall at her back. “I don’t know. There were many nights I wasn’t sure I’d see morning, but on particularly cold days, I remember having vivid dreams of warm places I’d never seen before, and I think somehow that helped.”

“Do you still have family there?” Riley asked.

Laney shook her head. “By my eleventh birthday, my family was gone. My mother died first and then my sister. Father held out the longest, but he

never recovered after he caught a case of bittenfrost. I was taken in by friends of my family, but I was a burden they hadn't planned for and couldn't keep. One spring, the village rescued a convoy of vendors from Enora that were stalled due to the storms. They shared their food and wares and told many stories. That's how I learned about the maidens. I begged them to take me along and they agreed, so long as I worked to earn my keep. Through it all, I can say that this cell is more comfortable than life in the Bleakstones."

Silence fell over the women after that. Lena couldn't imagine growing up there. A place so frigid many nicknamed the only village there Fisc Point, for all you'd find if you wandered into the highest part of the Slate Mountain Range, was frost, ice, snow and corpses. And despite it all, Laney had come to Enora to help.

Each one of these women had come to help, to contribute something good to the world. They didn't sit around waiting for someone else to help or fix what had broken in Reimar. They'd heard about an organization working to fix things and joined, even if it had ended up being a cult.

Lena, on the other hand, had abandoned her calling and shut the entire world out when things got too hard. She wasn't the only person who had lost her family, who had suffered, and yet, she couldn't see beyond her own pain.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned back to the door because, unlike Laney's family, her brother's soul was still alive within her, and if she could stop the turn, she might be able to figure out a way to get him out. To set him free.

"Have you tried pulling on it?" Riley's voice yanked Lena from her thoughts. When she looked over, Riley motioned with her chin at the latch. "I've heard stories about half wraiths developing inexplicable strength."

Lena considered for a moment and then gave the door a big tug. Nothing happened. Lena sighed, feeling the panic return. One look at the window behind her, and the panic intensified. The sky was beginning to lighten.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

The sky brightened slowly, the sun creeping up from the horizon until it greeted the land fully. Vince had not returned. Lena didn't know whether to be relieved or worried. Was it possible that something else had gone wrong? That instead he'd decided to go after Ahgrie and Jessa too?

Her thoughts were starting to spiral when Riley asked Camille, "How do you know Vince?"

"My story is not so different than yours," she said to Riley. "My lodging companion disappeared. When I reported it to the Head Maiden, she assured me she'd talk to the High Priest about it. I know now she never did. Not long after, I was assigned to clean the barracks, where I met Vince. One night, he tried to follow me back to my room. I managed to hide in one of the passageways, but he'd seen where I was staying. I can only assume he was the one who went through my things, including a letter I had written to my father asking him to come get me. The next day, I was assigned to the ceremony, and Vince was sent out on patrol."

Lena thought that fit well enough with what she knew about him and shuddered at the thought of what he might do when he returned. The sudden prickling sensation at her chest sent a jolt of adrenaline through her. When she heard the jangle of keys and the faint click of a lock, Lena retreated to a dark corner in her cell and repositioned the rope over her wrists. It took her a moment to realize that the other women hadn't heard it.

With one last glance at the women in the cell across from her, Lena closed her eyes and leaned her head into the corner, pretending to be asleep.

If her eyes were still glowing, she would never make it out of this cell. She knew the door of the adjacent cell had swung open by the ominous screech.

“What have we here?” said the voice. “Three trays but four strays.”

Lena heard what she could only guess were trays of food clattering onto the ground.

“Who is that?” the guard demanded. His footsteps thudded on the packed dirt floor, which likely meant he was making his way further into their cell. “You three, I know about.” The footsteps paused, and then she heard the blow land. Lena did her best not to flinch. “I know this bitch won’t say a word, but how about you, Maiden Laney?”

“I’ll tell you. Just don’t hit her!” Camille shouted.

A heartbeat passed and then another. The silence stretched on. Camille had been the most hesitant about Lena, and now she had the perfect opportunity to make sure they could be rid of her. It would take one word, and the guard would kill her and take her head, right here in this cell.

“We don’t know who she is, except that Vince brought her in last night,” Camille said.

“And?” the guard said.

“That’s all we know,” Riley said before Camille could reply.

Lena was not prepared for the second blow, this one landing harder than the first.

“I think I’ll just ask her myself,” the man said. The undeniable sound of steel vacating its sheath carried across the space to Lena. “And when I’m done with her, I’ll come back in here.”

The jingle of keys set Lena’s heart racing. Another click of a lock and the squeak of rusty hinges announced his approach. Lena tensed, cold realization dousing her.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Laney said, her voice closer than it’d been before. The footsteps paused.

“I promise I’ll make it enjoyable for her,” the guard said, amusement lacing his tone.

Two more footsteps sounded in front of her. *She would have no choice then.* The minute she opened her eyes, he’d be able to tell she was actively turning. She’d have to hope the wraith would take over but also that she could regain control after.

“Touch her and your skin will fall off,” Laney said, voice steady. A disturbance in the air suggested the guard had whirled in Laney’s direction.

“You dare threaten me?” he growled.

“I’m not threatening you. I’m saving your life. She has worming sores,” Laney said.

When he didn’t answer, Laney continued, “You know, the virus that eats holes in your flesh? He said they believe she’s immune so they’ve put her here for Orvain, seeing as how they couldn’t keep her in the city’s dungeons.”

Lena heard the man back up a few paces.

“Vince told us that if we said anything, he’d put her in here with us,” Riley added. “And before you come back in here, think about what the High Priest will do to you if you touch his property. The guards have already let it slip that we’ll be next to warm his bed, and it’s no secret he likes a pretty face.”

Lena heard the door to her cell creak open again and the click of a lock.

A loud clang made Lena’s heart freeze. She guessed the guard must have pounded on the bars of the cell.

“And do you know what will happen to you after the High Priest is done with you? Maidens don’t usually last long in his quarters, with tastes as violent as his.” A pause. “No? Well, let me be the one to tell you. You’ll be fed to a wraith. That’s right. I’ve seen it. Those who survive it . . . Well, you can imagine. Your pretty face won’t matter then.”

He barked a laugh and started whistling before his footsteps retreated.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Lena couldn’t sit still any longer and stood, letting the loose rope around her wrists fall to the floor. She looked to Laney and Riley, who were still standing at the barred wall that separated their cells. Daring to approach, she moved slowly, deliberately, to avoid scaring them.

Laney gave her a small smile. Lena nodded in return, letting her see the gratitude on her face. Riley stared after the man.

“Can I help you with those?” Lena offered. Laney didn’t hesitate. She stepped towards her and lifted her wrists up to the bars.

“Laney, what are you doing?” Camille stood.

“I want these off,” she said simply, her reddish-brown hair falling over her shoulder as she turned back to Lena.

She looked exhausted, as if the ruse had taken it out of her. Lena reached through the bars and began loosening Laney’s ropes.

Laney stared at the tips of her fingers where her nails had once been but didn’t mention the healing skin.

“What are worming sores? Is that an illness common in Pirn?”

Laney laughed, her tired eyes lighting up. “No, I just made that up.”

Lena couldn’t help but smirk.

After Laney helped Riley and Camille out of their bindings, the women sat in silence for a while until Laney walked over to one of the trays of food.

“Are you hungry?” Laney asked her, offering a piece of bread through the bars.

Lena hesitated; there was just something about her that she couldn’t place. After a moment, she took it and sat. It was nice to eat in Laney’s

company. Riley and Camille made their way over and sat near Laney to eat as well.

“Did you know?” Riley asked Camille and Laney.

“Know what?” Camille replied.

“Why they were taking maidens?” Riley asked.

Both women shook their heads.

“Yadisa was taken in the middle of the day, collecting samples at the river,” Camille whispered.

“It’s likely everyone in power is involved,” Riley said through gritted teeth.

Lena listened as the women pieced it together. The systematic disappearance of young women. More than two hundred in three years by Riley’s count. The secret activities of the Commander’s men, the true purpose of his healer and their collaboration with the High Priest. The only thing they didn’t understand was how the Aurynn were involved.

The information made Lena’s stomach turn as she recalled the Healer’s Organization’s involvement with Orvain. *Was it possible Nora and the other leaders were working with them as well?* She couldn’t get Nora’s request out of her mind.

Lena finally spoke when there was a lull in the conversation. “We need to find a way out of these cells.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Camille asked.

“Our best bet will be when someone comes to retrieve us,” Riley said. “As it stands, we have a better chance of success if the three of us can overpower whoever comes for us, but for you . . . when Vince comes for you, you have to fight.”

Dread coiled in Lena’s stomach as she accepted what she’d known all along. Exhaustion settled over her as the last of the adrenaline faded from the guard’s visit.

Silence fell over the women once more, and they eventually returned to the far wall and huddled together, taking turns sleeping. The sun continued to descend in the sky, shifting the light that filtered in through the bars above. Eventually, night fell. Vince still hadn’t returned for her, and Lena fell asleep, unable to fight the exhaustion any longer.



LENA JOLTED awake to belligerent screams at the cell door. Heart thumping in her chest, she looked around, her senses sharpening almost to the point of pain. Standing before her was Vince, and at her feet, a linen cloth reeking with a too sweet odor.

“Put it on your face, NOW!” he roared from his place in the narrow hall.

He appeared to be swaying slightly, the lantern in his hand splashing light on the walls. Lena cursed under her breath and stood.

“DO IT!” he screamed.

Lena looked down at the cloth, her mind racing. After a moment, she picked it up and threw it back at him. It landed a few feet away; the linen now covered in a layer of dirt. He slowly lifted the lantern to his face, now contorted in rage, the light illuminating the wicked cruelty that lay beneath. Fear made her limbs tingle, but she steeled herself because she was certain of one thing. The only way that cloth would end up on her face was if Vince entered the cell and forced it upon her.

“Fucking demon! When I ask you to do something, you DO IT!” he barked, words slurring.

It took him a moment to locate the correct key, but once he did, he plunged it into the lock and threw open the door. Vince stumbled into the cell and reached for his sword but paused. As if he’d just realized he still carried the lantern in his hand, he hurled it across the cell. It landed with a crash along the adjoining wall. Drawing his sword, Vince kicked the filthy cloth at Lena.

“Put it on your face,” he said again, each word clipped in warning. “You can arrive at the Commander’s office in one piece or two! I only need your head, girl.”

He blinked slowly, swaying in place. Lena realized he was *drunk*. Time. She just needed some time to think.

“You’re taking me to him now, in the middle of the night?” Lena ventured.

“I’m tired of waiting for him to summon me, waiting for when it’s convenient for *him*, especially since I’ve secured him such a prize. Put. It. On,” he said more quietly this time, lifting his sword. “DO IT!” he roared again when Lena didn’t move.

Just as she began to reach for the cloth, the flame inside the lantern winked out. Lena blinked in surprise; she could see with stunning clarity.

And there, near the shattered lantern on the floor, was Laney crouched down on all fours.

“Close your eyes!” Laney shouted.

Burning the image of the cell into her mind, she slammed her eyes shut and crouched. Lena reached for the wall behind her, hoping to get a sense of where she was, the new skin of her fingertips stinging as it met the rough stone.

The ring of steel clanged through the air as it struck stone. Terror filled her as she realized Vince was swinging the sword wildly in the cramped space. She could only hope he was too drunk to use the sword with any accuracy.

Lena chanced a glance around the cell before diving out of the way as Vince swung the sword where he’d seen her golden eyes appear, but he had walked deeper into the cell. She would not get this opportunity again. Lena broke into a run, aiming for the exit, but even inebriated, Vince was fast.

He clamped his free hand onto her injured shoulder and yanked her back off her feet. Stars burst in her vision as they fell backward together. Landing in a semi-seated position, she both felt and heard Vince slam into the wall of bars behind them. She tried to climb off him, but Vince wrapped his forearm around her neck and pulled her back down. Lena gasped for air as he squeezed, trying desperately to wrench his arm off her neck or to scratch him, but she didn’t have any fingernails.

She thrashed, fighting both Vince and the despair that threatened to drown her, but it was useless. A choked sob escaped her throat as her strength drained. *No, not like this. She couldn’t die in this dirty cell, alone and so far away from everything she loved.*

But then, Vince was yanked back violently and she with him. Pained screams erupted from him, and his arm loosened around her throat. Lena slipped from underneath his grip and ran.

She made it just outside the cell before Vince caught her, and she crashed to ground once more. Lena flipped over, anticipating his attack, but realized he hadn’t caught up to her; he’d fallen. Laney, Riley, and Camille sat behind the barred wall, arms extended through the gaps, pulling at his feet and ankles. It was clear they’d been the ones to yank him backward a moment ago, causing him to release her.

Lena kicked at his hand as he reached for her. Despite their attempts, Vince wasn’t delayed for long. He crawled toward her, his face bordering

on monstrous. Lena glanced at the angle of the cell door and then his head. If she timed it right—

Using her arms to brace herself, Lena lifted both legs, summoning all of the strength she could muster, and slammed them into the door as Vince's head reached the threshold. He tried to cover his face with his arms, but he couldn't fend off the full weight of the door. Again and again, Lena kicked the door into Vince's skull. She channeled all her fear and fury into her legs until his face was unrecognizable, bloody, and disfigured.

He didn't get back up.

Panting, Lena stood on wobbling legs. Laney, Riley, and Camille remained crouched at the adjoining wall in the moonlit cell staring at her.

Vince was still alive, as evidenced by his sallow, uneven breaths, but he wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

Assured that he was no longer a threat, Lena sprang into motion. She found the keys in Vince's pocket and rushed to unlock the door of the other cell. The squeak of the hinges felt like a warning call for all to hear in the quiet of the early morning, but no one came for them.

The night sky welcomed them beyond the barn door that had been left ajar. Winking stars shone from above. Lena wondered if they seemed brighter somehow, bigger, as if celebrating her freedom. She walked towards the forest at the back of the property, eager to get away from the barn that had almost been her final resting place.

Laney ran to catch up with her, and the other two women followed. When they'd reached the edge of the forest, Lena slowed.

"Thank you," she whispered to the women who now stood huddled together.

"I didn't do it for you," Camille said under her breath.

Lena slid her gaze over to Camille, who retreated several steps, fear growing on her face.

"Your eyes are glowing but brighter," Laney said.

Lena blinked, willing the irritation to fade, but Laney let go of Camille and walked over to her.

"You're welcome," Laney said, reaching for her hand.

The moment they made contact; Lena gasped.

"You too?" Lena asked.

"Is that what it is?" she whispered, closing her eyes and letting her head fall.

Riley and Camille looked between Lena and Laney, waiting to be brought into the conversation, but Lena kept her eyes trained on the maiden before her.

“I think it is . . . No, I know it is,” Lena said.

“Are either of you going to tell us what’s going on?” Camille snapped.

“I was scratched by the Aurynn the night I was dropped here,” Laney said, tears welling in her eyes. “I knew I felt different, but I didn’t know why. I also hadn’t been able to check it because—”

She lifted her wrists up and held them out, showing the angry red welts from the rope.

“Let me see it,” Riley demanded.

Laney lifted her right arm and turned her body towards the light of the moon to show where her robes had been torn. Through the ripped fabric, a gash in her flesh was visible. Small black veins, delicate in their appearance, spiderwebbed away from it.

Lena could sense it was indeed a wraithwound and realized that some part of her could detect the lifeform that now grew inside it. Riley shook her head in disbelief; Camille looked devastated.

“What exactly are the Aurynn, then?” Laney asked, anger lacing her words.

It was a question no one knew how to answer. It seemed like a lot in Reimar was not as it seemed.

Camille slipped her hand into Laney’s. “What will you do?”

“I— I’m going to The Whispers,” Laney said.

“The Whispers?” Camille asked, stunned. “Laney, no one goes to The Whispers and returns. Haven’t you heard the stories?”

Laney considered for a moment and then straightened. “I have, but I’ve also heard on my travels that there is help to be sought there, if only the person is brave enough to venture in. If I go, my life may be forfeit, but if I stay, it definitely is.” She turned to Lena then. “Come with me.”

Riley went oddly quiet at that, but Camille stared intently at Lena.

“There’s something else I have to do first,” Lena said, shaking her head. She would not risk Henry’s soul on a rumor when there was a good chance Ada and Eduard would be able to provide information on the plant Ahgrie told her about.

“Where are you going?” Riley asked.

Lena didn’t answer and instead gave Camille a pointed glance. Riley seemed to understand the reason for her silence. Lena wouldn’t put herself in danger by sharing that information, and while she didn’t particularly take to the woman, she had helped Lena, just as much as Laney and Riley had back in that cell.

“If you want to see James and Oscar again, go back into the city. I don’t know how you’ll gain entry; you’ll have to figure that out. Get to the market and ask around for the Conover brothers. Corvin has met them and knows who they are,” she said.

Camille stared at Lena, a flush creeping into her cheeks.

“They can get all of you out safely.”

“Why—?” Camille asked softly, the rest of the sentence hanging between them.

“I’m not helping *you*. I’m helping *them*. They were kind to me,” Lena said.

Camille’s flush deepened.

As she stood there, her skin began to prickle, and she wondered if Camille would betray her, just as Jessa had. She knew better than to trust a stranger, but she’d meant it when she said she was taking the risk for Oscar and James.

She took in the faces of the three women who had saved her life. She couldn’t blame Camille for her blatant distrust; Lena was turning into a wraith after all. But she was grateful to her all the same. Laney and Riley had been kind to her despite her current predicament.

She considered perhaps Laney had only been kind because she too had been infected, and her heart sank, although she didn’t exactly know why. But looking at Laney’s face, she decided that wasn’t true. And then there was Riley, who hadn’t seemed afraid of Lena at all. She didn’t know what to make of that.

“I’ll go to The Whispers with you, Laney,” Riley said.

Laney’s face lit up, and Lena couldn’t help but share the sentiment. She had a sense Riley could take care of herself, and it’d be safer for Laney to travel with a friend. At that thought, Lena’s mind flashed to her last conversation with Jessa, and she had to put it out of her mind.

“Good luck,” she offered with a small wave before turning and heading off into the woods.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

A chill wind blasted through the trees, unseating the last of the amber leaves that still clung to skinny branches. This woodland was a stark contrast to the Overgrown Forest. An unusual fall storm gathered on the horizon, threatening to extend Lena's time in the woods. She had spent days trying to locate the path that would lead her to Ada and Eduard's cabin. Just as she thought she might never find the trail, she spotted the crimson daisies that grew along the worn path and practically sobbed in relief.

Having walked without rest or sleep, her body ached in protest as she made her way down the trail. After several hours, the chill wind brought with it a soft floral scent, and Lena's heart leapt in her chest. She recognized the smell of fall-blooming flowers that would no doubt have taken over the couple's garden. Pale yellow asters and reddish bronze chrysanthemums swayed gently in the distance.

The emotion swelling inside her was deep and piercing. She'd made it. Just ahead, the wood opened to a meadow of tall grass, and nestled inside a circular garden was their cabin. Finally giving herself permission to stop, she put her hand on a splintered tree trunk to steady herself.

A short distance was all that stood between Lena and the knowledge she so desperately sought. And yet, Nora's words rang clear in her mind. It'd been selfish to enter Enora, and she was lucky she hadn't lost control. But she *had* entered and that had led her here.

Lena stood at the half-rotted tree, hesitation muting the relief she'd previously felt. Ada was a long-time family friend, having grown up with

her mother. Ada and Marisee eventually lost touch after Ada moved away from Dovia, only reconnecting several years after Lena was born.

In their youth, they'd had access to the Undan Temple where the Goddess's healing spring originated, the water working its way into enchanted crystals. Most children survived serious illnesses that way, but after the city fell and the Goddess disappeared, life expectancy decreased significantly, and healing knowledge became increasingly valuable. Marisee had helped Ada and Eduard fill the gaps in their healing knowledge while they helped Marisee learn more about rare plants and herbs.

After Lena took her oath, Marisee transitioned them into Lena's care so she could practice her skills. Lena tended to their aches and pains and assisted them in obtaining supplies and food as they aged. She wasn't the only healer to visit, but she had long suspected she might be their favorite. Their joy at seeing her always made her heart swell, and they took great interest in her life and in that of her family. She'd heard they had a daughter, but they never spoke of her, nor had Lena ever seen any evidence that she'd come by to see her parents. When Lena could no longer get out of bed, Henry began to treat them instead.

Guilt wormed its way into her already knotted stomach. Ada and Eduard were on the list of people she'd failed, cut out of her life as if they'd never existed.

She had spent hours with them in their garden, picking and mulling herbs for Ada's swollen knees and Eduard's arthritic hands. The plants and flowers grew larger than any she had ever seen, their colors both beautiful and strange. It was evident they were grown with years of love and attention.

The couple tended to each other the same way they tended to their garden, special attention to detail lay at the root of their affection for one another. They directed the love, care, and devotion they showed their garden, and each other, to Lena after her grandfather was murdered. It was with their help that Lena found her way back to herself. They provided the space for her to grieve. And to heal. A place without demands or constraints or judgment. A place where she could show up as she was and complete small tasks to help them, to give her purpose.

Every month, she would spend a week with them. For the first few visits, they worked in silence, but if she wanted to talk or eat or sit, they were there. Then things began to change. It started with momentary pauses,

gaps in time when she was so focused on her current task of picking weeds or mulling herbs that she was no longer drowning in grief. Slowly, those gaps grew longer, and she learned she could find joy in the small moments and then longer ones.

It saved her life. They saved her life. Along with Marisee and Henry who loved and held her through her grief, too.

Lena inhaled a shaky breath. To think, after Marisee disappeared, she'd forgotten the lessons she learned with them in their garden. Instead, she'd let the grief sweep the knowledge away and bury it down deep. The pain of losing her mother had been all consuming. Stripping her entirely of the person she was, leaving behind only a fading echo of the woman she'd once been. Grief had taken everything from her. Or rather, she'd let it.

Doubt crept into her mind as she stood there, memories of time spent with them a reminder of the woman she'd been who now stood opposite to the woman— creature—she was becoming.

She suspected the wraith might be weak, given the state of her body and because it hadn't made an appearance when she fought off Vince. All things considered, she might be able to stop in briefly, inquire about the plant Ahgrie had shown her, and start the hunt, if they happened to know anything about it.

Movement caught her attention, and she looked up to see Eduard walking toward her.

"Lena." Eduard said warmly, a sad expression passing over his features.

She looked down at herself, realizing her appearance must have been ghastly.

"Come, let's get you inside," he said.

The warmth in his voice only fueled the guilt she felt that he would welcome her in such a way when she'd disappeared from their lives without warning.

She hesitated, lingering at the splintered trunk, but eventually followed Eduard into the meadow. She'd felt so alone since losing Henry, and after visiting Ahgrie and Jessa, she'd only felt more alone. It was comforting to be with others who had known Henry and spent time with him, especially recently. She felt a deep sense of connection to the man walking in front of her.

Eduard was moving slowly, and Lena found it easy to catch up. Spotting the full-length porch that had been added to the cabin, she realized Ada was

sitting outside with a cup of what she knew had to be her personal blend of chamomile, orange, and rose tea.

The worn, wooden steps bore the usual signs of constant use. Her shoulders relaxed as she crossed the threshold of the arched trellises that marked the start of the garden surrounding their home.

Ada's smile fell as Lena approached.

"What's happened?" Ada asked softly, her keen eyes searching Lena's face.

Emotion clogged her throat before she could speak. "They're all dead, Ada," Lena whispered.

Ada nodded and reached for Eduard, who came around Lena to stand by his wife.

"I see," Ada said. "Come, let's get you inside."

"Wait, I'm not sure that's a good idea, I—" She took a step back.

"You need help, and it's our turn to give it, come," Ada said, cutting her off.

Lena considered for a moment but eventually relented.

"Tell me what you need," Ada demanded.

"A place to wash, please," she said.

Ada waved at Lena to follow and led her through the small cabin. The fireplace cradled a small fire that heated the space perfectly. Nearby were reading chairs that also bore signs of wear, the once luxurious blue fabric faded from where it was exposed to the sun in the late afternoons. Ada had been a tailor long ago, and Lena suspected she'd been the one to select the jewel-toned hue.

A small round table stood at the center of the quaint kitchen, which Eduard veered toward. Lena found herself waiting near their old desk while Ada fetched extra bathing supplies. It was covered with intricate sketches of plants, flowers, scenery, one which featured a woman standing by a tree. On the wall above were a few drawings inside intricately carved frames. One of the frames held a drawing of an older girl who smiled at the artist; while the other held a botanical illustration of a small bud on a vine. To the left of the pictures, a medallion and a yellowed ribbon hung from a thin metal chain. The medallion looked familiar, but Lena couldn't place it.

"It's all set up for you, dear. Come."

Ada pointed toward the washroom. Inside, a folded white towel sat on a stool near the tub, along with a bottle of washing soap. *Lavender.* Eduard

appeared behind her with two, large buckets of hot water to top off the small tub. Ada encouraged Lena to take her time and let her know they'd be waiting on the porch when she was done.

The moment she sunk beneath the warm, scented water, the lump of emotion returned, clogging her throat. She tried not to think about all that happened in Enora and outside of the city where she'd fought for her life in that dusty cell.

But she couldn't stop her mind from replaying how Henry had looked as he took his last breath in her arms, that and the promise she'd made him. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to keep Henry's soul alive within her, and she had no idea how she might free it if she did. The truth was that even if she figured out how to stop or control the turn, she might never figure out how to free him.

If she didn't, it was likely his soul would not be permitted to enter Brilliance when she died and would be deemed an abomination. The Goddess of Eteris favored pure souls and was known for having cursed the wicked man who attacked the maiden long ago.

Even so, all her fears and concerns would cease to matter if the wraith took control again. Lena hadn't been able to fight it then; deep down, she doubted she'd be able to regain control if it did. The thought frightened her, and she focused instead on scrubbing herself clean, eager to speak with Ada and Eduard and be on her way.

Once she was free of grime, Lena turned her attention to the wraithwound. The skin surrounding the area had healed further and no longer looked infected, while the skin inside the gashes remained grey and leathery with raised scarring on the edges. She could see the black veins that spiderwebbed away from the wounds more clearly; they seemed to pulse in time with her heartbeat.

The realization made her skin crawl.

Next, she focused on wrapping her torso, hoping to lessen the ache of her broken ribs. Forgetting about the injuries to her fingers, she tried to run them through her hair and winced. While still tender, the flesh where her nails had once been was slowly hardening into something new. The skin was a darker color, almost like the mottled skin of a bruise, and it pulled slightly when she moved her fingers.

When she finally made it out to the porch, she found Ada and Eduard sitting at the gardening table and holding hands. A fresh plate of food sat on

the table opposite them. She felt the lump of emotion return and did her best to swallow it down. The shame she'd felt during the Healers' meeting resurfaced as she remembered a time when she'd wondered out loud whether spending time taking care of the elderly was worthwhile.

Lena sat and realized for the first time in days, she felt hungry. She ate the vegetable sandwich they'd made, savoring the roasted winter squash, browned onions, and tangy cheese. She caught a glimpse of how Eduard caressed Ada's hand as she ate. They all sat in a familiar silence for a while, watching as storm clouds gathered on the horizon. A cool breeze snaked through the garden, dispelling the tangle of floral scents when Ada finally spoke.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"They came when we were out in the fields for Neema's funeral," she replied.

"I'm so sorry," Ada said.

Lena looked away, hoping to keep her grief at bay.

"And Henry?"

Lena chewed on her lip, tears pricking her eyes.

"No," was all she managed.

A somber mood filled the space, the wind and the plants going still.

"How many nights ago?" Eduard asked.

"Thirteen, I think . . . No, maybe fourteen." She shook her head and braced herself as she added, "And I have a wraithwound."

"We know," Ada said gently. "It's all right."

Lena released a long breath. "I went to see Jessa and Ahgrie. She's been collaborating with Orvain and discovered he and his men are in search of a plant. Ahgrie thought you might know what it was."

Ada's brow crinkled, but then she nodded and stood, slowly walking to one of the posts that held up the roof of the porch. Wrapped around the sturdy log was a delicate vine. Up towards the top, concealed in shadow, Lena could barely make out two, black buds hanging from the cord-like vine. Ada held her hand up, gesturing to the buds.

"The Bud of Brielle," Eduard said in a reverent tone.

Lena's eyes grew wide.

"We've been growing the vine for many years, and yet, it has only produced buds one other time. It's very rare," Ada said. "That's why we asked how many nights ago you were attacked. If it's been longer than three

days since the initial attack, or if the infection has been augmented by taking a soul it won't work—"

"—it will kill you," Eduard finished for her.

The world seemed to fall away around her. She'd known better than to hope, to think there might be a way to save Henry. Lena wiped at her face with the palms of her hands, settling into the knowledge that any hope Henry might have resided within her and in her ability to push on. She would have to go to The Whispers. But it would be foolish to proceed without a backup plan in case the wraith took over.

"Is it okay if I take one with me?" Lena asked, Benneck's words echoing in her mind.

Ada and Eduard looked at each other, some unspoken message passing between them.

"Let me tell you about it," Ada said, motioning for Lena to join her.

The bud was small enough to fit in the palm of Lena's hand, and the delicate petals glimmered oddly in the dim light of the stormy sky. Even hidden in shadow, the bud clearly had something otherworldly about it.

"The Bud of Brielle comes from a different planet with a climate much different than ours. It seems like the primary difference, and why it doesn't flourish here as it does there, is the light of the sun, but we can't be certain. Eduard had the seeds with him when he came here, long ago," she said.

"Where did he come from?" Lena asked, the shock working to mute the blow of having learned it could not save her or Henry.

"From a world called SecaTerr. Eduard doesn't remember much about how he ended up in Eteris, but he was captured soon after by the King's men. He and several others were tortured for knowledge about his world and his people."

Simultaneously stunned and horrified, Lena held a hand up to her chest but put it back down when she remembered her wraithwound. Eduard had always been very private about his past; the only thing she knew about him was that he'd been some type of soldier.

"How did you escape?" Lena asked.

"Ada broke me out," he said, giving her hand a squeeze.

Lena felt her eyes grow round as she imagined Ada breaking into the castle dungeon. The questions burst forth from her in rapid succession: "Does this mean you're not . . . human? Do you have special abilities?"

“I know you must have a lot of questions, but this is important,” Eduard said.

“Any idea what kind of wraith did that?” Ada asked, changing the subject.

Lena shook her head. She didn’t remember anything about the attack.

“We can only hope it was a weaker type of wraith. Those are easier to fight.”

“And if it isn’t?” Lena asked.

She had begun to suspect that wasn’t the case.

“Then you’ll have some decisions to make. We know very little about wraiths, but the powerful ones seem to have the capacity to consume many souls. Some have even shown the ability to influence or at least sense others.”

The darkness inside her seemed to stir, and Lena thought back to her interactions with Laney. Eduard noticed Lena’s discomfort and moved on, pointing to the flower.

“If you’re going to take this yourself, you must ingest it. That will end your life. If you are to use it for someone else, you’ll have to crush the bud in your palm and rub it onto the affected area. It is important to understand that you must rub it deeply into every cut or scrape made by a wraith. If you miss any part of the injury, the healing will not be complete. Be advised that it will be very painful for you. On SecaTerr, the flower is used differently.”

“Will it burn?” Lena asked curiously, the healer inside her perked at this knowledge.

“It will cut your flesh. The petals are comprised of tiny pieces of ore akin to metal. The slivers of ore, while sharp, are hollow inside and will draw the essence of the wraith into them. Once they’re full, they will turn to ash, and you can brush them away.”

“Have you used it before?” she asked them.

“We have. That’s how we learned of its limitations here,” Ada said.

Lena wanted to ask them a hundred more questions. She couldn’t believe Eduard was not from Eteris. She’d treated some of his aches and pains, and there was nothing about him that made him seem *other*. Eduard stood and cut both buds from the vine. The plant turned brown and withered before her eyes.

Eduard glanced at it. “It usually goes dormant after the buds are cut, but I have a feeling this will be the last time it blooms.” He wrapped each one

in black linen cloth and set them gently in a tin. Turning, he extended the tin to Lena.

“I don’t need both of them. One will do if I have to ingest it, won’t it?” she asked. Lena only hoped she’d be able to ingest the bud before the wraith fully took over because if she didn’t—

“Take them both. You never know what you might need an extra for.”

“Thank you both so much,” she said, reaching for the tin.

Ada wrapped her arms around Lena, which made her flinch; she didn’t want to get too close, but after a moment, she softened in Ada’s arms.

In the time they’d been outside, the sun had set fully, and Lena knew it was time to go. She would give anything to be able to stay, surrounded by the comfort and familiarity of the meadow, the garden that had grounded her, and the people who made it possible.

She was reluctant to spend another night alone in the woods, remembering how the Overgrown Forest had come alive at night. Lena reminded herself there was only one cursed forest in Reimar, and she didn’t have to go near the Twisted Forest, also knowns as the Drowning Woods, on the way to The Whispers.

Despite those fears, the chance of hurting Ada and Eduard was enough to set her feet moving. She made to grab her pack when Ada brushed her hand away.

“You’re not leaving *now*, night has fallen. Stay,” she said.

“I can’t thank you enough for your help today, but I can’t stay,” she said.

Ada stared at Lena for a moment and seemed to realize she wouldn’t change her mind.

“Where will you go?” she asked instead as she exchanged a concerned look with Eduard.

“I’m off to the Whispers. I met a young woman when I was in Enora who told me some seek assistance there if they’ve been infected.”

Ada and Eduard didn’t seem taken aback by Lena’s admission.

“You’ve heard the same then?”

They nodded and hope bloomed once more in her traitorous heart.

“Do you know how to gain entry?” she asked.

“The Whispers hold many unspeakable things, but some say if you seek The Collector, the man said to have settled there, it won’t be long until *he* finds *you*,” Ada said. “It is also rumored he has access to a Seer.”

Lena blinked; she'd forgotten to mention her mother's diary when she arrived. But if there was a Seer at The Whispers, she'd be able to gain access to it. Her brother had told her there was information in there that could help her.

"Here. Take this with you," Eduard said, extending a wax-coated bag. She looked inside and found it was full of food, bandages and salves, and a small dagger sheathed in leather. She opened it and placed the tin inside, making sure to seal it up tightly.

"I want to apologize. To both of you. I— I let you down. And after everything you did, I just couldn't—

"You don't have to apologize. You've endured so much. We're just happy to be able to assist you in your time of need," Eduard said. Ada smiled in agreement.

Lena nodded, her heart a little lighter. She had just cleared the steps when Ada called out to her, "Even the darkest nights are witnessed by stars. They shine their light upon us. Even if we can't see it."

Lena tucked those words close to her heart. Ada was right. Even though she felt alone, she wasn't. She carried Henry's soul within her. They'd faced difficult circumstances before, and they would do it again.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

Lena almost preferred wandering the forest in a fog like she had previously done. Now that she had taken time to wash, eat, and rest, she was more aware of her surroundings, particularly the noises in the forest.

While the Overgrown Forest was known for its eerie silence, this far from the fallen city, the animals made their presence known. Chittering from above set her teeth on edge, and the snap of twigs nearby made her jump. She steadied her breathing and continued moving, surprised when she realized she could see well enough to avoid running into wayward stones or fallen logs. Lena wasn't quite sure how to feel about the change, so she shoved it out of her mind just like she did with every other unsettling thing she'd come to learn since receiving a wraithwound. Because the moment she stopped to think about it, the moment she let the thoughts take root, she would likely drown in the truth of it all.

Lena didn't intend to travel straight through the night. She only meant to put some distance between herself and the couple. Every step she took away from their cabin pulled at her, as if tugging her back there. The comfort and familiarity Ada and Eduard offered was alluring, but she wouldn't risk their lives. Lena walked for what felt like hours, and when the blanket of exhaustion became too heavy, Lena found a gap at the base of a tree that grew against a boulder and decided it would be as good a place as any to stop and rest.

She pulled her mother's cloak tightly around her, the wool insulating her from the rough bark and cold stone. As she nestled into the crook of the

tree, she felt grateful for Ada and Eduard's willingness to help and relieved the wraith hadn't taken over while she visited.

Lena fell asleep swiftly, knowing that her last hope lay in The Whispers with The Collector, whoever he was. As Lena shifted to get comfortable, she thought of Henry. He'd brought so much joy to her life, lifting the fog of grief and the ache of longing in her heart.

She fell asleep quickly, and for the first time in a long while, she dreamed.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

Lena dreamt of a man standing on a barren patch of earth. Upon closer inspection, she realized he stood on a towering sand dune, golden hair blowing in the acrid wind. The man was dressed in silver-plated armor, a long sword strapped to his muscled back and a shimmering metal helmet propped against his waist.

He appeared incorporeal, the wind blurring his image. He began to turn, and she had a distant sense that she knew him, but before she could see his face, Lena was jolted awake by a voice roaring in her ear.

“LENA, WAKE UP!”

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

The first thing she noticed was she no longer had control of her body. Unlike the first time the wraith had taken over, her legs took steady and balanced steps intent on reaching their destination. She stalked through the forest, her traitorous muscles abiding each and every foreign command. The second thing she realized was that she had doubled back towards Ada and Eduard's cabin. And then the panic exploded within her.

No, no, no, this can't be happening!

Lena threw herself at the walls barring her from the control she desperately sought. The control needed to freeze her muscles, to halt her limbs. She could sense the infection's expanded reach inside her, its absolute focus on making it back there . . . but not to Ada. To Eduard. She vaguely remembered the pull she'd felt toward him when she'd first seen him. But why?

It was like a sentient being had stolen her body and taken it for themselves. Lena finally understood what it would mean to lose herself to the wraith.

She tried to catch a glimpse of the scenery, to look for familiar landmarks or distinguishing features in the terrain. To her dismay, she couldn't tell at all where she was. Lena focused on the barriers keeping her trapped. She tried to push her energy, her being, outward.

Her body kept moving.

She tried to get its attention, to distract it, to confuse it somehow, but her body would not *respond*. She thought of the Bud of Brielle, tucked away in her pack, but she couldn't reach it, couldn't get her arms, her hands, any part of her body to obey. It was then that Lena started to scream.

She had no idea if she'd be able to regain control of her body or if this would be her existence from now on. She didn't know if she'd be relegated to the back of her own conscious mind, aware of the atrocities a monster committed while wearing her skin. Or, if eventually, she would cease to exist at all. Lena thought of Henry, his steadfastness, loyalty, compassion, and assuredness in who he was. Lena had none of those attributes, yet he had entrusted his soul to her, and she couldn't be sure that she hadn't already failed at her promise to him, just like she'd failed her mother, Jessa, Aric.

Lena's screams became sobs as she watched helplessly when the wraith located the meadow ahead in which Ada and Eduard's house sat, unaware of the monster it now welcomed with its unobstructed terrain and sleeping flowers.

The wraith crossed the meadow in a matter of moments, driven by some insatiable desire to get to Eduard. As Lena's body stood under the arched trellises that marked the boundary between the meadow and their garden, Lena launched another assault at the mental walls. She threw herself against them, her mind absorbing the impact as it met the barrier that kept her in. Her body stood there in the dark for a moment, unmoving, and Lena thought perhaps a part of her had gotten through. She could feel the wraith calculating, assessing, and then to her horror, her body took a step and then another.

Lena sank to her knees inside herself and began pleading, begging the monster to stop, but it did not. It continued up the path towards the home, and it was then that Lena noticed a tall, broad figure approaching from the porch.

Lena hadn't realized there was someone sitting there. The lights were off; she figured they'd be asleep. Hope bloomed in Lena's chest that perhaps Eduard could stop her, that he could end her life, since the wraith had failed to capture them unaware. The wraith continued to approach him, and he her.

"Lena, is that you?" he asked hesitantly, but when she didn't reply, he sighed. "I see. If you can hear me in there Lena, I'll tell you this. Learn to forgive. It's going to be all right."

When he reached her, he opened his arms, as if to embrace her, and Lena's jaw fell open.

“*NO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING*?” she screamed. But her mouth did not move. Tears spilled from her eyes as she pounded at the barrier in front of her. “RUN! GET ADA AND RUN!” she continued to scream. But Eduard could not hear her.

She felt more than saw the wraith extend her hand towards Eduard. He fell into her arms, the weight of his body heavy on hers. She wailed as she saw his body collapse to the ground. And then, there was Ada, descending the porch steps toward her. Toward certain death. Ada didn’t speak. She didn’t look at Lena. She merely covered his body with hers, as if that’d be enough to stop the wraith. As if that would somehow protect them both.

It did not.

And Lena didn’t know whether it was the wraith taking full control or her inability to witness anymore; Lena collapsed inside herself and her world once again went black. She was ever so grateful that it did.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

Curled up in a corner of her mind, Lena floated in and out of consciousness. She was vaguely aware the wraith stalked through the forest in her body, as if searching for something. She felt heavy, like a dead weight laying at the bottom of the ocean.

She didn't know how long it had been. The days and nights blurred together. A few times she caught glimpses of objects in the sky casting an eerie glow onto the land or odd weather, but she could no longer determine whether what she saw was real or part of her diminishing consciousness. She felt herself withering away in the hollow darkness of her mind; guilt, shame, and regret her only companions.

Or was it her body that was withering away? It didn't matter. Not only had she failed; she had done the unspeakable.

Lena lost more of herself as time went on. *Would the wraith continue to kill in her body, continue to terrorize the people of Reimar until it was put down? Until* she *was put down?* She wished desperately that she would be, that she might encounter a soulbound soldier, guards from the Commander's militia, anyone who might put an end to the nightmare she was trapped in.

The wraith didn't stop, didn't eat, or sleep. It just kept going. At one point she felt like she might be drowning…

Or was that happening now?

Then, one day when there was only the smallest part of her left, a single memory of Henry, a spark ignited in the darkness. Lena felt her soul stirring and her consciousness awakening. She focused on that spark, unsure of whether at long last Sundis, the EverGod of Death, had come to usher her

into the Abyss of the Damned. She didn’t dare hope, but then, a warm wind caressed her face. She reached up to touch her cheek confused by the tender touch. It settled around her slowly, as if a blanket of sunlight had been tucked in around her; she closed her eyes, ready to welcome death. And then, she woke up.

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

The warmth of the sun struggled to reach the forest floor even through the bare canopy above. It took her a long time to realize it wasn't death that had come to call but life. She was, again, in control of her body. Lena didn't immediately recognize the trees in this part of the forest, but she knew instinctively she was no longer anywhere near the meadow. A small mercy. She couldn't bear to think of what she—the wraith—had done.

Lena attempted to stand on wobbling legs when she realized she was at the edge of a swamp. Thin, long streaks gouged the soft mud before her. From the looks of it, the wraith had clawed its way out of the swamp. She was completely soaked through with stinking water, covered in rotted earth and the EverGods knew what else. Her muscles ached fiercely, and her body was marked with cuts and bruises she had no memory of.

Taking in her surroundings, she noted the trees were twisted and disfigured. Their wretched limbs clawed in every direction, even into the mud at her feet. She stumbled through the forest in a daze.

Lena took one step and then another, each one carrying her towards memories she couldn't bear to face—

…a flash of razor-sharp claws, the warmth of blood pooling in her hand, Ada's face as she approached Eduard's limp body…

—until she realized that she was running, her muscles straining with the effort, her breath ragged in her lungs. She didn't bother dodging the jagged branches that cut at her face and arms. Her muscles screamed from exhaustion, but she couldn't stop. Lena ran through the forest; her labored breathing turned to sobs. The tears came next, welling up in her eyes and blurring her vision. Just when she thought her body might finally give out,

she tripped and went crashing into the forest floor. Ignoring the pain, she pressed her fingers into the earth, determined to get back up when she saw it. The blood. It was caked into the lines of her hands along with dirt and other filth, a stark contrast to her wan skin.

It took her then. The grief. It's endless depths consuming what remained of her already broken heart. Lena screamed, a shrill, broken sound. Her body was racked with wailing sobs as she saw her hand plunging into Eduard's chest, again and again. She reached towards her own chest, half expecting a hollow cavity in its place. The ache she felt there was confirmation that her own heart still beat although she couldn't be sure how much longer she would be able to call it human.

The truth was, she had been a monster long before she had been touched by one. Lost to her own grief, she had failed to see the value of the community that tried to rally around her. Instead, she'd resented them, pushed them away, because no matter how kind they were, how inviting and tender, they weren't him. Nobody could be him. Her grandfather.

Then, her mother disappeared, and the cycle repeated itself, or rather, she gave herself to it again. And what was more, she had come to resent her mother for going. For risking her life, cutting it short, for Neema who'd already lived a full life. When, in reality, the people Marisee had been protecting were the only reason any of them had any life at all. They'd been protecting the realm with their own lifeforce for nearly fifty years.

She had failed them all. *Everyone.* She was selfish, a coward and a liar; she deserved every bad thing that had ever befallen her. There, in the quiet abyss of her own mind, she'd sat naked in front of the truths she'd been avoiding, and they stripped her bare.

Yes, she was a monster.

Lena stayed on the near frozen ground unwilling and unable to get back up. The crushing weight of all she had lost and all she had yet to lose was staggering. Hours passed, and she went blissfully numb, the cold unable to seep any deeper into her bones. Exhaustion settled over her, calling her towards the depthless dark. Lena curled into a ball on the forest floor and wished for death. She knew then that if she woke up again, she'd ingest the Bud of Brielle.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY

Yet again Lena found herself standing atop a dune, a hot wind stirring her hair. A man stood in front of her dressed in silver-plated armor, long unbound hair snapping in the wind. She shielded her eyes with her arm, but the brilliant glare cast by the sun reflected off the polished metal, obscuring his face. She squinted, trying to get her eyes to cooperate, but soon realized his image undulated with the blowing winds.

“Who are you?” Lena asked.

“You don’t know?” he said in a familiar tone that also hinted at a smirk. “It’s me, Lee.”

Grief struck her like a spear through the heart as she heard the nickname echo in the space between them.

“No,” she said in disbelief, “Henry is dead.”

“I’m not. You know exactly where I am.”

The moment soured quickly as Lena’s memories flashed back to Henry’s limp body. Henry seemed to sense this, and his tone took on a more serious note.

“I know things haven’t been easy, and I’m so sorry to ask more of you, but I must. Get up.”

Lena opened her mouth to speak and closed it again; Henry waited.

“I can’t,” she said, her voice breaking. She wanted so desperately to reach for him.

“You do not walk this path alone. I am here with you,” he said, pointing at his heart.

Tears lined her eyes as she stared at the man who claimed to be her brother. He didn’t look like a boy here; he looked like a man. Like a

warrior.

“How do I know it’s really you?” she asked.

He paused for a moment, thinking before he asked bluntly, “Does anyone else know you ate me?”

And then he laughed. The sound rich and deep, full of familiarity.

Stunned, Lena gawked at him and to her own surprise, she laughed too. Actually laughed.

“I didn’t eat you!” she shot back.

The retort flew from her lips with practiced precision. The absurdity of this was unbelievable.

“You kind of did,” he said.

Lena scoffed, and she could tell he was smiling. His loss suddenly felt like an unbearable weight.

“I miss you so much,” she whispered.

“There’s nothing to miss, Lee. I haven’t gone anywhere.”

She tried to step closer, but Henry shook his head.

“Your strength lies in the parts of yourself that you keep in shadow. It’s time for you to bring them into the light. Trust that you are capable, Lee.”

Henry’s image faded slowly, and Lena stood there under the beating sun and arid wind before the scene around her faded along with him.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

Lena awoke several hours later to the sun peeking in from the barren branches above. Her eyes were swollen, and her mouth tasted of ash. She felt frozen to the ground, but the cold didn't appear to inhibit her movements or affect her as it had in the past. She didn't want to think about why that might be.

Lena wondered if seeing Henry had been real or a projection of her grief. He'd looked like the man he would never have a chance to become. The ache in her chest deepened at the thought. She missed him so much it hurt to breathe.

She closed her eyes and stuck her hand into her pack; it'd been soaked through with mud and filth but, luckily, the wax-covered bag would have protected her supplies from the putrid swamp.

She rummaged through it as she lay there, her hand landing on the cool tin of the box that held the otherworldly flowers. Lena closed her eyes as she traced the edges of the box and considered what she might do next. Physically she was in bad shape, but she wasn't sure if it was because of the transformation or the steady beating her body had taken since the inception of the nightmare her life had become.

She would never make it to The Whispers in this state. Just as she began to contemplate how she might tend to her failing health, a chittering in the trees caught her attention. She looked up, searching for the source of the noise when she heard the hooves of a horse, the steady beat getting closer.

Worried that it might be more of the Commander's men, she scrambled to sit up when she noticed her mother's cloak lying a few feet away. Without thinking, she snatched it off the ground and limped towards a copse

of trees, her movements uncoordinated as she struggled to master the stiffness that had settled in her muscles.

The trees she now hid among were healthy and grew upright out of the soil, unlike the mangled, twisted trees near the swamp. *The Twisted Forest.* A chill crept up her spine as she realized she'd been in the cursed forest of the Drowning Woods. She must have crossed into a different area when she ran from the swamp. Or rather, ran from herself. How had she entered those woods and lived? No one escaped those woods . . . well, no human. She didn't have time to contemplate this further as the sound of the hooves neared.

She caught a glimpse of the horse's rider and noticed black, translucent shadows trailing behind him. It was the same thing she'd noticed before with Jessa but more pronounced. As he approached her location, the horse seemed to spook, perhaps sensing her presence. It became unsettled, refusing to take direction from its rider.

At this, the large man decided to dismount. He moved slowly, working to tether his horse and make camp. She watched as he set a pitiful fire ablaze before setting up camp. When he was finished erecting his tent, he fell more than sat onto a boulder that barely peeked from the cold earth. He sat there, seeming to contemplate something before he turned to the leather saddle bags lying on the ground behind him. He pulled out a small package and gently unwrapped it with his right arm. Pain marked his every move as he ate what was likely a cold, unappetizing dinner.

Lena remained as still as her battered and bruised body would allow, afraid to alert him to her presence. She watched him and waited, considering Henry's message. In those still moments, she accepted what she'd known to be true since waking up at the edge of that swamp. She was dying.

Might it have been her soul teetering on the edge between life and death that triggered a manifestation in a form she was likely respond to? Or had he been real? She knew in her bones she wouldn't be able to go on much longer without feeding the wraith inside her, but she also had to take care of her physical body. Disgust turned her stomach at the thought of aiding the monster inside her, if only to save herself. And Henry.

A thought crept in from the back of her mind, as her gaze lingered on the dying man. The minute it had finished forming, she was immediately repulsed by it. She couldn't do it again. She couldn't consume another soul.

Despair began to worm in as she considered Henry’s message, but she wasn’t sure how she could live with herself knowing what it would take to keep them alive.

Lena watched as the soldier unsaddled his horse and removed the harness mount, brow mount, and reins, securing the horse only with a loose neck rope. He stood there scratching his horse before placing his forehead on the beast’s muzzle. Then, he all but crawled into his tent.

She could tell by the darkening aura surrounding him that death wasn’t far behind. She could wait until he died. Then, technically, she wouldn’t be responsible for his death.

A myriad of emotions rushed through her, the ones that seemed to linger the longest were guilt and shame. Emotions so familiar they might as well have been old friends. And yet, she didn’t move. She waited in the trees until it was dark, and she was sure he must be asleep.

The weight of the canvas was heavy in her hand as she pushed the tent flap open. Lena had inched toward the tent slowly, and yet she was surprised the horse did not stir, only eyeing her warily as she passed. Inside, the dim light from a gas lantern illuminated the space. At the center of the tent, the man lay on his back, taking up most of his bedroll. One muscled arm rested on his chest while the other splayed out, almost as if he had collapsed onto the floor that way.

His cotton tunic was drenched in sweat and clung to his skin, which displayed every dip and groove of his chiseled torso. He was beautiful, with dark hair and an angular jaw covered in stubble that gave him a rugged look. The aura of black that surrounded him seemed darker than before, and his breathing was shallow, which likely meant it was only a matter of time before he passed. She wondered why the wraith hadn’t attempted to wrest control away from her, but she sensed its diminished presence at the back of her mind.

Lena looked around the small space, wondering how he’d gotten here and what he was doing this deep into the woods when she saw it. Obscured by the shadows at the base of one of the tent walls was a sword, still sheathed in its scabbard, and beside it, a stamped metal badge the size of her palm. Lena’s eyes grew wide, and she froze as she realized she stood in a tent with the greatest threat to her life— to Henry, aside from the very monster living inside her—because before her lay a soulbound soldier.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

Lena took a step back on instinct, kicking over a tin cup that clanged loudly. She stiffened, preparing to flee, but the man did not stir. She allowed herself to take one breath and then another. After several moments, when the man had not stirred from his position on the bedroll, she cast her gaze across the tent once more. A satchel lay next to the man's sword, and she reached for it, curiosity driving her recklessness. She wouldn't normally sort through a stranger's possessions, but part of her wanted to learn something about who this man was, the life he'd lived.

Soulbound soldiers were trained for one purpose: to hunt down wraiths. Whispers on the wind often spoke of them having otherworldly strength and abilities given to them by the sorcerer, but only after they swore their allegiance and bound their souls. They were brutal, vicious, and effective. Held in high esteem for coming to the aid of villages that found themselves under attack, they had many allies, perhaps with the exception of those whose turned family members they killed, and depending on the circumstances, the Commander's men.

Lena gently pulled open the satchel and found a drawing of a woman. With soft eyes and a kind smile, she was beautiful. The simple, pencil-drawn sketch was almost pristine, as if the man had not dared look at it to avoid smudging the delicate lines. Underneath wrapped in parchment was a short piece of wood, symbols carved in a spiral around it. Lena held it up, and using the dim light in the tent, she could make out most of the symbols. A spark of recognition flickered in the back of her mind, but she couldn't make out any words. At the bottom of the bag, she glimpsed a larger object, the dim light catching on a thin metal band outlining the hexagonal shape,

when the man before her gave a shuddering breath. Lena quickly put his things back and waited a moment before making her way over toward him.

She'd seen death before, sat in its company and bore witness when her patients passed from illness or injury. As she sat there and took in the man's declining physical state and the pain etched on his face, a pang of sorrow filled her chest. As a healer, it went against every fiber in her being to let a man die, regardless of who he may have been in life or what he'd done. Lena tried to remind herself that without this, without feeding the wraith inside her, she would most certainly die, and Henry's soul, his sacrifice, would be for nothing.

This man had arrived at her feet at just the right moment. She wouldn't have to kill him. He was already dying, and doing this would help keep her and Henry alive. It would give her the opportunity to keep fighting, striving toward a solution that might save him.

The aura that surrounded him was a deep black now. He was almost there, at death's door. Almost at peace, free of his task. And then, she saw Henry, battered and bloody in her lap, heard the wet rasping breaths, and felt the soft exhale of his final breath on her face, and she *knew*. She knew she couldn't do it. This. All of it. It was one thing to tell herself she could, to have killed in self-defense, and to have entered a city full of people with a wraithwound, but it was another thing entirely to have killed involuntarily, to have lost control over herself and committed atrocities with a body that had only ever worked to aid the ill or injured. To have killed people she loved in search of a different fate for her brother.

Defeat settled into the pit of her stomach like a stone, but resolve filled her heart. She didn't know, couldn't know, if the man lying before her was good, but she'd bet he was a better person than she was. Because she— she was a monster, both inside and out. Lena put her hand over her heart, imaging that she could reach Henry's soul inside her, and whispered, "I'm so sorry, Henry. I tried. I really did."

And then she got to work.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE

She did her best to wash up with the last of the water and soap she carried and then settled in next to the soldier, pulling out her supplies. As she did, she felt a peace settle over her. She knew she was dying, but if she was going to die, she was going to do so having done something right. Instead of taking another life, she was going to die having saved one.

Lena pulled out the small blade, pushing the thoughts away about how she'd come to possess it, and sliced into the cloth of his tunic to reveal the muscled body below. Initially, she couldn't see any injuries but then she examined the placement of his arm. Peeling his tunic away from his body further, she glanced below it, and there, covering his ribs and stretching towards his back, was a filthy bandage. It took a great deal of effort to lift his arm and place it above his head. Well, more like drop it there because, apparently, he was built of solid muscle. He didn't so much as stir when she did. Lifting the lamp closer to inspect his injuries, she realized she didn't need much light to work.

The soiled bandage was crusted with pus and the EverGods knew what else. Four gruesome slashes lay beneath, oozing with infection. Jagged and deep, the wound trailed off toward his lower back. She couldn't help but wonder how he'd gotten them. While they appeared similar to her wraithwound, the spacing of the gashes was different, and they went much deeper into his flesh than hers.

Something about it called to her, like a frequency that gave off familiar energy. There wasn't much in the realm that could take down a soulbound soldier, except for maybe a fully turned wraith. But that didn't make sense because surely, he would have turned by now. She could tell by the state of

the wound, that and the progression of her very own, it wasn't recent. No, it'd likely been weeks. A sickening realization sank in. Perhaps it'd been a beast that had given him these . . . like the enormous creature she'd spotted in the forest. A memory of its wicked claws flashed in her mind. It was possible, she guessed. Infected beasts weren't exactly wraiths, but they were still infected.

Grunting, Lena summoned her remaining strength to push. She knew he'd be difficult to move but hadn't imagined that he'd be *this* heavy. For access to his lower back, she'd have to roll him onto his side. Scanning the tent, she found a blanket discarded on the other side. *Perfect.* Just as she'd been taught, she rolled it into a log and positioned it under his shoulders. Bit by bit, she pushed on his body and stuffed the blanket further under him until she finally gained the leverage she needed to roll him over.

Once she got him on his side and took in the full view of his back, she froze in horror. Not only because of the state of his injury, even though it was indeed grotesque, but because there were small crystal shards embedded in his skin all along his spine. Her mouth hung open as she stared, the small shards reflecting the flickering glow of the lantern. She couldn't imagine the process he'd endured to have the crystals embedded, nor how long it had taken the flesh to heal after such a thing. Lena shook the shock of the crystals out of her mind and brought her attention back to the wound.

With an injury this severe, it was a wonder he hadn't gotten blood poisoning and died long before now. The inside of each wound was black as pitch, and she worried briefly the flesh had died and she would have to cut some of it out. She would have a better idea after she cleaned it.

It took every last bandage she carried and his entire skein of water to get the area clean. Lena sent a silent prayer of thanks to Eduard for the wax bag that had preserved her supplies. Once that was done, she packed the soiled bandages in a piece of his torn tunic and set about making sure he'd easily be able to access his own supplies once he woke up. Aware that she was avoiding the next part of the process, Lena found that preparing the soldier's space gave her a moment to consider where she might go after she was finished tending to him.

Her grandfather had a cabin near the Slate Mountains. If she could make it there, that was where she would spend her final days. She suspected she'd

crossed through the Drowning Woods into the Forlorn Forest, which was close enough to that mountain range.

Feeling a sense of peace settle over her with that decision made, Lena pulled the small bud from the metal tin and stared at it in wonder. *A different world*. This flower was native to a different planet. It's healing properties were as foreign to her as those from the Goddess's Spring— able to heal or condemn, depending on the circumstances. Refusing to draw out the moment any further, Lena crushed the bud between her palms and welcomed the pain she knew it would bring.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

Rubbing the crushed bud into the man's skin was absolute agony unlike anything she'd ever known. Tears streamed down her face, and she gritted her teeth as she worked, taking care to ensure the metal-like ore that bore the consistency of sand was pressed and massaged into each bit of exposed flesh, into each crevice. To her amazement, her hands did not bleed; instead the skin looked like it had melted and warped, giving the appearance of burned flesh that had already healed. She was almost finished with the second gash when she realized she'd have to use the second bud as well. Lena couldn't find it within her to feel concerned about it. She wasn't long for this world.

At one point, she thought she'd finished with the third gash, only to learn she had missed an area and almost sobbed when she had to push the tiny shards deeper into his skin. Once she was certain the third gash was completely covered with the bud, she sat back onto her heels, closed her eyes, and lifted her face to the roof of the tent. Hot tears streaked down into her hair and past her ears.

When she finally summoned the courage to look, she examined the damage done to her hands. The skin was tight and aching, but it no longer felt like needles were being raked over it. She released a shuddering breath as she braced herself for the pain and fought the urge to rush her work on the last wound.

Lena couldn't fight the sobs that broke from her as she worked on the final wound, the pain nearly unbearable, but she would ensure her work was thorough and complete.

When she was finally done, she cradled her hands to her chest and fought to breathe through the pain. At long last, it eased and slowly faded. She flexed her hands, palms up, in front of her and marveled at the skin there. Patches of skin on her palms and fingers had turned black, as if the skin there had died.

She decided to wait, to ensure the flower would do its work. And if she was being honest with herself, the thought of watching how an otherworldly object could heal a dying man sparked the same sense of curiosity and purpose that had once led her to follow in her mother's footsteps.

Lena marveled at the steel-colored bits of crushed flower as they began to flake and float away, disappearing into the air above her. Raw, open skin remained but free from the vile black ooze that once infected it.

Realizing the flower did not heal, necessarily, she understood the truth of what Eduard had said about it. The Bud of Brielle truly had only one purpose, and that was to consume darkness. In this case, the infection that was plaguing the soldier's body.

Lena got to work stitching him up and rubbed salve onto the sealed flesh. She finished by securing clean pieces of cloth from a spare tunic she'd found in his bag, to ensure the injuries would stay covered, protected.

She had just finished rolling him onto his back when a soft glimmer from a chain around the man's neck caught her attention. But she didn't have the chance to get a closer look because a large hand enveloped her wrist and yanked her towards him.

Steely blue eyes bore into hers, and the man growled low in his throat, "Just who the hell are you?"

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

Lena yanked her wrist from the man's grasp, pulled her things from the ground, and ran, slipping through the canvas flaps and into the darkness. Terror coursed through her, not at the thought of being captured by the soulbound, but at having the wraith inside her emerge once again to kill, to consume.

Lena cleared the small camp and kept running, suddenly energized by the terror coursing through her. The terrain changed gradually from damp earth and barren trees to a rocky slope, yet she did not slow, her labored breathing becoming heavier as she went on.

Could she travel far enough to prevent the wraith from going back, from killing the man she'd worked to save, in her current physical condition? She moved as fast as her body would allow. She would continue until her legs gave out, until she was sure the exhaustion, the breakdown of her muscles, was enough that if the wraith did take over, it wouldn't have a working body to use.

Lena wasn't sure how long she walked for, since she was doing her best to ignore her failing strength. When her legs trembled with effort and she felt close to falling unconscious, she knew it would be safe to stop.

After ascending a slant of grey stone, nearly on all fours, she found herself in an abandoned village. The exhaustion and ache she felt were almost indescribable, so she picked the nearest crumbling structure and made her way inside. Lena suspected it may have once been a hunting cabin, now long since abandoned. Finding a small cot towards the back, she was asleep before her head touched fabric.

~

SLEEP DIDN'T KEEP Lena under for long. She was startled awake by a strange huffing noise. Clearing the sleep from her eyes with numb hands, Lena looked around. A red tinged dawn and the chill of snow greeted her as she rose.

Unease slithered into her gut when she realized that she'd only awoken to the huffing noise because it'd been deathly quiet when she arrived the night before.

She felt weak and sluggish, but she'd awoken in the same place she'd fallen asleep, and that realization brought with it a spark of joy the exhaustion and fear couldn't dampen. Lena swung her legs over the edge of the cot, intent on finding a place to relieve herself when the earth beneath her feet shuddered; not a second later, a loud boom reverberated through the air.

Heart pounding, chest prickling faintly, Lena froze. Working up the courage to move, she stabilized the pack at her side and crept further back into the shack. Locating a window, she crawled toward it, careful to avoid the shards of glass from the missing pane. Not daring to breathe, she peeked out to see a towering figure standing in an empty field behind the shack.

A sword strapped to his back—no, not a sword. It was some sort of appendage that curled slightly over his head, a large black talon at its end. Lena couldn't figure out what she was looking at as the man wandered through the snow-covered field and kicked at uneven mounds on the ground. The mounds shifted slightly as he kicked them, as if they absorbed the impact. And then horror struck. A vision of her own village, her friends and neighbors lying dead around her, momentarily replaced the image in front of her.

Bodies. Time seemed to slow as her vision narrowed and then widened, taking in the enormity of the field and how many people— how many corpse—lay there.

An otherworldly roar pierced the veil of memory, and she slammed back into her body. It was the roar that made her blood run cold as she realized this was the same creature she'd seen in Virdeen, but this one was male. Tall and thin, he had light brown hair and pale skin, but the features of his face gave him away. Just like she'd seen in the female, his face appeared twisted in rage.

Paralyzed with fear, Lena could only watch as the talon at the tip of its appendage unhooked from itself and split. Two black, membranous wings unfurled, revealing black veins woven throughout. He stretched them out, talons flexing, before he rolled his shoulders. A wave of magic rippled over them, and where black membranous wings had consumed the light, only white delicate feathers remained. The creature then sank onto its haunches and launched itself into the sky.

Lena’s legs shook as she stood. Her mind raced, and heart pounded as she exited the small stone structure. It was most likely why she didn’t realize she was walking right into the arms of a soulbound soldier.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-SIX

Before Lena could blink, he spun her around, slamming her body into his, and clamped his hand over her mouth. Slowly, he backed her under the sparse canopy of trees nearby. He must have felt that they were sufficiently hidden because just as quickly as he'd pulled her close, he released her.

Lena spun around simultaneously taking a large step backward and out of his reach. She recognized him immediately. He looked disheveled, shoulder-length hair unbound and a cut up tunic sticking to his sweat slicked body but so much better than he'd looked in his tent. The healer in Lena beamed at his recovery.

"Is this your village?" he asked, scanning the area behind her. "You can't be out here. I tracked a wraith here . . ."

Fear spiked in her chest as she saw the recognition spark in his eyes.

"No," he said, in disbelief. "It can't be."

Lena backed away. *He was too close. His healthy, beating heart was too close.* She whirled and set off across the field, doing her best to avoid the snow-covered corpses.

"Hey!" he shouted.

But Lena continued, she had to get away from here, away from this. From him.

"Stop!"

She could hear him coming after her. She turned again, to say what, she didn't know, but when she did—he was standing *so close*. His blue eyes taking in every detail of her face.

She took a step back and tripped.

The soldier reached out as if to catch her, but he was too late. Worry creased his features as she fell. But instead of the frozen earth coming up to meet her, she landed on something soft, raised.

And then, a hand appeared from the snow, large and weathered. It seemed to reach for her before falling limp.

No.

Unable to deal with the sight before her, to relive the nightmare that had come to pass in Virdeen, Lena felt her consciousness leave her body. Once again, time slowed. She watched herself from above, like a neutral observer, as the remnants of a black aura disappeared around the snow-covered body. Then, a clear rippling mass began to form, slowly gathering above it.

A person. She had tripped over a dying man. Lena had sensed death when she'd awoken but hadn't had any time to comprehend what she'd felt. And now, now—

The mass gathered in the air in front of her. It was beautiful, like a ball of energy, of pure light hovering there. It called to her.

She saw her eyes shift then. A thin ring in the center flared to life, burning gold just between her pupil and green irises. She suspected the golden ring appeared when she was experiencing strong emotions. The terror she sensed in her periphery solidified her theory. They were beautiful, her eyes. Mesmerizing and terrifying. Her blackened hand reached out—the strange skin an odd sight when compared to the blanket of snow around them, but no, it wasn't her hand anymore. The wraith reached out and touched the glimmering mass, pulling it in.

The effect was instant. Her face, wan and sunken in, filled out, now radiating a healthy glow. Her eyes were clear and bright, her lips no longer cracked and dry. Lena knew the same transformation she'd seen on her face was also taking place under her clothes. She seemed to sit up straighter, an ease returning to posture.

The wraith stood, dropping Lena's hands to her sides. Black pointed nails slid out of her fingers, and she knew that if the wraith wanted to or needed to, it could extend those sharp nails and use them as claws.

The wraith stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders as if brushing off the exhaustion and weeks of neglect her body had endured.

The creature that stood before the soldier was entirely foreign. Strong, assured, and horrible. Her beauty a different kind of weapon. A lure. The wraith tilted her head up to the sky, a smile forming on the corner of her lips

as her feet left the ground. Suspended a foot above the ground in front of the soulbound soldier, a glittering black cloud began to form around her shoulders.

“FUCK!” he cursed.

Lena tore her gaze away from what used to be her body to glance at the soldier. He had unsheathed his sword and was now pushing something on a metal contraption strapped to his wrist. She watched on, amazed, as a little glass bottle popped out, and he brought it to his mouth. He used his teeth to pull the cork free and poured the contents down his blade. It erupted in a blaze of violet flames. She couldn’t find it within herself to be scared. Instead, she felt a sense of relief, knowing she would soon meet her end.

He drew his sword back to deliver a powerful blow. But instead of swinging the sword to sever the wraith’s head, he turned and deflected the blow of another sword alight with green flames. Surprise coursed through her as she realized he fought another soulbound.

In her detached state she felt a vague sense of worry as she realized the soldier she’d saved turned his back to her. *It.* The wraith’s face, her face, snapped to the right, away from him, and towards the expanse of field beyond them. Lena thought to warn him when he deflected another blow from the soulbound wielding the sword with green flames and managed to shove him back. Then, he pulled another vial from his wrist and shattered it on the ground at the wraith’s feet. The explosion that followed knocked her consciousness back into her body and into oblivion.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN

A prickling sensation in her leg roused her from sleep, or unconsciousness. She wasn't sure which one. Lifting her head, she realized she'd been shackled at the ankle to a tree and set down at an odd angle, causing her leg to fall asleep. Disappointment flooded through her and then devolved into something cold. Why was she still alive? Why was she still forced to endure this hell? The wraith had won; she could sense it, and she was so very tired of carrying the weight of a promise she couldn't keep.

"You didn't answer my question," the soldier said, crossing in front of his tent to sit at the fire.

Lena jumped. She hadn't seen him standing there. Despite herself, she couldn't help but notice he looked even better than the last time she'd seen him.

The pallor of his skin had improved, and he moved more gracefully. His breathing was even, and his eyes, blue flecked with brown, were bright. He also looked . . . clean. His dark brown hair was no longer matted to the side of his head, and he wore a new set of clothes. For some reason seeing him healthy took the edge off the anger that had been digging itself under her skin.

Instead of replying, Lena studied the shackle.

"What are you? Are you one of those creatures from the field at MontTier?" he asked.

"You mean one of those things with the wings? No," she said flatly.

"But you're not a wraith, so what are you?" he asked again, irritation leaking into his tone. His irritation grated at her, making her feel reckless.

“Oh, I *am* a wraith. Fully turned. Why is it that I’m still alive?” she snapped.

“How is it that *I’m* still alive? What did you do to me?” he snapped back. Irritation vacating his tone for full blown anger.

“That demonstration I put on in the field wasn’t enough for you?” she demanded. “You soulbounds have *one* job!”

“Yes, a job I can no longer *do*,” he shouted, “now I am dutybound to you!” The sound of his words rang in the silence between them. “At least until I can pay the debt that is owed,” he said through gritted teeth.

The man paced in front of the fire, and Lena got the sense he was talking more to himself than he was to her.

“Who was the other soldier?” Lena asked slowly, just now remembering the man he’d protected her from. Another soulbound no doubt, if the flaming green sword was any indication.

“Taryk. He won’t be far behind seeing as how he saw your *demonstration*.”

“So, what now?” Lena asked.

“We’ve got to keep moving,” he replied.

Lena’s gaze slid to the shackles and then back to him.

“How is it that you’re still human?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Aren’t you supposed to be the expert on wraiths?” she said.

“You don’t exactly present like a typical wraith,” he snapped. When she didn’t reply, he tried, “What’s your name?”

“Why bother asking if I’m just going to end up in a dry grave?” she asked, looking away. The soldier stared at her, until she said, “It’s Lena.”

She didn’t bother asking his name in return.

After a moment, he walked over key in hand, but before unlocking the metal clamp, he wrapped another chain around her waist. When he was sure it was secured, he unlocked the shackles at her ankles.

He didn’t seem concerned that her hands were free. Lena did her best to block out the memories of what she had done with the nails that now sat on permanent display.

When he was finished, she held up her wrists. Crouching down in front of her, he lifted his gaze to hers, his piercing blue eyes searching her face. As if finding whatever he was looking for there, he shook his head and stood.

“I don’t need to shackle your hands,” he said and turned back towards his tent.

Lena understood the words he left unsaid. He wasn’t afraid of her, and he didn’t need to worry about her harming him. She suspected that he was plenty dangerous, even without weapons, especially now that he was healthy again.



THE SOLDIER SHIFTED his focus to packing up the small camp and gave Lena some privacy before they set off. She imagined she’d be walking beside him as he rode. Instead, he lifted her atop his horse. The beast eyed her warily and swished its tail but responded well to its rider.

They traveled in silence for a long while, seemingly headed towards the plains, a place she’d never been, although she was familiar with the stories about the terrors that dwelled there. She’d heard stories of the spindly-legged creatures that crawled down from the trees at night, and the flat, leather-backed monsters that would pop up from the ground and crush a human whole.

Irritation seemed to leak from the soldier with every step. After several uneventful hours, he pulled the horse to a stop.

They had reached more rugged terrain, craggy outcroppings surrounded by expansive browning plains that exposed them to harsh sunlight despite the chill in the air. Vegetation emerged from cracks and crevices in the rocks, and the area was dotted with the occasional tree. The soldier found a shaded area near a rocky outcropping and tethered his horse to a low hanging branch in the shade. He did the same thing with Lena, securing her chain to another tree nearby.

“You haven’t asked where we’re going,” he said in clipped tone.

Lena stared out into the plains. The hills visible in the distance covered by sand and small patches of grass reminded her of the dunes she’d stood upon with Henry. Her heart suddenly ached at the thought of him.

“Does it matter?” she asked.

“That you haven’t asked? I think it does,” he said.

But Lena couldn’t bring herself to care about his astute observation. The grief she felt was oddly reminiscent of the numbness she’d come to know

so well, but now, it was accompanied by something new.

Anger.

She realized she was angry at Henry. So angry. For giving her his soul, for trusting her when she didn't deserve it, and for the position he'd put her in. Because while Lena had cared little for herself, she would give anything for her brother, and he knew that. He'd used that against her. Lena let the anger burn in her throat.

But had he really?

Lena shook the thoughts away, her anger banking. She wouldn't do it again. She wouldn't blame someone else for her choices. This was on her. All of it. The broken trust, betrayal, ruptured relationships. Her loneliness and unhappiness. She had chosen all of it. She had killed that man in the forest, entered a city full of people as a half-turned wraith, and gone to see Ada and Eduard who had paid for her selfishness, her recklessness, with their lives. She had killed them. Murdered them. She wouldn't give the wraith the opportunity to hurt anyone else.

Lena shrugged.

The soldier passed her a bit of dried meat, which sat on her lap undisturbed while he ate. He seemed to notice this too.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Nobody," she said.

"There has to be something different about you. Perhaps from your life before the wraithwound?" he tried.

"No, I wasn't much of anyone then either," she said.

"How many souls did it take?" he asked, his voice hardening.

"Too many," she answered honestly, the numbness dragging her deeper.

He looked stunned, and she couldn't tell if it was because of the admission or the fact that she'd answered at all.

He gave her one curt nod. "You can call me Cross."



IT WENT on like this for days, perhaps a week. The days blurred together, and she lost interest in keeping track. She would wake up, he would give her privacy to wash up in one of the small streams, he would pack up their camp, and they would be off, setting a slow course through the plains.

He asked her the same questions every day:
“Who are you?”
“How did you heal me?”
“How is it you’re still human?”

EVERY NIGHT, he would set up camp, ensuring Lena had a comfortable place to rest. She always chose the location farthest away from him. He tended to his horse with care, making sure the pitch-dark beast was fed, brushed, received plenty of scratches, and its hooves were picked out. If they had nothing to eat that night, he would hunt, often disappearing for hours. Not that she ate often.

Nights were punctuated by large twinkling stars and filled with strange sounds: buzzing, chirping, chittering, and other times high-pitched screeches or roars. The strangest part was that she did remain human. For now.

Every night she would have a different variation of the same dream, her claws piercing Eduard’s chest and then Ada’s. Other times, she found herself standing in front of Ahgrie and Jessa. Even Laney and the Conover brothers made it into her dreams. Lena would wake drenched in sweat and inspect her hands turning them over, expecting them to be dripping with crimson.

Some nights she could’ve sworn she felt a small ball of warmth cuddled next to her. Those nights she rested easier, but anytime she dared to check, she found she was alone.

Things went on like this until one night when the soulbound went out to hunt and didn’t return. Lena, often choosing sleep over a meal, woke up sometime later to a still, empty camp.

Just when she had begun to wonder where he might be, he stumbled in from the darkness. Pale, eyes glassy, his tattered armor was shredded at the chest and blood leaked through the leather. For the briefest moment, Lena looked down at her hands, half expecting to see his still beating heart held there.

He made it all the way to the fire before he collapsed. Lena waited for him to get up. Surely, the injury couldn’t be that bad. But he didn’t stir. Instinctively, she grabbed her pack and rushed over, her chain dragging over sand and protruding stones. She had almost reached him when she was yanked back by the chain at her ankle and had to throw her arms out to

steady herself. He was *too far*. Lena tugged at her chain, knowing it had no more give.

She looked around, searching for anything that might help her reach him. The soulbound's horse swished its tail and pawed at the ground, likely sensing her distress. Taking in the distance between them, she lowered herself to the ground and crawled toward him, stretching out until she was lying prone on the hard rock and sand. Lena hooked her arms under his shoulders, and using the shackle on her ankle as leverage she dragged him back, screaming as it cut viciously through her boot and into the thin flesh there.

EverGods he was so heavy!

Luckily, he'd passed out face up this time, which gave her access to the wound. Working around his armor, she found there were large gashes across his chest.

But his heart was still inside. That was a relief.

Other than the lacerations, he seemed otherwise unharmed. Lena deduced he had most likely passed out from blood loss. Working quickly, she pulled a bitter red vine from a vial and pre-chewed it. The taste was rancid. She gagged, trying and failing to keep her stomach from turning sour as she shoved it between his molars. Lena worked his jaw to release the milky sap, which would stimulate rapid production of blood in his body.

Then, she turned her focus to undoing the belts and buckles that barely held his armor together. Unable to remove it completely, she had to settle for shifting it out of the way and ripping through his tunic. She tried not to think about the blood now covering her hands as she worked to assess the severity of the wound and treat it.

Her hands shook as she sutured the wounds closed. She'd only been able to rinse them with the canteen he'd left by the fire. EverGods, she couldn't remember the last time she'd done this. Procedures once ingrained in her through rote memorization now seemed as distant to her as her life prior to the wraithwound.

She had just finished when a screeching roar pierced the air. Lena's head snapped up, and she scanned the darkness for the source of the noise. With her chained to a tree, and the soulbound unconscious, they would be easy prey for any creature who wandered into their camp.

Looking him over again, she spotted a dagger secured to his belt. Careful to avoid disturbing his wounds, she reached over him to pull it out.

It was a fine blade, with one line of foreign text carved into the wooden handle. It seemed he tended to all of his things as carefully as he tended to his horse.

Once she confirmed he was stable, she sat guard for the rest of the night. Her ankle throbbed fiercely, but she didn't dare move. Every so often, she checked his pulse to make sure it was improving and watched as his breathing became steady. She even went so far as to place her hand over his heart. Normally, she wouldn't have dared, not with the wraith inside her, but she had to know his heart still beat. Lena wasn't sure when she fell asleep, but by morning, she fully regretted having saved his life, *again.*

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT

Lena awoke to him removing the dagger from her bloody hands. He wouldn't even look at her. She didn't care. Her ankle was throbbing, likely swollen inside her boot and she focused in on the pain.

"Where's the key?" he asked, voice cold.

Lena slowly drew her gaze up to his. He looked better. Although unlike last time, it did nothing to curb her annoyance.

"What *key*?" she asked.

He gave her ankle a pointed look. *Oh, that key.*

"I have no idea," she replied, giving him a look of her own.

She hadn't even considered looking for it. In the moment, it hadn't even crossed her mind. Lena pulled her boot off as he turned and continued to scan the area.

Not a moment later, he bent over and snatched something from the ground near the now slumbering fire. It must have fallen out when he collapsed. She knew the moment he came upon the realization, too, because his cheeks reddened.

Lena smirked.

Clenching the key in his fist, he walked over to unlock her chains and looked stunned at the condition of her ankle. It was mottled with bruises of purple and deep black that spread into her foot. She couldn't help but be impressed at how bad it looked, her mind automatically filing through the physiology behind the injury. But she just stood and walked off in the direction of the bushes, limping slightly.

Her ears picked up the melodic rush of a stream nearby, and she wandered on, following the sound. It wasn't long until she spotted it, the

water gleaming in the morning light. She made her way to the water's edge and sat, gingerly slipping her foot into the cool stream. Lena leaned back onto her arms and tilted her head back, eyes closed to the blinding brightness.

As if the sun's rays had slowly thawed something cold and numb within her, she let her mind wander. A deep and heavy sadness settled over her like a blanket.

She had completed the turn; Henry's soul was lost. She knew it, deep down, and now, she was just waiting to lose herself. At any moment, the wraith could be unleashed upon the world to cause more destruction and harm. To kill. Consume.

To consume someone's soul was to consume all that made them human. Their hopes, fears, and dreams. To destroy families and impart on them the same grief that had almost killed her.

Sure, she was still herself but for how much longer? It was the waiting, the absolute uncertainty of it all, that she couldn't cope with. She wouldn't wait to find out. She couldn't.

The soldier's angry voice cut into her thoughts. "We've got to move!" he shouted from somewhere behind her.

Oh, Cross was cross.

A ghost of a smile formed on her face.

She must have saved the most unskilled soulbound soldier in existence because how was it that he'd almost gotten himself killed again? He was so lucky that he'd collapsed within the range of her chains. Well, within dragging range.

Lena took her time at the stream washing, and when her ankle was sufficiently numb from the cold water running over it, she made her way back. She pulled her boots on without protest and stepped up to the horse that would carry her away from here.

They traveled with minimal stops the entire day and then for most of the morning the day after. They finally stopped in a grove of trees nestled inside rocky outcroppings. It was a cloudless day, and the sun was high in the sky. Lena peeled off her cloak the minute her feet touched the ground. Cross glanced at the heavy cloak now lying on the rocky ground. Seemingly immune to the hot sun, he still wore his own cloak. Lena pulled on the front of her garment, willing the air to cool her skin as she ducked into some shade.

He still hadn’t spoken to her, opting instead to go about his tasks in silence.

Sore and stiff from the ride, she had just been released from her chain when her shoulder began to prickle. Instantly, the hair at the back of her neck rose, and her senses heightened. A chittering sound from the trees nearby sent a chill up her spine. She’d heard the same noise in MountTier before that winged creature had landed in the field.

Lena whirled to warn the soldier, but he was nowhere in sight. The stallion tied nearby began to whinny. She sank further into the shade of the trees, trying to decide what to do, when the clash of steel rang out in the distance.

Guided by the commotion, Lena ran, ignoring the pulsing in her ankle. She could hear a gruff voice projecting off the stone nearby, “Still alive, Cross?”

“Disappointed?” Cross asked.

“Somehow I knew you’d pull through,” the voice retorted.

The moment she cleared the trees, Taryk’s green-eyed gaze snapped to hers. He was clad in grey leather armor, an ornate sword gripped tightly in his hand. Cross subtly angled himself so that he stood in front of her, but Taryk merely peered around him, a violent glint in his eyes. His cropped blonde hair and pale skin stood opposite to Cross’s brown hair and tanned skin. He was just as tall and muscled as Cross, but the way he carried himself seemed less graceful somehow. Still just as deadly though.

Good.

Lena stepped past Cross, walking towards him. Cross grabbed her wrist, stopping her, and she flinched, turning to face him. At the sight of the fear in her eyes, he dropped her wrist, a question forming in his eyes.

“You said you’re dutybound to protect me, but he’s not,” she said, pointing at Taryk.

“Lena. Don’t,” he cautioned.

Giving him one last glance, she turned and walked across the clearing, coming to stand directly in front of Taryk. She saw as understanding formed in his eyes.

“Do it,” she said to him.

Taryk didn’t bother looking at Cross. Instead, he gave her a curt nod, adjusting the grip on his sword. At his silent acknowledgement, a black

glimmering mass appeared in her mind, forming inside her consciousness. The wraith.

It knows.

She saw Taryk's expression harden as he took in her face, and then his piercing green eyes settled on hers. And she knew her eyes must be glowing. *A perfect golden ring alight between her pupil and irises.* He sank into a fighting stance, his muscles tensing with the anticipation of the movement he was so familiar with as a wraith hunter.

"Taryk, don't, she's—" but before Cross could say anything else, a powerful blast sent him flying backward, away from them.

Lena hadn't even glimpsed where the blow originated from. He landed several feet away in a heap on the rocky earth.

When she turned back to Taryk, his sword was already in position.

Perfect.

As her mind seemed to do when she couldn't cope with the events likely to unfold before her, time slowed. Light glinted off the intricate design etched into the sword, calling attention to the sharpened edge of the blade now being held at the exact angle that would release her from this hell. Eyes locked onto hers, Taryk tightened his jaw, the veins in his neck visible through the strained flesh there. The defined muscles of his arm worked in perfect harmony as he moved to oblige her request. Lena couldn't help but see it all, while at the same time inside her own consciousness, she was being dragged into the expanding black cloud, losing more of herself to the wraith as the milliseconds ticked by.

Lena exhaled a sigh of relief, the air vacating her lungs in a smooth, fluid stream. She was ready for it to be the last she would ever take. But before the sword reached its mark, an ear-splitting screech pierced the air, and a ball of black shadow erupted from the trees at Taryk.

The force of the impact sent him crashing into the hard stone, his sword clattering to the ground. It wasn't a ball of black, but a creature that now clawed at him. It shrieked violently, exposing small, pointed teeth before turning on her.

Lena was so stunned; she felt the shock halt the wraith's attempt.

The furry creature the size of a large house cat had large round eyes that were wholly black, pointed ears, a small snout, and a long, striped tail. An eleuth. It sat, unmoving, on Taryk's chest.

Lena felt rooted to the spot, but she didn’t know whether it was from fear or from the wraith having taken over her muscles. Just as the edges of her vision began to turn black, she saw the small animal transform. It seemed to wrestle with the transformation, its eyes changing rapidly between wholly black and blazing orange with a slitted pupil. The claws slowly retracted, and its teeth shrank, revealing a normal row of less-sharp teeth behind them. It chittered at her, and she thought she noted a look of concern on its face. Lena was certain she was mirroring the expression right back before she felt intense pressure on the side of her neck, and her world went dark.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE

Lena stood in a darkened room, bright golden light visible in the distance. The space around her felt hollow, like if she spoke, it would echo back at her. A sun-kissed wind caressed her cheek in the darkness, warm and familiar. She turned, and the light seemed to flare in response. She walked toward it, surprised she was unafraid in the otherwise impenetrable dark. She didn't know how long she walked, but eventually, she began to glimpse a golden dome. She could make out something underneath it; a flame, burning red hot with glimmering orange edges, sat suspended beneath the dome. Underneath the flaming orb was a man with golden hair and silver-plated armor. He was down on one knee, holding onto the pommel of a sword that'd been embedded in the ground beneath him. His head was bowed, as if in prayer. Lena gasped as she realized who she was looking at.

Henry.

As if sensing her, he looked up. He wore a pained expression; his jaw was clenched, and sweat beaded his brow. Lena tried to run to him but was kept away by an invisible barrier. She put her hands up, trying to feel for a way to gain entry or get closer. At this, Henry tried to smile and failed.

"Look to the eleuth," he seemed to say, although his mouth did not move.

The words wrapped around her mind before disappearing into a fading echo. Just then, her shoulder began to prickle. Henry's face snapped to the side, and when he looked back, fear shone in his expression. He lifted a trembling arm and blasted Lena away from the dome and back into consciousness.

~

HE WAS *ALIVE*. Henry was still alive, and he was fighting for his life. *No. Fighting for her. To keep her safe.* She didn't understand how it was possible, but she could sense it, his strain and discomfort in holding his position. Powering the dome of light. To protect something, that burning blaze suspended above him. A protection spell. Which meant that there was something else in the darkness with him.

The wraith.

Lena thought she had failed, that Henry's soul had been lost, and it was only a matter of time before the wraith took over for good, but she'd been wrong. So *wrong*.

She had given up. It was what she'd always done. And she'd tried to . . .

"*Look to the eleuth*," he had told her.

Lena bolted upright. She spun around, looking for the small creature that had attacked Taryk and immediately clenched her neck. It ached fiercely in two different spots. Pressure points, she realized.

In her frantic state, she'd missed Cross, who was sitting on a log several paces away. He gripped his sword tightly, muscles tensed, but upon noting there was no danger, he released his grip. He was covered in a thin layer of dust, and blood was crusted at the edge of his hairline, and he looked . . . well, even angrier than before.

Furious, actually.

"What *the fuck* was *that*, Lena?" he seethed.

But Lena couldn't focus on his face because in the sky behind him was another moon, or was it a planet? It was enormous, taking up almost her entire field of vision. The surrounding auroras were unlike anything she'd ever seen. Iridescent greens and blues wove together, evoking a sense of awe so great her mouth fell open.

"What in the EverGods is that?!" she asked in return, pointing behind him.

Undeterred, Cross stood, blocking the celestial show.

"I need to go." She rose, making sure to avoid putting weight on her bad ankle.

"Go? You're not going anywhere. Not until you tell me what the fuck *that* was," he said, a quiet calm coming over him. "Things get hard, and you just give up?"

A lump grew in her throat with the accusation, the burn of shame creeping up her neck and into her face. He wasn't wrong. EverGods knew he wasn't, but he wasn't right either.

"You don't know anything about me," Lena spat.

"I *know* you're still human. I'm not sure how or why, but unlike so many others, you've managed to maintain your humanity," he said.

Humanity? Her humanity?! She'd lost that the minute she'd decided to pursue this course of action to save her brother! And as a result, she'd done unspeakable things. She hadn't just killed. She had ripped beating hearts from human bodies!

"It's not that I don't want to live! It's that I don't want to end up killing ANYONE ELSE!" Lena fought the emotions that threatened to undo her. "I—I can't—I don't want to end up killing YOU!"

The anger drained out of his face momentarily, replaced by something softer. But then he seemed to remember himself, and his expression hardened.

"You do not get to use me, or anyone else, as a means to an end or to justify your inability to cope," he said.

Lena blinked. And then blinked again. He was right. That was exactly what she'd done. To him and Taryk. Despite choosing to save Cross's life because it was the right thing to do, it had also eased her guilt at a time when she was certain she'd die. It was true she'd rather die before she hurt anyone else, but she also felt she didn't deserve to live. That was the reason she'd approached Taryk. And though Taryk didn't appear to have any issue with ridding her of her life, she'd assigned him that task without considering what it might mean for him. It hadn't been something she'd planned, but when the opportunity presented itself . . . And yet, while all of that was true, he didn't have the right to judge her on her "inability to cope."

The audacity of doing so sent anger flooding through her system, burning through the numbness that made her feel detached. Apathetic. It was true she'd burned her life down when she couldn't cope with the loss of her grandfather and mother, but taking a life wasn't something she could ever see herself making peace with, unlike him.

"That's funny, coming from somebody who kills for a living. Or is murder something that eases you to sleep at night? You might find that not

everybody can take life so easily, especially if they've sworn to preserve it!"

"You're not going to hurt me." He said it like it was final, a promise written in fate. His face was hard, but his tone had lost its bite.

"Let me go," she said again. "You can't keep me here."

"You're right. I can't. You're free to go anytime you wish. But you might want to wait until morning unless you're ready to test yourself against tree stalkers, scales, or any other manner of death that would await you in the darkness."

Spending the night in the woods was one thing, even if they were enchanted or cursed, but the plains were . . . different. The beasts that roamed freely here were deadly, having had centuries to hone their skills.

Lena closed her eyes, willing the sense of urgency now burning inside her to ease.

"Now. Would you consider joining me by the fire? I'll tell you what I know about that," he said, pointing behind him but keeping his gaze trained on her, "and you can tell me how the hell it is I'm not lying dead near the Drowning Woods."

"No." Lena shook her head. She felt both judged and utterly exposed in front of the soulbound.

He sighed. "Please?"

She considered denying his request again. After all, who was he to remark on her choices. And yet . . .

When Lena didn't refuse, he tossed her a key. She stared at it, unsure of why she hadn't said no. She had a feeling if she refused a second time, she'd miss an opportunity to learn more about wraiths. She reluctantly picked up the key. It didn't escape her notice that he'd avoided her bad ankle, locking the shackle to her uninjured leg instead. She unlocked it and slowly made her way over to the fire.

It burned brightly, crackling softly in the quiet of night. They were now in a different part of the plains, still surrounded by craggy rocks and towering pines, but currently camped under a large overhang.

"Taryk?" Lena asked.

"He was still unconscious by the time I got you *secured*. I tied him to his horse and set him loose on the plains," he said.

Lena gaped. "With all of those monsters out there?!"

“He deserved it. Trust me,” he said, using a small blade to sort through glass vials on a cloth in front of him.

“How’d you get me here?”

Cross turned to a length of rope sitting near his supplies by way of answer.

“The Taryk treatment, then,” she said. He smirked.

“Some would say you deserved it, too,” he said, but then the smirk slipped from his face. “Are you going to tell me why you did that? And now you’re—?”

He gestured at her with the small blade in reference to her apparent change in motivation.

“I—thought I had lost someone. As it turns out, he’s still alive. I have to help him.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“I just do,” she said.

Cross nodded. “How’s your neck?”

“I think you can guess,” she answered.

“And your ankle?” he added, his gaze meeting hers.

“Same as my neck,” she answered.

Cross nodded yet again. Then, he rose and lifted his shirt, turning to the side so that Lena could see his ribs and lower back. Lena rose as well, unable to contain her astonishment. Without thinking, she walked over and placed her hand on the newly formed scar. Tracing the area, she examined the new skin there. His slight shift at her touch revealed the tiny crystal-like shards reflecting the aurora’s glow. Lena bit her lip to keep from asking him about them. She had so many questions about their origin and function, but asking questions usually invited questions. And that was never a good idea in Reimar.

His touch was ever so gentle as he removed her hand. A flush so fierce crept up her cheeks she might as well have been on fire.

“I’m so sorry. I was—am—a healer, and I wasn’t sure how well—what the skin might look like. And so fast?” She was rambling now.

But Cross was still holding her hand. He flipped it over, palm up, and stared at the scarred, blackened skin there. “How did you heal me?”

Lena pulled her hand out of his and went back to her place across the fire.

“I’m not sure,” she lied.

“Okay, then why?” he asked.

But Lena merely shrugged.

“Your turn. What can you tell me about that?” she said pointing behind him again. He didn’t miss a beat. “Oh that, I have no idea what that is.”

“You said you knew!” she protested.

“I said I would tell you *what* I knew, and it’s not much, except for the planet you see there has been getting clearer over the last few weeks. The first time I noticed it, it was very faint. It was also after I got injured, so there were a few nights I questioned my sanity. Now, well, it appears to be closer, and a lot more visible.”

Weeks?

“Okay, not very helpful there,” she said.

“I could say the same about you,” he said, shrugging.

Okay, fair. Lena sighed.

“All right. What can you tell me about wraiths?” she tried.

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

Nothing. Everything.

“Have you ever met someone who turned but maintained control over themselves?” she asked.

“What makes you think you’ve completed the turn?” His question was cautious, careful. Almost gentle. In that moment, it was hard to think the mission he’d sworn himself to was killing wraiths who had once been human, like her.

She gave him an incredulous look, gesturing to all of herself as if to remind him of the complete transformation she’d undergone right in front of him. But when he didn’t reply, she said, “I just know.”

“No,” he said, finally answering her question. He returned to his work sorting through glass vials. “Why do you think you’ve managed to maintain control?”

How much longer would it be before Henry’s strength gave out, and they were both lost to the monster inside her?

“I have a working theory, but if I’m right, I don’t have much time left. I’m going to The Whispers come first light,” she said, determination taking root as she spoke the words out loud.

“The Whispers? What is it that you think you’ll find there?” he asked, frowning as he held up an empty vial.

“Answers, I hope.”

"*We* leave at first light then," he said simply.

Lena stared at him. Sensing her gaze, he looked up. There was nothing but truth in those brilliant blue eyes.

"Why?" she asked.

"I've already told you. I am dutybound to repay the debt I owe you, and until then, I cannot return to my previous task, so I will accompany you on yours," he said, as if it'd already been settled.

She didn't necessarily *want* a soulbound soldier accompanying her to The Whispers, especially if the rumors were true. If it was a safe place for those who'd been infected, she'd be leading him there. She wasn't keen on traveling with someone who misunderstood her either, who spoke to her so bluntly. But even she could admit he hadn't been wrong. Did she really care what he thought? He didn't know her.

On the other hand, if the other rumors about The Whispers happened to be true and it was in fact a cursed land full of evil spirits, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have him accompany her. It would be nice to have a companion in her travels, yes, but more importantly, he'd be able to ensure that she didn't harm anyone else if she lost control . . . or if Henry's strength gave out.

"You can come with me on one condition . . . Make sure I don't harm anyone else," she said.

He nodded. "I can do that, but I'd be able to do it more effectively if we made a stop before heading to The Whispers." Before Lena could protest, he added, "It'll be quick, but I have to replace the potions I've used."

Lena thought back to the eruptions of power that'd come from within the OverGrown Forest and caused her to flee into the fallen city. That'd been him; she was sure of it. Had he been on his way to her village before getting attacked by the beast? Lena shivered at the thought, an eerie sense of strings being woven together lingered in her mind. It was enough to get her to agree.

"All right," she said.



LENA MARVELED at the dancing streaks of light illuminating the night sky. Things had been quiet, and she'd been able to get several hours of

uninterrupted sleep while Cross took first watch. She'd been surprised to wake refreshed, although it might have had something to do with the fact that she was safe and *not* alone. Despite the warning she'd given him about the precarious situation regarding the wraith, he hadn't attached the shackle to her ankle.

Cross had fallen asleep on his bedroll but not before issuing her a warning as well. He'd told her what tree stalkers sounded like when they vacated the trees they pretended to be a part of during daylight hours, and he assured her they wouldn't have to worry about scales, as they preferred to crush their prey in the fields. Finally, he told her not to leave their camp, no matter what she heard past the glow of the firelight.

It was this warning that hounded her as she crept into the shadows past the light of the fire. Lena had heard a familiar chittering noise and couldn't risk missing the eleuth, especially after Henry's message. Cross's horse snorted in protest like he was scolding her as she stepped into the shadows. She could have sworn the night-dark beast rolled his eyes at her too, but she couldn't be sure.

Her eyes compensated for the lack of light almost immediately, and she was grateful for it. Placing her hand upon the rough bark of a tree to help gain stable footing, she adjusted the placement of her ankle on the slant of rock she balanced on, listening intently to gain a sense of direction for where the creature might be. A chittering noise came from a tree behind her, followed by an identical chittering noise that seemed to come from a tree farther ahead. Large boulders and shrubs protruded from the ground otherwise covered in pine needles, and she wondered whether the terrain was distorting the sound. Lena's skin began to prickle at her shoulder, as she chanced a few more paces into the darkness.

Foolish. So foolish.

The chittering was closer now, but when she heard it again, it seemed further. The hair rose on the back of her neck, and a cold sweat began to form on her brow. It was luring her deeper into the grove of trees. Lena stopped, deciding to turn back. She'd made foolish choices in the past, but her senses were screaming at her that none of this was right. She turned to head back towards the camp when she realized she could no longer see the glow of the fire.

No. No. No.

Lena strained to hear the crackle of the logs being consumed by the fire or the huffs and snorts of the horse's *I-told-you-so*, but only heavy silence greeted her. She thought about calling out for Cross, but something in her gut told her that might be the last sound she ever made. Rustling in the trees above made her blood run cold, and just as she was about to bolt, orange eyes appeared on a low branch across the way.

They disappeared just as quickly as they'd appeared. Lena narrowed her eyes, willing them to focus, to take in the intricacies of the darkness she peered through, and there perched on a low branch was the eleuth. Its eyes were now wholly black, razor-sharp teeth exposed in a silent snarl, black claws protruding from its small hands. She hesitated as she took in the transformation, but where she had expected to feel fear, she felt only a slight pull toward the creature.

The eleuth looked up into the trees, scanning the dense pines. Then, it did the strangest thing. It tossed its head in a gesture that Lena took to mean *come this way*. So, she did. Making sure to use the pine needles covering the ground to muffle her footsteps, she made her way over to the eleuth. As she got closer, she decided it was a truly terrifying creature, at least in this form, but still, she did not feel afraid. The eleuth raised its stripped, furry tail, slowly lifting it to her face before pushing her chin up with it. The animal used its tail to angle Lena's face upward and slightly to the side. She didn't have time to consider the amount of intelligence the creature displayed as her eyes focused in on the area it was directing her towards.

After what felt like an age, Lena's eyes adjusted further. There, suspended on a branch high up in the towering pine, was a creature Lena could only describe as a horned demon. It was the size of a large bird, but this one had multiple sets of leathery wings and grey flesh that appeared to be rotting. Two large, curved horns sat upon its head above milky white eyes. Beneath that, four fangs protruded from its lipless mouth. As if sensing that Lena had spotted the horned creature in that tree, the eleuth proceeded to turn her head to three more spots in the surrounding trees.

Four.

There were four winged demons perched in the trees around her. They had led her away from the camp by impersonating the creature she was looking for. She didn't know why, but the eleuth was coming to her aid, just like it had done with Taryk. Lena looked back at it, her heart swelling a

little, and wondered how she was going to get back to the camp. Its answer came in one slow blink.

Turn, it seemed to be telling her. *Show me the monster.*

But she couldn't become that thing again, the one who ripped hearts clean out of human chests, that could kill without mercy or regret. The thing that had murdered people she loved and consumed the entirety of who they'd once been. Unlike the eleuth that seemed to be able to control the turn, she didn't know how. A memory struck of her being locked inside her own mind, and she gave the creature a barely perceptible shake of the head.

No, that wasn't an option.

Instead, she searched the ground for anything she could use to fight the bird-like creatures. There were boulders and stones nearby, as well as fallen branches that might be easy to swing. Lena had just decided on a branch when the eleuth screeched. She turned just in time to see it explode out of the tree next to her at an incoming creature, all sharp claws and teeth. In the split second before they collided mid-air, she observed the multi-winged creature led with its horns, glimmering with a wet sheen.

Poison.

Lena's concern for the eleuth was cut short as the surrounding area grew even darker. What felt like a red-hot knife sliced into her arm. Lena cried out, whirling around, but failed to see the one that had attacked her. EverGods, it burned. It felt like her flesh was melting off. And maybe it was; she didn't have time to check. She lifted the branch, ready to swing it at the sight of one of those creatures, when she received another slice on her exposed ribs. Tucking her arms in closer to her body, she continued searching the darkness, trying to temper her growing frustration. The wretched things moved in total silence and blended almost perfectly into their surroundings. A small slice on her cheek had her grunting in annoyance and swinging the branch wildly around her.

She had no idea how the poison might affect her or how much longer she had before it would incapacitate her. As if she'd summoned it with her thoughts, her arm began to tremble slightly.

Another screech from the eleuth let her know it was still alive, still fighting. Heart hammering in her chest, Lena filed through her options. The first attack was triggered by movement so running wasn't an option. Not to mention she couldn't run blindly through the ever-growing darkness. The

pursuit would likely work the creatures into a frenzy, and shouting for help might bring on a fiercer attack or alert other creatures to her location.

The truth of her situation was inescapable. Lena was outnumbered and injured. Despite her improved eyesight in the dark, she couldn't see well. She was going to die in this grove of trees if she didn't act. But she couldn't let the wraith in, couldn't summon it beyond Henry's boundary; it could hurt him, or worse, kill them both. Panic crept at the edge of her indecision.

The brush of wings through the unbound hair at her neck made her entire body convulse in repulsion, and Lena spun in a circle, swinging the branch. Her injured ankle almost gave out, and she had to stifle a cry of pain as she steadied herself on the other foot.

Wings brushed past her in coordinated fashion, alerting Lena to the creature's strategy. They were testing her and would likely ambush her all at once after ensuring she wasn't a threat. The attack was imminent.

Panic and fear swirled low in her gut. Even with the eleuth's help, there were too many creatures to take on. She'd come too far to let herself be eaten by these half-rotted, winged monsters. Lena swallowed her fear as she accepted what she had to do.

She couldn't risk letting the wraith in entirely and compromising Henry's safety, but perhaps she'd be able to let some of it in. Lena scanned her consciousness for the darkness inside her and found it instantly.

A wisp of a glittering dark mass floated before her. Lena invited it closer. But a blast of golden light batted it away. *Henry.* Having delved inside herself, she distantly felt two more gashes open in her flesh, one on her hip and the other on her thigh. The pain pulsed dimly in her periphery. She was out of options and time.

Lena reached for the wisp of black once more, stilling as it slithered toward her. Suddenly, she was standing inside the dome, alone. A tunnel formed through the golden light. Henry was helping her. Letting a small part of the wraith in. She gasped as the wisp of black speared through her. The darkness that filled her was ruthless, brutal, and full of ancient knowledge. And then the dome shut, cutting off the rest. The dome disappeared from her mind's eye, and she was back in her body.

Her senses slammed into her, and Lena's perception of her surroundings widened. The heaviness of the darkness pressed in on her, and the scent of rotting flesh and something else like pheromones, putrid and reeking, hung in the stale air. The near silent rush of air beneath a pair of wings reached

her ears. And with that she sensed, more than heard, one of the creatures diving for her.

With only a second to spare before taking another injury, Lena swung the branch with every bit of strength she could muster. She was rewarded with the crack of bone. An ear-piercing shriek ruptured the unnatural silence around her, and Lena whirled, eyes raised, looking for the other two creatures.

A yelp of pain from behind startled her, and she spun again, looking for the eleuth. The distraction cost her. The remaining creatures launched their attack. White-hot pain at her shoulder and opposite arm left her gasping for air. She heard the eleuth cry out once more followed by a whimper. Lena went out of her mind with panic, searching for the furry creature who'd been fighting at her side. The creature Henry had instructed her to find.

She stumbled through the darkness searching for it, the thick branch falling from her hand before understanding crashed over her. It likely wasn't the eleuth at all. They were mimicking it, bouncing the sound around the same way they'd lured her into the forest.

Two more slices were delivered simultaneously, the last one cutting into the flesh above her throbbing ankle. It was this last blow that flipped the switch. The wisp of darkness she'd invited in became a torrent, breaking through the dome, aimed at the burning core in the center. Lena drew it toward her instead, finally understanding she was present inside herself in two forms. Her consciousness appeared as a mirror version of herself, a human standing inside a dome of glowing light. And the burning core represented her heart. The thing the wraith fought to infect.

Lena took in more of the wraith than she wanted but managed to intercept the torrent, sparing the burning core. She was able to block some of it too, but the force continued its onslaught. She thought of Henry, his perseverance and light, and this seemed to strengthen the dome. Strengthen her.

Her whole body was trembling now, both inside her conscious mind and outside of it, as the poison seeped deeper into her muscles. A deep cut to the back of her thigh sent a spike of pain that cut through her consciousness, and her leg gave out. She lost her balance and fell, hitting her head on a small boulder. The torrent of glimmering black ceased. Back in her body, she rolled over and clutched her head.

Lena pushed herself up from the ground, anger rising swiftly within her. First at herself for being so foolish and weak, and then at the wraith now starting to roil inside her for thinking it could just commandeer her body.

The rage seemed to sharpen her senses to a finer degree, the details of her surroundings becoming clearer. The pain of her injuries dimmed, and time slowed. Lena rose to her full height, the burning in her veins easing as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She was likely going to die, but before she did, she'd be damned to hell if she didn't make sure every single one of these creatures accompanied her into the depthless abyss.

On the exhale, she perceived a disturbance in the air—no, *two* of them. They came from opposite directions, horns angled to inflict the most damage. In response to the threat, her nails extended further out of her fingertips, becoming claws, as she reached into the air to snatch the closest creature from where it flew. She shredded through layers of leathery wings as she squeezed. Lena ripped the wretched thing's head clean off the rotting body, ignoring the sting of pain as it bit into her hand.

Discarding the mutilated creature, she went still, ready to snatch the other one out of the air, when the eleuth flew in from her periphery and pinned the remaining creature into a tree. It pulled its head back and extended its jaw before ripping a small, black heart out its chest. A smile of satisfaction at the savage kill pulled the corners of her lips up.

The rage felt *so* good. It was *freeing*. Until she realized it wasn't hers, but the wraith's. She was on the verge of losing herself, teetering at the edge of a cliff so tall that if she fell, it would be the end of her. The end of *them*.

Fighting to stay in control, she sought to expel the darkness she'd taken in. It coursed through her, looking for a way in, a way to shake the little control she'd managed. Lena looked at the eleuth, eyes wide with fear.

It landed at her feet and rose on its hind legs. The eleuth's eyes flashed orange before turning black once more. They flashed several times before settling on orange, its other features shifting back as well.

Standing on the precipice of the unending darkness that pulled her in, Lena willed herself to take a step back from it, but she couldn't. Didn't know how to. She'd willingly let the darkness in. The *wraith* in. She had pulled it in, against Henry's wishes, and he'd let her, knowing she'd had no other choice. But now—

The eleuth still stood in front of her, curiosity and concern in its features and the tilt of its head.

Curiosity...

She was unable to follow the thought through as pain burst from somewhere deep inside her.

Then, she was on her knees, shards of rock digging into her skin, heaving up her dinner. Pine needles stuck to the blood on her hands along with some of her own vomit. When she was done, she looked up to see that the eleuth had scampered closer and seemed to be waiting. Lena wiped her mouth on her sleeve and felt the soft caress of fur on her face.

Was it . . . comforting her?

The eleuth set off behind her, and she turned, her heart sinking just a bit, but then it stopped and motioned again with its head for her to follow. Lena stood on wobbling legs and stumbled after it. She walked only a short distance before she saw the golden glow of firelight up ahead, and she almost sobbed in relief.

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CHAPTER

FORTY

When she reached the campsite, Cross was standing outside his tent, sword in one hand and the metal contraption he'd worn the first time she'd met him strapped to his wrist. He seemed to sag at the sight of her and sheathed his sword.

Was that relief on his face? Maybe it was the poison making her hallucinate.

Upon closer inspection, he looked absolutely furious. His blue eyes narrowed on her, but Lena was exhausted and in too much pain to care. She was also pretty sure she was bleeding from, well, *everywhere*. Lena stumbled towards her pack, which she'd left by the fire and collapsed in front of it. Cross lunged toward her, preventing her from landing in the dirt face first. He helped her to sit, eyes darting over her body as he assessed her injuries.

Hands shaking, Lena dumped the contents of her pack on the ground. She needed to draw the poison out.

"What happened?" he asked, barely containing his fury.

"You know what happened," she said.

"Do you still have a death wish?" he asked between clenched teeth.

Lena didn't look at him. She didn't have time for his rantings. She needed to figure out if a poultice would neutralize the poison in her system after she drew it out.

"Tell me what happened?" he asked again, pure command in his voice.

"I went into the forest to find the eleuth, and I found it—plus some other Goddess-damned creatures that tried to eat us," she summarized.

The eleuth looked up at Cross as if confirming her story. It was lying next to Lena, licking its wounds.

“What did they look like?” he said, still crouching beside her.

Lena looked at him then, but he wasn’t just looking at her. He seemed to be taking in every detail of her appearance, the blood, both red and black, and the vomit stuck to her sleeves. His expression was unreadable now.

“Flying horned demons? I don’t know. It was dark!” Lena said, looking around for a stone she could use.

Cross went silent at that, appearing lost in thought. “Did you get a look at their wings?” he asked.

“Yes, there were multiple sets; leathery, grey, I think.”

“Nychtyra.” Cross said, face grave.

“Nych-what?” Lena said, reaching for a stone.

Cross reached out and intercepted her hand.

“Here, let me see,” he said, “may I?”

Lena eyed him before finally nodding.

Cross turned her arm towards the fire to get a better view. He inspected the gash there, pulling at the skin gently. “Nychtyra are a birdlike species that hunts in packs. They have layered wings, the outer layer is how they fly, but the other sets of wings underneath have a different function. They use vibrations to create a kind of silo to disorient their prey. It’s like being trapped in a tunnel without light or sound.”

That was exactly what Lena had experienced. She hadn’t been able to locate the light of the fire although she hadn’t wandered very far, and the impenetrable darkness felt fabricated somehow, different than just the absence of light. It made sense she hadn’t been able to see well despite the improvement in her vision or hear the crackling fire nearby.

“What of the poison? I need to figure out which herbs will draw it out,” she asked, the words running together.

“It’s not poison; it’s acid. They use it to make your flesh more amenable for implantation,” he said.

“Implantation of what?” she asked slowly, her already sour stomach turning again.

“Their eggs,” he said.

Lena gagged so violently she startled the eleuth. Cross glanced at it but didn’t say anything about the creature, likely having decided it wasn’t a threat.

“They would only risk implanting them after you were dead though,” he finished.

Lena exhaled sharply, but her mind had already moved onto the effects acid would have on her heart if too much entered her blood.

Cross got up and walked across the camp to his satchel, pulling his gauntlet out. He returned with a small, thin vial unlike the others she’d seen. It seemed to glow green in his hand, and she wondered if it was one of the potions that were said to be created with magic, but as he unhooked it from a second, empty vial it was attached to, Lena realized it’d just been reflecting the aurora in the sky.

Cross held the slim bottle out to her. “Here, this will numb the pain,” he said.

Lena looked up at him, the pain seeming to flare in response to his attention.

“Why?” she asked, reaching for it.

“It’s the least I can do for the woman who saved my life,” he said, before walking away, leaving her to her task.

Woman, he’d said. *Not* wraith, *woman.*

Lena swallowed the lump in her throat, thankful he hadn’t asked her anything else. She wasn’t sure how much longer she would have been able to keep it together if he had.

She had invited the wraith in, past Henry’s defenses, and despite his assistance, she knew there’d been a cost for that. A cost he had paid somehow. She also knew he was the only reason she’d been able to regain control after the fact. The shiver that ran down her spine had nothing to do with the cold.

At least she’d made contact with the eleuth. She looked down at the furry creature, now asleep at her feet, and felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for its presence. Lena reached her hand toward it but thought better of it. It was filthy. She needed to clean her hands and focus on packing her wounds with the powder that would neutralize the acid and then apply the poultices that would fight against infection and swelling.

Sending the contents of the small vial down her throat, she began.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-ONE

Lena ended up needing Cross's help to tend to the wound on her back. He had approached the task in a business-like manner, working to clean it and rub the black powder into her cut before applying the poultice. She'd been surprised at how gentle his touch had been, given his chosen profession.

She'd also needed to borrow a shirt as hers was closer to ribbons than a functioning garment. It hung loosely from her frame, reaching to just above her knees, but she'd been able to tuck it into her filthy pants for a better fit.

Cross had taken over the watch for the rest of the night, despite Lena offering to let him sleep. She had drifted between sleep and wake the rest of the night, often sensing Cross's gaze on her.

She didn't quite know what to make of him. He'd been furious about being dutybound to protect her. When she'd approached Taryk, it had been his opportunity to be rid of her. She hadn't thought the oath would hold if her decision to approach Taryk was made willingly. Then again, she wasn't sure what the specifics of the oath entailed.

She couldn't imagine what it meant for him to have to protect the very monster he'd been tasked with killing. The more she thought about it, she figured it wasn't dissimilar to her situation, but in reverse, because she had taken life when her oath required she protect it.



A CHILL WIND arrived with the first rays of light. She took a moment to relish the caress of the cool breeze before fastening her cloak. Her whole body ached, each movement stinging as the skin pulled. She'd cleaned out the wounds and bandaged them. Luckily, the cuts hadn't been as deep as she'd imagined, not even the one on her back, which she'd been certain would need stitches.

She tried to hide her wince when she moved. It was embarrassing enough she'd forgone Cross's warning and met danger almost immediately, but she had a feeling he'd noticed.

"We'll have to ride hard today if we want to make it to Lythara before lockdown," he said simply.

She gave him a questioning look.

"The outpost is located just off the plains, but creatures have been known to wander in if they don't seal the gates," he said.

Cross mounted his horse, extending a hand to her. Lena hesitated. "Despite his attitude, Kharon doesn't bite," he said.

But Lena wasn't worried about his horse. She'd been riding on Kharon for over a week, but last night, she'd let the wraith in.

She glanced around as if willing another method of transportation to appear. Her heart pounded in her chest as she considered. It was clear Cross wasn't afraid of her, but she couldn't say the same about herself. Lena took a steadying breath and willed her heart to slow. Henry was keeping her from turning somehow, but if his strength gave out, would she turn? Or worse, hurt Cross? He wasn't invincible, despite the rumors that swirled about the illustrious warriors. She'd learned that firsthand.

Reluctantly, she accepted. Seated in front of him, she felt the heat of his body seep in through her cloak. Lena fumbled with her hands, unsure of where to put them, until finally, she turned to ask and saw Cross trying to hide a smirk.

Maybe she should have just *eaten him* when she had the chance. Her heart lifted a little at the use of Henry's interpretation of what she'd done. But the feeling of levity didn't last. Eduard's face flashed in her mind, and she was suddenly drowning in shame and regret.

Kharon's sudden movement brought her back to the moment, and she exhaled a shaky breath. Later. She would think about it later.

Chittering from the trees let Lena know the eleuth wouldn't be left behind. It launched itself from a nearby pine and transformed midair, its

eyes going black. Lena was stunned to see a pair of ghastly wings appear on its back as it soared toward them.

“Did you know it could do that?” Cross asked, awe clear in his voice.

“No!” She half turned, her cheek brushing across his chin.

“Pet of yours?” he asked.

“No. A new friend, I think,” she said.

Cross merely nodded and went back to scanning their surroundings.

They rode across the swaying, brown grasses of the plains, scattered vegetation the only markers of their progress. Eventually the terrain changed, the plains giving way to abrupt, vertical rock features and small streams that wound through steep rocky slopes. As the sun crept higher into the sky, the chill in the wind seemed to vanish.

The sun beat down on them relentlessly with no shelter or shade in sight. That, paired with the veritable heater at her back, made her vision swim. Lena reached for her water skein and drank deeply, hoping the water would snap her from her stupor. All she could think about was the heat seeping into her skin, making her blood simmer. A cooler shift in the air had her leaning over, chasing the feel of it on her skin, when—

“Whoa!” Cross exclaimed, slowing Kharon.

Strong arms rose up around her, as her body went loose. She leaned into those arms, the only solid thing in a world that swam with bright light and bleeding colors.

“Lena, what’s wrong?”

She tried to get the words out, but her lips wouldn’t move. She tried again, managing one word: “Hot.”

The word was barely a whisper. He touched her forehead and placed his palm on her cheek. She let her face fall into his hand, eyes threatening to close.

“I have to get this cloak off you. Is that okay?” he asked. When she didn’t answer, he shook her gently.

“Can I take this off?” he asked again, a little louder.

She managed a nod. That seemed to be enough for Cross, who unhooked the clasp of her cloak and pulled it down her back. The next thing she felt was the rush of cool water as he poured the contents of his water skein to soak her shirt.

Lena moaned at the feel of the water as it pulled the heat out of her skin.

“Talk to me, Lena,” he said, panic lacing his tone.

Lena blinked, her vision beginning to clear. She was clutching Cross's forearm, blood beading where her fingernails met the tanned skin of his muscled arm. He had opted to wear his cuirass this morning, leaving his arms exposed. Lena recoiled at the sight of his blood, even as she turned to face him.

"I—I just scratched you!" Lena hid her face in her hands, memories of the other times her nails had drawn blood assaulting her. Had she just reinfected him?

"I'm fine," he said gently. "I'll get it looked at in Lythara."

She peered down at the puncture marks in his arm and was relieved to see the absence of thin black veins or grey tinged skin. It took her a moment to compose herself. Cross waited patiently, giving her the room she needed despite his proximity.

"I must have overheated," she said when she felt like she could speak without breaking down.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he asked, no hint of the usual bite in his tone.

"I didn't want to slow us down," she admitted, realizing that in her silence, she'd done just that.

"And now?"

"Better but still hot."

"We can't risk you passing out again. It's not safe to stop. What else can we do to cool you down?"

Lena looked down at what she was wearing, Cross's shirt and her undershirt. That was it. Lena pulled the white linen shirt over her head and shoved it into her pack. She couldn't bring herself to care once the breeze slid over her skin.

Cross turned his face. He was trying to give her some privacy, she realized.

"Would you consider telling me the next time you feel unwell?" he asked, urging Kharon onward.

Some part of her bristled at his request. She was so used to being on her own, shutting others out. But that hadn't exactly worked out for her in the past. The thought of Jessa made her heart hurt, and she pushed that away too. It would always be a risk to let others in, but the least she could do was ensure she didn't get him killed by keeping him in the dark.

"I will," she said at last.

A shriek from the skies had Cross suddenly on alert, his face scanning the terrain ahead. Lena tensed, waiting to see what the eleuth might be alerting them to, but she didn't have to wonder long. An enormous sheet of rock shifted on the path before them. Cross pulled on the reins, directing Kharon around it. No, not a sheet of rock, Lena realized a moment too late.

A scale.

Just like its name suggested, its back was covered in rough, stone-like scales, some of which had moss growing on them or small colorful flowers that swayed as it rose before them.

Lena gaped as the massive creature snapped up from the ground, revealing an underside made only of needle-like teeth. Kharon dodged the monster with ease, swiftly skirting around the edge of it. Lena whipped around as they passed, curious to watch the monster collapse back onto the earth. As it did, a spray of needles shot from the creature.

Cross chuckled as Lena continued to stare. To think she'd considered crossing the plains on her own.

"They trap anything that wanders by underneath those large flat bodies and slowly consume them. It's a gruesome way to meet the EverGod of Death," he said.

Lena shivered at the thought.



THEY RODE with a few breaks interspersed throughout the day until the sun had nearly sunk behind the horizon. Lena made note of the rapidly fading light and then tilted her head up to see if she could catch a glimpse of the furry creature circling above.

As if sensing her concern, Cross urged Kharon on faster. The horse seemed to sense his urgency and obeyed, powerful muscles flexing under his brilliant black coat. Lena silently begged the last rays of sunlight to linger a little longer. After seeing the kinds of creatures that called the plains home these last few days, she didn't want to know about the sort that drove an outpost to lockdown just after sunset.

As they began to descend off the plains, Lena shivered again, but this time it was at the caress of Cross's warm breath on her neck.

“Lena,” he said, peering down at her shoulder, “it might be a good idea to cover up.”

She had forgotten that the grey, leathery skin on her chest and shoulder would be on full display without a proper shirt on. She blushed, suddenly embarrassed and self-conscious about her brutally scarred body. Reaching into her pack she pulled out the damp, wrinkled shirt and pulled it over her head.

“There,” he said, pointing down the sloping lawn at what appeared to be another stone outcropping. As they continued to race down the plain, a small outpost materialized.

Surrounded by a stone barrier made of boulders and jagged rocks, two rows of squat, stone buildings, connected by a taller structure at the end of the drive, made up the bulk of the outpost. It looked like an elongated letter “U,” with a wide dirt road running between the two rows of buildings. A heavy metal gate, flanked by fortified guard towers, was the only opening in the stone barrier.

They raced toward the small outpost, figures scurrying towards the nearest building.

“You may want to cover your ears.” Cross whistled loudly, and she realized he was announcing their arrival in hopes the guards would hold the gate.

Another sharp whistle pierced the air, and both Cross and Lena turned to see a pale rider with cropped blonde hair flying down the plain behind them.

“Shit,” Cross murmured as they raced through the gate and down the main drive towards the tall structure at the end. Lena glimpsed a healer’s banner above the door to one of the shops and made a note of its location.

They crossed the threshold into the stables just as the last rays of sunlight winked out. Cross whipped Kharon around to see Taryk had made it into Lythara with a second to spare before the main gate was shut behind him. He, too, raced toward the stables, but the attendant didn’t give him the chance to enter as he rolled a large rectangular door across the steel track with a regretful look.

Lena heard the whinny of Taryk’s horse and the sound of hooves retreating as he was forced to find another inn to host him for the night. Cross seemed pleased with this and turned his attention to the stable hand.

He dismounted, turning to offer his assistance to Lena. She couldn't help but glance at the small puncture wounds in his arm, now crusted over with dried blood. She half expected to see small wraithwounds in their place, but there was nothing but tanned skin. Relief washed over her, and she wondered if the Bud of Brielle had somehow made him immune to any sort of wraithwound.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, passing her cloak over and leading Kharon toward a stall at the back.

"Fine, just a little stiff," she lied, willing her legs to keep her upright. She was more than a little stiff. Her muscles ached, the cuts all over her body throbbed, and she was sore in places she'd didn't want to consider.

Cross nodded and then turned to tend to Kharon. He relieved the horse of its saddle and gear as he waited for the stable hand to retrieve food and water.

"We'll have to be careful here. As you can imagine those who live here aren't friendly to strange creatures or—"

"I understand," she said. "What about Taryk?"

Cross turned and studied her face; those blue eyes looking beyond her words at what she'd left unsaid.

"I'm not sure what he'll do, he's . . . unpredictable," Cross said, annoyance flitting across his face.

"Is he a threat?" she asked.

"I'm not sure yet. But I intend to find out," Cross said.

She followed Cross through the stables with its fortified stone walls and makeshift stalls inside. Just outside the door that connected the stables to the inn, Cross turned so suddenly, Lena almost ran into him. Tilting her head back to look into his face, he wore a thoughtful expression as he examined her hair.

"What?" Lena asked, running her fingers through it.

The strands on the left side felt different. As opposed to the thick, smooth strands she was used to, this section above her left ear felt wiry and coarse. Wondering if it was due to having lost some of the feeling in her hands, she pulled pieces of her hair into view. Her mouth fell open slightly as she caught a glimpse of the coarse, wavy locks.

"Maybe just push it forward to ensure it covers your shoulder," he said at last, "and"—He took one of her hands in his and turning it palm up —"what can we do about these?"

“Couldn’t you pass me off as an artist or something?” she asked as she dug into her pack. Cross gave her a deadpan look. Once she had adjusted her hair and donned her gloves, she looked up at him as if to ask, *There. Happy?*

He nodded and proceeded toward the door with worn letters that spelled “THARA’S INN.”

Behind a stone counter sat a tall, lean man with a dusting of grey hair. Lena wasn’t sure what he was reading, but he seemed more interested in that than attending to them. Cross pulled out a stamped metal badge and slid it across the counter. Lena recognized it as the same one she’d pulled out of his satchel. The sound of metal scraping on stone was enough to capture the man’s attention. He sat up, promptly shut the book, and glanced at the badge on the counter, steel-gray eyes going wide.

“My apologies sir, I thought you were one of the Comman—uh, someone else,” the innkeeper said apologetically.

“My companion and I are quite tired and would like to request lodging,” Cross said. The softness in his voice was gone. Only a soulbound soldier stood before her now.

“Of course, sir,” the man said, handing over two keys. “If you’re interested in some hot food, I could have our bar maid bring something up.”

“Is the suite available? The one with the tub?” he asked, the keys on the counter undisturbed.

“The, uh, the marital suite?” the man asked, peering over at Lena, who was staring intently at Cross.

“Yes,” Cross said simply.

“Yes, sir, here you go,” the innkeeper said, handing it to him.

He led them back through the stone building towards a room at the end of the hall. They passed the bar located in a large sitting room, a small fire smoldering in the hearth. The place was sparsely decorated, but it was clean and well kept.

Once they arrived at the door of the room, *their* room, Lena’s heart rate picked up. Suddenly, she was aware of how hot it was, her heavy cloak suffocating, and the heat from the fire oppressive.

The innkeeper was still talking to Cross, something about mealtimes, his interest in a bath and the rates for Kharon’s upgraded accommodations. She caught Cross peering over the man’s shoulder at her, and he abruptly ended the conversation. The innkeeper walked away mumbling something

about the bath, and when Lena turned back, Cross was holding the door open for her.

She stood there staring at the threshold. Images of her backtracking through the forest to Ada and Eduard's house flashed in her mind. This time, she couldn't stop the flood of images: her bloody hand buried in Eduard's chest and Ada's face as she approached Lena, knowing she'd meet the same end as her beloved.

"Lena?"

"I can't," she said.

"You're not going to hurt me or anyone else here," he said.

Lena saw the certainty in his eyes and took a steadying breath. The wraith was strong; she'd felt it when she let the wraith in on the plains. She could only hope the soulbound was stronger. Reluctantly, she stepped past the threshold. She hoped Henry could keep up his shield, at least until they could be on their way tomorrow.

"Where did you go just now?" he asked.

But Lena just shook her head. He seemed reluctant to let it go, still searching her face, but must have decided against pressing the matter because he nodded curtly and turned away.

Glancing around the room, she was surprised at how big the space was. There was a large bed in the center of the room with a plush beige area rug underneath making the expansive space feel luxurious, yet cozy. Off to the side was a separate bathing room with a large stone tub set in the center.

There was a massive fireplace opposite the bathing room flanked by two stone columns with intricate carvings etched into the stone. Cross walked to the oversized armchair in the corner by the fire and set his things down.

"You can have the bed," he said, walking into the bathing chamber.

She drifted over to the bed, removing her cloak and tying up her hair. The relief from the heat was almost instant. She thought about lying on the bed but then reconsidered. She was filthy. No wonder Cross had requested the suite with the tub.

"I'm going to get some water for the bath. Will you be okay until I return?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks," she replied.

Cross nodded once and stepped out. A few moments later, he returned with large buckets of water that he emptied into the tub.

“You can go first,” he said, walking over to the armchair. He reclined his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. Lena took this as her sign.

Pulling the door to the washroom closed, she felt her muscles relax a bit. Lena peeled the filthy clothes from her body and let them fall to the floor. The cuts all over her body ached, and she had to will her body to move. Placing one foot into the tub, she gasped softly. The water was *cool*, not hot, not even warm. Lena sunk under the cool water, relishing the feel of it on her skin. She ran her hands through it. The slight numbness would take a while to get used to. She figured she was lucky she still had the use of her hands at all after using the Bud of Brielle.

She stared at the blackened skin of her hands and realized that, yet again, there was blood dried on her fingernails. She had to remind herself it was Cross’s blood, and he was okay.

She thought of Cross and the picture of the woman she’d seen in his satchel. It was likely she was his wife. Lena wondered why he’d sworn an oath that kept him away from his family. She was happy she’d made the choice to save him; she couldn’t imagine being responsible for tearing another family apart.

Lena shook those thoughts from her head and breathed in deeply. She thought of Henry and marveled at the fact that he was still alive and keeping her safe. Lena hadn’t had a moment to think about it, to wonder how it was possible. In her mind, she renewed her vow to keep her promise to him. To fight any way she could, to help him—help them both. Lena closed her eyes and tried to envision the dome and send her consciousness toward that part of herself where he resided. Nothing happened.

She missed Henry so much. She missed talking to him, teasing him, and reminiscing. He’d never met her grandfather, joining her family two years after he was murdered, but Henry had heard all of the stories. Knew the silly saying that accompanied one of her grandfather’s lectures. “*To learn, you must do,*” he would say. And the way he’d go off on a tangent describing some tiny detail about the scenery on his travels when he’d initially been talking about a patient.

Lena sighed and started washing, ensuring her cuts were clean and continuing to heal. After she was done, she stepped out of the tub and headed to the small sink in the corner, an old mirror propped up behind it.

Lena could only stare at the woman looking back at her. She looked . . . healthy and beautiful. Her eyes were clear, the green color of her irises brighter than she remembered, and her skin was soft and luminous. Lena hated it. A beautiful face to conceal the monster within. It was a lie she never agreed to tell.

She peered down at the brutal scar on her chest and shoulder. The greyish, leathery skin there looked out of place. Like a rotting island in a sea of healthy, tanned skin. When she looked closer, she could see the black veins there were much more pronounced. No wonder Cross had advised her to hide it.

Lena finished drying herself off and went to work washing her clothes, including the spare set which was also filthy. When she was done, she realized she didn't have anything dry to wear. Donning her damp clothes, she exited the washroom to find that Cross wasn't inside.

His belongings were still by the armchair, and he'd left several things sitting out. A sense of guilt still clung to her for having looked through his belongings when he was unconscious, and yet a piece of parchment caught her attention, and she learned her curiosity was stronger than the guilt. After setting the damp clothes on a plush carpet in front of the fire to dry, she walked over to it.

Inside the parchment was a wooden totem with strange script carved into it. It was the same one she'd seen inside his tent before. At first, she couldn't make out what it said, but after staring at it for a moment some of the words came into focus.

YOU SHALL LEAD the [indiscerable] to Eteris' end to save what was and what can be again.

IT WAS STRANGE VERSE. Something about it struck a chord of recognition, but she couldn't quite place it. Setting the totem down, she wandered back over towards the bed and heard scratching at the door. Orange eyes greeted her, and Lena looked around, wondering how the creature had gotten in unseen.

She'd wondered where the animal had gone when they arrived in Lythara. While she knew the eleuth could take care of itself, she had worried about it.

The eleuth chittered softly and then scampered across the floor, stopping once to make sure Lena was following. It led her past the front desk, which stood empty, and out to the stables. Lena heard two familiar voices just beyond the metal door that sealed the stables.

“She’s my dutybound.”

“That’s not all she is,” Taryk said.

“You know what the oath says. I won’t hesitate to protect her from any and *every* threat,” Cross said.

“I really hope you know what you’re doing, Theron,” Taryk said.

“It’s not your concern—”

The sound of hooves nearing interrupted the tense conversation. She didn’t quite know what to make of it. It wasn’t necessarily what Cross said, but *how* he said it. It made her insides feel warm, and her heart still.

“We’ve confirmed there’s five of them. The guards at the gate are ready to let you out,” one of the new voices said.

She heard the hooves of horses depart and guessed Cross and Taryk were headed to assist with something at the main gate. She was about to head back to her room when another voice drew her attention.

“Is that Cross Theron?” a soft female voice asked.

To hear a woman asking after Cross stirred something strange inside her.

“Didn’t you see the scalian leathers?” the man asked. Lena’s brow furrowed as she thought back to the creatures in the plains with their thick, stone-like skin.

“Do you think what they say about him is true? That he’s the ‘most effective soulbound to ever exist?’ He doesn’t look old enough to have killed that many wraiths—”

Effective? Lena scoffed. *Try unskilled. If they only knew the mighty warrior has almost died twice in the last few weeks.*

A furry tail whipped against her leg gently, and Lena looked down to see the eleuth scampering away. She briefly considered staying to listen to what was being said outside the stable gate but followed the eleuth instead.

It led her through a well-lit passageway in the back stocked with extra hay, saddles, mounts, and several shovels. She finally reached a dead end and looked up to see the eleuth clinging to a suspended wooden ladder.

Lena’s skin began to prickle, and she glanced around, making sure she and the eleuth remained undetected. She followed the creature up the ladder

to a sort of loft that had been carved into the stone above. A worn chair was the only thing occupying the space, and it faced a circular window that opened to the expanse of the plains beyond. A fine metal grate, reinforced with thick iron bars, had been welded atop it, making it so that nothing could get out. *Or in,* she realized.

Lena marveled at the construction of the multi-layered window until she realized what it was. Another guard tower of sorts. A way to watch for what might be approaching from the plains opposite the main gate.

The eleuth perched on the chair and used its tail to signal out beyond the window to the plains. *Watch*, it seemed to say.

Lena turned, scanning the darkness beyond. Without the glow of the aurora, which didn't appear as bright near Lythara, she had to rely on the moon's pale light to illuminate the plains. She had just begun to wonder whether she had misunderstood the eleuth's signal when she saw movement.

Large, night-dark figures ran down the plains. She squinted, trying to make out what they were, and realized they were large, feline adjacent creatures nearly the size of a small horse. They had sleek black coats, perked rounded ears, and a long trail of fur that started on the top of their heads and ran over their backs to their thin, long tails. Their paws were enormous, tipped with claws that glinted like steel in the moonlight.

Could it be they were actually made of steel?

Lena nearly pressed herself against the grate, trying to get a better look at the scene unfolding before her, when a flicker of green light caught her attention. The flicker exploded into a trail of green fire, and a sword emerged from the darkness.

Lena gasped, and before she could wonder, pale violet flames tinged black at the edges erupted from nearby. Cross and Taryk were on the plain.

A cold burst of fear made her legs go weak and stomach lurch. Lena's hands shot up to the grate. She watched, eyes wide, as four black beasts aimed towards them, closing the distance between man and beast faster than any animal should be able to.

Taryk moved first, riding out to meet the beasts, with his cropped blonde hair reflecting the moonlight as he rode. Cross broke off, riding in the other direction and prompting the beasts to split up. Two continued to race toward Taryk, and two split to head off Cross.

Lena followed the trail of purple fire racing across the plain and sent a silent prayer to the Goddess that Kharon's strength would endure.

But he didn't need Kharon to carry him for long. Once he managed a sufficient distance from Taryk, he leapt off his horse. The second his feet hit the ground, he moved. Fire trailed through the darkness in graceful arcs as he worked to keep the beasts that circled him at bay. An unsettling clicking noise echoed through the plains, and she realized the animals were communicating with each other.

Cross kept his head slightly cocked, ensuring he could see both beasts as he slowly turned with them, each step a calculated move.

Then they attacked. Both creatures lunged at him, one extending its claws to swipe at him and the other coming in with teeth. Cross spun, avoiding the metal claws that would have ripped his flesh open. With a slash of the sword, he cut through one of the beast's legs. A screeching roar pierced the air, but Cross was already moving, plunging his sword through the creature's open maw.

Goosebumps grew all over Lena's body as she realized she recognized that roar from the night Cross had stumbled back into their camp and collapsed from blood loss. Had these beasts been hunting them the entire time they'd been crossing the plains? The realization made Lena sick.

A second roar shook Lena out of her thoughts, just in time to see Cross evade the second creature that lunged at him with snapping teeth. He moved beautifully, as if each step was part of a dance that had been ingrained in his soul.

He deflected the metal claws of the second creature once again, managing to keep it at bay. And then it *stood*. It towered over him on its hind legs, while Cross was forced to forfeit a step, then two.

No, he wasn't retreating. From her vantage point, she saw the brilliance of the move. The creature thought he was conceding, but he was merely getting into position. As the creature descended, Cross sunk down onto one knee and thrust his sword upward, ensuring that it did so onto the burning tip of his sword.

Just as soon as he'd impaled the creature, he yanked his sword out and rolled out from under it to avoiding being crushed under the weight of the large animal.

With a whistle for Kharon, he managed a running leap onto the horse who took off at a full gallop in the direction of the green fire still cutting a

path through the darkness. Lena gaped from her spot at the window, but by the time the Cross made it over to Taryk, the beast he'd been facing lay dead in the grass.

Taryk turned to face Cross, the smug look on his face clear in the green light of his blade. She couldn't hear what Taryk was saying to Cross, but a screech from above had Cross's head snapping up to the expanse behind Taryk.

Taryk whirled, lifting his sword, but it was too late. She heard him cry out as the animal pinned him to the ground, claws digging into his shoulders and teeth inches from his face. Cross didn't make it off Kharon before a small ball of black shadow dove in from above. It landed on the creature's back and extended its head, jaw opening wider than it should be able to, as it reached down and ripped its throat out.

Lena spun around to see an empty chair behind her. Turning back to the window, she saw the eleuth leap off the creature, its maw slick with blood. The eleuth spit out the animal's throat on the grass and sat. Cross pushed the limp body of the feline off Taryk, who stood, shoulders bloody, and scrambled away from the eleuth.

Actually, scrambled backwards.

Before either of the men could react further, it launched back into the sky. Taryk stared at Cross wide eyed, his now extinguished sword in the grass next to him.

Cross turned away from Taryk and smiled as he mounted Kharon and rode off, back towards the gates of Lythara.

Not so unskilled after all then.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-TWO

Once inside, she requested the bath in their washroom be refreshed. The innkeeper took her in, letting his gaze wander over her, and she was glad she'd gone back for her cloak and gloves. When he didn't speak, she began to wonder if the innkeeper had seen the eleuth or otherwise spotted something else that gave her away.

"I know it isn't any of my business, but are you safe?" he asked warily.

"Safe?" she asked, making sure she'd heard him correctly.

"Yes. I've never seen a young woman traveling with a soldier willingly," he admitted.

"Oh, I see. But yes, I am here willingly." Her heart squeezed a bit at his concern.

"All right." He nodded.

Lena nodded as well, unsure of what to say next, and then she remembered her request. He assured her he would send someone in before going back to his book.

It wasn't long before the young stable attendant came. Steam now rose from the water, and a new set of soaps and oils had been set out, the scent of cedar and vanilla wafting in. The attendant also brought in a tray of food and set it at the edge of the bed. Lena nodded her thanks, walking over to the clothes she had set out in front of the fire. She was delighted to find that they were already dry. Just as Lena reached for them, the door opened.

Cross entered the room, exhaustion clear on his face. He gave her an assessing glance before walking to the corner and removing his weapons.

"You should eat," he said, nodding at the tray before walking into the washroom.

Lena glanced at it. She knew she should eat, but her appetite had slowed considerably since the wraith attack.

After changing into her dry clothes and setting the still damp set in front of the fire, she returned to the bed, pulling the tray of food closer. There was an assortment of dried meats, cheese, and fruit paired with crusty bread and honey. She ate quickly, making sure to leave some for Cross.

Exhaustion descended upon her swiftly. It felt like the events of the last few days slammed into her all at once. Suddenly, she was keenly aware of every cut and scrape. The pulsing in her ankle deepened, and she couldn't wait to stretch it out. Lena carried the tray of food and set it on the small table near the chair Cross had claimed. By the time she made it back to the bed, she could barely keep her eyes open. The last thing she remembered was climbing into the cool sheets before sleep took her.



LENA MARVELED at the uniformity of the ripples in the sand that made up the dune she stood upon. The sun was blinding, beating down on her from every direction, almost as if multiple suns shared the vast, pale-blue sky above her. She brought her arm up to shield her eyes and realized she was dressed only in an oversized linen shirt.

She looked around, eager to catch a glimpse of her brother. She owed him an apology for drawing the wraith through the dome and wanted to see how he was doing.

But Henry didn't come.

The sweltering heat sank into her skin, burning the delicate flesh of her scalp, along with her arms and shoulders. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled down her back and between her breasts. She tried calling for him, but her voice disappeared into the wind.

Discomfort slowly morphed into pain, the dry, heavy air making it difficult to breathe. Every time the wind kicked up, molten particles of sand struck her bare legs, face, and arms. Then, her feet began to burn.

Where was Henry, why had he brought her here?

Panic began to creep in at the edges of her mind as she realized she was alone in the scorching landscape with nowhere to hide from the unforgiving

sun. The exposed areas of her flesh were turning pink, and she could barely stand to stay upright on the blistering sand.

She took several steps down the shifting sands but found herself standing right back where she'd begun. Lena scanned the area again, squinting against the blazing sun, but there was nothing but sand dunes stretching out into the distance. Her skin had gone from pink to red, and her eyes ached.

"Henry!" Lena screamed.

The pale blue sky and endless sandscape began to fade, the ground shuddering beneath her when suddenly it disappeared completely. Lena landed abruptly on white glossy stone.

She groaned and opened her eyes to brilliant gold light. She lifted her hand to shield her eyes and blinked several times waiting for her vision to adjust. The stone beneath her feet was warm, and the air was almost as hot in this place as it'd been on the dunes. It took a moment before her eyes could tolerate the glare of the golden light from the polished floor. Keeping her hand up, she stood and looked around. There, embedded into the white stone, was a sword.

Lena gasped, pulling her hand from her eyes to find that she was standing inside Henry's dome, and above it, an enormous black tendril rose, preparing to lash at the structure.

The mass of black descended upon the dome with such force that Lena was thrown off her feet. The resounding boom made her ears go hollow. She struggled to sit up, her body slick with sweat. Lena dared a glance at the sword and saw Henry, but his image was almost completely faded, flickering faintly before her.

"Henry, what's happening?" she screamed, but he didn't look up. Knuckles white, Henry clenched the pommel of the sword between his hands while kneeling before it.

Another lash came down upon the dome and an explosive crack reverberated through the air. Lena cried out and tried to crawl towards him, hands and knees slipping on the warming stone beneath. And then fire descended upon them. A multi-layered scream echoed beyond the dome. Lena screamed too as the scorching heat of the fire filled the dome.

A whisper snaked through the air and into her ear. "*Lena. Wake up!*"

Her eyes flew open and landed on a familiar face. *Cross.* The relief that washed over her was instant, despite the heat. Except, instead of looking

furious or annoyed, like she'd expected, he looked . . . *terrified*. On instinct she reached for him, but the movement was stopped abruptly. Her wrists had been shackled. She followed the short chain to a stone pillar flanking the fireplace, the intricate designs in the stone ground away where the chain strained against it.

Lena was lying on the plush carpet in front of the hearth, which now held a blazing fire. Her clothes were completely soaked through with sweat, and every inch of her body ached. But it was the blood on her hands that sent her into a panic. Her vision blurred as she focused on the crimson stains blending with the blackened skin of her palms. Her breaths came in short, quick pants, as she struggled to fill her lungs fully with air. Lena couldn't breathe, she couldn't think—

"It's yours, Lena. The blood is yours," Cross said calmly. Though, the expression on his face did not match his tone.

"What?!" Her brain couldn't process what he was saying.

"The blood is yours, not anyone else's," he repeated.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"The wraith—it tried to take over."

Getting a better look at the warrior, she realized his hair was disheveled, as if he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly, and he was shirtless, a sheen of sweat covering his body. Clutched in his hand was the dagger he usually wore in his belt.

"You cut your wrists on the shackles; the blood got on your hands as you—it, tried to get them off."

Lena looked him over again, searching for a scratch, a bruise, anything to indicate she'd caused him harm. She wouldn't be able to bear it if she had, but he seemed all right.

"Hot," she whispered once she found her voice again.

Cross got up and poured a bucket of water over the fire, suffocating the flames, and then reached for her wrists, key in hand.

Lena flinched. "No."

"If I leave you here, you'll die. We have to lower your body temperature."

But Lena did not offer him her wrists. Instead, she let her head fall back to the floor and turned onto her side, curling into a ball.

"Lena, please," he said.

"Just leave me here," she begged.

“I will *not*.”

Lena wanted to close her eyes and let the pain sweep her away, but it was the pleading in his voice that made her nod.

“Bring the dagger,” she whispered.

The next thing she knew, Cross was lifting her from the floor and carrying her into the bathing room. He lowered her into the tub, but when her body touched the water, she screamed. It felt like being dipped into fire. Instead, he lifted her back up and slowly sank to the floor, placing her on his lap. Holding her steady with one hand, he reached for a cotton cloth with the other and dipped it in the water. He gently placed it at the nape of her neck until the temperature was tolerable. He continued to move the cloth around her body, cooling her down.

“How did you know?” she asked when she felt like she could speak again.

“Your breathing changed,” he said, pulling another cloth from the stack and wiping the blood from her hands and wrists.

Lena averted her gaze, not wanting to see her bloodied hands, and tucked her face into his chest.

Part of her wanted to know what he meant. Had it been as simple as that? A slight change in her breathing had alerted him to the wraith’s presence. But another part of her didn’t want to know what he’d seen. When he was done wiping her hands, she curled further into him and was surprised when she felt his heartbeat under her palm. She hadn’t meant to place it there but felt comforted in knowing she hadn’t harmed him, and his heart still beat beneath his muscled chest.

He’d known heat would keep the wraith at bay at least. Or had it been pain he was aiming for?

“You had me worried for a moment,” Cross said.

“I found my way back,” she said after a pause.

“I was talking about just now when you refused to let me take off the shackles. I know there’s more fight to you than what I’ve seen.”

“That hasn’t been true for a long time,” she said, looking up at him, her voice nothing more than a rasp.

“It exists. You just have to find it again,” he replied. He brought his hand up to brush a strand of hair off her damp forehead and tucked it behind her ear.

Lena didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure that was true for her.

“You remind me of someone. She was strong, fierce. She lost her fight for a while, but eventually she found it again.”

Lena’s heart sank although she wasn’t entirely sure why. She remembered the drawing of the beautiful woman she’d seen in his satchel. A whisper of her own loneliness struck her, and she couldn’t help the muddled emotions that twisted inside of her.

“Can you tell me about her?” she asked.

Beyond the choices she’d made, Lena felt like she was slowly losing touch with her human side. She wanted so desperately to hear of someone who found their way back to who they’d once been.

Cross was silent for a while, and Lena closed her eyes.

“Lena?” Cross said, shaking her gently.

She cracked an eye open. She was so very tired.

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise me you’ll stay awake.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“She was a horse breaker, working with wild horses. Many thought she used force to tame them. But that was never the case. She would ask them if they wanted to be of service, to be matched with someone who’d been tasked with something significant, a special purpose of sorts.”

“She could talk to horses?” Lena asked, her interest piqued.

“Not in the way you and I are speaking. She used her energy,” he said. “Many of the horses declined, but some accepted. A few took direction well, but others challenged her, to see if she was trustworthy. She did this for many years until she met a man who admired her fire and wild spirit. But after they were married, he tried to tame her. Tried to dampen her spirit and cage her. It worked for a time, but she found she couldn’t live in a cage. Much like the wild horses she worked with, she needed to have the option, and he hadn’t given her one.”

“What did she do?” Lena asked.

“She gave *him* an option instead. And when he left, her spirit flew higher,” he said proudly.

Lena shifted in his lap. “Is that—is that why you left to become a soulbound?”

Cross barked a laugh, and she sat up further, dislodging the cloth on her chest.

“I’m talking about my mother,” he said.

Oh.

“Wait, does that mean that Kharon—?” she started to ask, but her voice trailed off once she saw the smile disappear from Cross’s face.

“She matched us before she died. I think she knew I would swear my oath and paired me with him. He’s . . . different. It was the last thing she did.”

And the last gift she ever gave me, he seemed to say.

It was no wonder Kharon was so important to him. It was true that most riders developed a special connection with their horses, but she’d sensed their relationship was different somehow, deeper, and she’d been right. Lena thought of his mother and what it must have been like to have the person you love try to change you.

“How do you think she was able to make that choice?” Lena asked, wondering if he’d been talking about his own father.

“She understood that love helps you burn brighter. It doesn’t try to contain or break your spirit,” he said.

Lena took in his face, the full lips, strong nose, and striking eyes, and wondered if he’d taken after her or his father. She had a feeling she knew the answer.

She considered the story he’d told her and figured she had also been caged in a sense, trapped by the circumstances that would allow the infection to eat away at her until there was nothing left. But as long as she had control, as long as she still had agency, she could make choices within those confines.

Wasn’t that what Cross was doing with her? Dutybound to protect his sworn enemy, he too was navigating their tenuous pairing within the restrictions set by his oath. Another cage of sorts, except she knew what was likely to happen after he met the terms, and she was still a wraith.

“Do you think you’re ready to go in the tub?” he asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

Lena reached over and slipped her hand into the cool water. It felt refreshing. She nodded.

He lifted her with strong arms and gently lowered her into the tub. She was vaguely aware that her soaked clothing left little to the imagination, but Cross didn’t so much as glance at her body.

Once she was submerged, he left the bathing room and returned with fresh clothes and a glass of water that he placed in her hand. Lena tried not to think of the implications of him doing so. Where this gesture used to

signify a person's commitment to nurturing a romantic relationship and a promise that their love would flow freely to the other person, Lena had to remind herself he had a family. And it was unlikely soulbounds subscribed to the same beliefs and customs attached to the sanctity of water and the role it played in courting.

According to the old customs, to offer someone water was to offer them life, although it wasn't as simple as handing someone a glass of water. The ritual entailed using a special crystal vessel and a gesture of mutual understanding and agreement. Not many still practiced, but her grandfather had courted her grandmother that way, and Lena had loved the symbolism in it. Cross turned to leave but stopped just short of the door.

"Even if you weren't working to help him, *the one you thought you'd lost*, even if you had nothing else, no one else, you'd have you. You are enough. Your life matters. Don't be so quick to give up on it," he said and strode out.

Lena's throat closed up, and her eyes filled with tears that spilled into the water around her. She did want to live. Badly. And not just for Henry but for herself too. What she wouldn't do, or grant the wraith the opportunity to do, was kill.



CROSS RETURNED a short time later to help her out of the bath. Lena didn't tell him she'd tried to stand up on her own a few moments prior and failed. She was still in her soaked clothes and just the thought of the effort it would take to peel her shirt and pants off was enough to make her think she'd prefer to sleep in them.

"Do you think you can change on your own?" he asked, assuming the same business-like tone he'd taken when he helped her with the wound on her back from the Nychtyra.

Exhaustion and self-consciousness warred within her as she reluctantly accepted the truth.

"No," she admitted. Despite having cooled down significantly with the application of the damp cotton cloth and the bath, her muscles ached fiercely, and she couldn't stop trembling.

“All right,” he said, reaching under her arms and helping her to stand. Lena struggled to step out of the tub and had to rely on Cross’s strength to stay upright. She stood, like a drowned cat, staring up at him, a flush creeping up her neck and into her cheeks. But this time it wasn’t due to the heat of a blazing fire.

She wasn’t sure if it was the shivers that racked her body, but she could have sworn her skin tingled everywhere her body met his.

“Can you hold onto me?” he asked softly.

Lena nodded. Cross lifted the dripping fabric of her shirt slightly before hooking his thumbs in the waistband of her pants and pulling them down her legs. Lena couldn’t help but stare at the crystals embedded in his muscled back as he did. Once he’d ensured she’d be able to maintain her balance, he helped her step out of the pants.

“How would you like me to get your shirt off?” he asked, arms locked around her waist to keep her from collapsing.

“I can sit on the bed,” she offered.

Cross hooked an arm under her legs and swept her up into him as he carried her to the end of the bed. A heady mix of cedar and vanilla combined with his own personal scent filled her nose. It was a scent she was familiar with after having borrowed his tunic. She breathed it in, the scent stirring something deep within her.

Once seated at the bottom of the bed, she offered him the hem of her shirt and lifted her arms to assist him with his task. He peeled the shirt off her body, making sure to turn his head as he did. Afterwards, he retrieved the dry clothes from the bathing chamber and left her to pull those on. Luckily, dressing in dry clothes required a lot less effort than pulling off wet ones.

“You need sleep,” he said.

Lena nodded, but she couldn’t bring herself to move. As if sensing her struggle, he lifted her once more and carried her over to where she’d initially fallen asleep and replaced the covers. Lena summoned her strength to offer him her wrists.

“No,” he said, “sleep, I’ll stay on watch.” He said it as if they were back on the plains, but she knew what he meant. In here, she, the wraith, was the predator he’d keep an eye out for.

Lena let her eyes close, but a question formed in her mind. If she didn’t ask him now, she’d never learn the answer.

“You didn’t tell me why you left, why you joined the soulbounds,” she said in a whisper.

“You leave to save them. It’s service for a service,” he said after a pause.

Thinking she must have misheard him she asked, “To save them?”

“My niece, Kiara, she’s sick. My service keeps her alive,” he said.

Oh.

“We do what we must for those we love,” Cross said, something like sadness in his tone.

She knew that truth well. So well, in fact, it was slowly consuming her. Lena had briefly considered seeking out the sorcerer but knew she’d never find him before she turned. She opened her mouth to ask him about the crystals embedded into his back, but it didn’t seem like the right time.

“Thank you for keeping your promise,” she said instead.

“Sleep, Lena.”

So she did, letting his voice guide her to the abyss.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-THREE

The next morning, Lena was pleased to learn the aches in her muscles had been reduced to mild soreness, although her cuts still stung when she moved. As she dressed, Cross set about packing his belongings. Struggling to find a tie to secure her braid, she dumped over her pack. She found a piece of leather tangled with Henry's medallion and shook it free to secure her hair. Cross had told her that if they limited breaks, they could reach The Whispers in two to three days.

"Are you ready?" he asked, glancing at the spilled contents of her bag.

Lena nodded and stuffed everything back inside quickly. They made their way to the great sitting room, which to Lena's surprise, also doubled as a dining hall. It was full of tables, chairs, and weary travelers, and Lena made sure to pull her cloak tighter around herself after she caught some of them sneaking glances in their direction.

The innkeeper made his way over to them, his gaze lingering on Lena.

"Quiet night," Cross said by way of greeting, extending the room key to the man.

"Yes, we think the felis corpses in the field deterred our usual nightly visitors. The guards at the gate send their thanks." The innkeeper turned to face Lena and passed her a small bag. "I've packed some things for your travels; I hope you don't mind."

Lena opened it to find some fresh clothes and other small, wrapped items that looked like provisions.

"Thank you," Lena said, but the old man just brushed her off.

Cross nodded at the innkeeper and then strode off towards the stables. Lena put the sack in her pack, and with another nod of thanks, followed

Cross out of the inn.

The heavy iron door of the stables stood open, revealing a cloudy day, but instead of heading towards Kharon, Cross nodded to the street beyond.

“The shop is this way,” he said curtly.

Lena followed, amazed at the small shops thriving inside the stone buildings. There were a lot more people in the small outpost than she’d expected. Having caught a glimpse of the shop she’d noted the night before, she stopped.

“I’ll be in there,” she said.

Noting the healer’s banner, he nodded and said, “Three shops down on the left,” and continued walking.

Lena watched him go, sensing that any progress they’d made last night had evaporated with the dawn. Sighing, she walked over to the open-faced shop, stepping onto the stone floor. She marveled at the plants and herbs that grew in small pots along high wooden shelves and the small bottles of oils and tinctures in colors and viscosities she’d never seen before. She was considering inquiring about the healing properties of a small glass vial with silver liquid swirling inside when a familiar voice caught her attention. Taryk was standing toward the back, having a heated conversation with a man she could only assume was the shop owner.

Spinning on her heel, Lena ducked out of the shop and walked down the street to find the one that was “three down, on the left,” but before she had a chance to enter, she heard Cross’s voice, angry and clipped.

“Who was it, Row?” Cross asked.

“What’dya mean who?” a woman asked in return.

“Who was lost?” he asked again.

Then silence. Lena held her breath, keenly aware that this was not a conversation she should be privy to.

“Everyone’s checked in, Cross. And recently too,” Row said.

“How recently?” he asked.

“Within the last week, maybe a little longer,” she said.

“From where?” Cross pressed.

“Taryk’s with you, isn’t he? Gothiel from the outskirts of Bledrock, Hendricks before responding to activity near the Slate Mountains, and Sera and Zebos are just south of Misted Oak. Why?” Row asked.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Yes!” Row said, irritation growing clear in her voice. “The only one who was unaccounted for was you. Now are you going to tell me why you’re asking?”

But the moment appeared to have passed.

“Is the stone charged?” he asked, his anger softening to irritation.

“First let me see your bracil. I’ll work on getting it refilled while you speak to him,” she said.

Lena’s skin began to prickle, and she brought her hand halfway to her chest before she thought better of it. Movement at the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she turned slowly to see Taryk approaching.

EverGods! Why hadn’t she figured if Cross was coming here, Taryk might too?

Taryk stopped just in front of her and opened his mouth to speak when a sharp chitter came from above. His head snapped up, gaze darting above the shops before he took a large step backward.

In doing so, she was able to get a better look at the puncture wounds on his exposed shoulders.

“Who are you?” Taryk asked, curiosity and suspicion mingling in his tone. “What are—”

“My name is Lena,” she said quickly to stop him from asking her about what had occurred on the plains.

Taryk assessed her, taking note of her appearance.

She braced herself, waiting for him to ask the question she knew was at the forefront of his mind, of every soulbound’s mind.

But he didn’t ask if she was a wraith. Instead, he asked, “And you’re his dutybound?”

“I guess,” Lena said, catching sight of the small purple plant in his hand.

“Interesting,” he murmured.

“Is that sempervidium?” she asked.

Confusion flitted over Taryk’s face.

“It is,” he replied, glancing at the plant.

“Is that for those?” Lena said pointing at the plant and then at the puncture wounds in his shoulders.

“It is,” he said again, looking more irritated than confused now.

Cross’s voice drew her attention, and she turned, stepping into the shop. Taryk’s motivations for going to Lythara were still unclear, and she

preferred not to be alone with the soulbound. Taryk followed, still holding the plant.

“It’s good to see you, Cross, I thought you were dead, and he’s been, well, quite displeased with the delay . . .” Row was saying.

Cross stood in front of a wooden counter. Behind it was an older woman with bright red hair. Short in stature with deep lines on her face, she had sharp eyes. She looked Lena over once before her gaze flicked to Taryk.

“I’ll be right with you, Taryk,” she said, not sparing him a second glance.

“. . .remember, red is dead, black is for on the attack, green is serene, white is for light and—”

“—chartreuse for a boost. Yes, I remember, Rowena. You remind me every time,” Cross finished, taking his gauntlet back.

Rowena gave him a stern look although Lena didn’t miss the flicker of hurt in her eyes before she placed a new set of leathers on the counter and passed him a satchel that clinked as she held it out. More potions, she guessed. But that thought was quickly overshadowed by the glimpse she caught of the woman’s arm. Tiny shards of what could have been glass or crystal glinted in the light, just like the pattern on Cross’s back.

Lena’s shoulder continued to prickle, the sensation more prominent this time, but before she could consider the cause, Cross turned, his gaze jumping between her and Taryk. His fingers curled into fists at his sides, the muscles in his neck tensing.

“Too tough for crystals now, Taryk?” he asked, eyes falling to the plant in the soulbound’s hand. He didn’t wait for an answer before he stalked past and left them both standing there.

Turning back to Taryk, Lena pointed at the plant once again. “You do know that’s actually sempermortem. Use that, and they’ll have to amputate both of your arms. It looks very similar to sempervidium, but it’s not.”

Taryk’s eyes widened in surprise as he looked down at the small plant in his hands once more. Eyes narrowing, he looked toward the healer’s shop down the way and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything else, she set off down the road after Cross.

Lena found him in the stables, standing in front of Kharon’s stall. He was leaning forward, hands braced tightly on the stall gate, knuckles white.

“What—” Lena started.

“I need to know who it was, Lena,” he said, pushing off the gate, face unreadable.

“Who—what?” Lena asked, glancing around the stable.

“Which one?” he asked again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, her voice sounding a lot calmer than she felt.

“I need to be able to tell their family they won’t be coming home,” Cross said, voice low.

“Who? Who won’t be going home?” she said, frustration leaking into her voice.

“The soulbound you killed,” he spat.

Lena froze; the air in her lungs seemed to evaporate.

Was it possible she had blacked out and killed someone else? A soulbound soldier no less? Her body began to tingle as a familiar numbness returned.

“I don’t—I didn’t—” she started, but Cross lunged at her, ripping her pack from her shoulder and dumping the contents on the ground.

A low hissing noise and chittering sounded from somewhere above her, but it barely registered. Lena watched in stunned silence as he got down on one knee and rummaged through her things until he pulled out the medallion. It hung from his clenched fist as he held it up before her.

“You don’t know? THIS! Who did you take this from? Do you even know their name? Was it Gothiel, Hendricks, Sera, or Zebos?” he shouted.

The rage Lena felt descended upon her swiftly, sharp-edged and all-consuming, so much so that she barely felt the shift. That was her brother’s medallion he held in his stupid fist and thrust at her. Seeing it dangling there as supposed evidence for a murder she hadn’t committed made her blood boil.

Lena snatched the medallion from his fist, nearly snapping the chain, and then she shoved him.

She shoved him so hard he fell into the stone wall behind him.

“*That*,” she said, in a voice that did not sound like her own, “belonged to my brother. He wore it on his person as a child when my mother found him, alone and terrified in the slums of Dovia. He wore it every single day until the day he died!” The last few words worked their way up to a scream. “I know exactly how many people I’ve killed. I see their faces every night. I

did not kill a soulbound soldier, and right now, I really wish I hadn't saved one either!"

Cross looked both stunned and confused. Using his index finger, he pulled a thin, silver chain out of his shirt, holding it up so Lena could see.

"We all wear one of these, Lena, given to us on the day our service contracts are granted. It's identical," he said.

"I don't give a fuck about your stupid medallion—" And then it all clicked. "You were asking that woman, Row, about the other soldiers, because you thought I—that I had killed one of them," she finished, unable to keep the hurt out of her voice. "How long? How long have you suspected me of killing one of your friends?"

Cross stood and dusted himself off but maintained his distance. He scanned her face, his astute gaze lingering, and Lena suspected he noted the hurt in her eyes.

"The night you were attacked by the Nychtyra that medallion fell out of your bag, but it wasn't until this morning that I got a good look at it," he admitted.

She couldn't hear anymore; she didn't want to think about this anymore. Lena got down on the ground and picked up her discarded pack. She shoved her belongings back inside as the anger she felt banked, morphing into something else.

"I don't know why the medallions match, and honestly, I don't fucking care. I haven't killed any of your friends. If the conversation you had with Row just now wasn't enough to convince you of that, I don't know what would. Stay away from me, Cross."

With that, she went back inside the inn. She found the innkeeper sitting behind the desk. He looked up from his book and frowned.

"I—I was here willingly, but that is no longer the case. Do you have a horse I could uh—buy?" She stumbled over her words. Lena closed her eyes, steeling herself for what she about to say, "I don't have any money, but I could pay you . . . with this," she said motioning to the large emerald brooch on her cloak.

The man considered the offer, giving her a pitying look, and then accepted with a slow nod.

He led her back into the stables and towards a different section of stalls where a grey mare stood. Lena didn't see any sign of Cross. *Good.* The innkeeper prepared the horse and briefed her on its temperament and care. It

didn’t seem to be spooked by her, and Lena took that as a small blessing from the Goddess. Once she was astride the horse, she pulled the brooch from her cloak and handed it to him. He took it reluctantly.

“Thank you,” Lena said before the man could change his mind.

“Keep an eye out for beasts,” he warned. “You’ll find they wear many different forms.”



LENA RODE down the center of the dirt road towards the main gate, passing the small shops still teaming with people. The crisp air dispelled the heat that had begun building underneath her cloak, and she breathed it in, willing it to cool the embers of anger that still smoldered within her.

A guard in the watch tower waved as she cleared the gates and turned her mare due east, a great weight lifting off her shoulders. At last, she was on her way to the one place that might offer her some answers.

She rode on into the day, thanking the missing Goddess it was overcast, the air retaining quite a bit of the morning chill. Occasionally, she heard a familiar screech from above, and her heart squeezed knowing the eleuth had chosen to accompany her.

She’d been so foolish to let Cross delay her. Despite having traveled together for weeks, the truth was she didn’t know him and couldn’t trust him. She couldn’t forget that he’d sworn an oath to kill her either, which she expected him to do after he’d “repaid his debt.” The illusion of safety and sometimes pleasant companionship had dulled her sense of urgency, but the truth was, she was better off on her own.

The terrain changed as she rode on, shifting from grassy plains with rocky outcroppings to sandy dunes with little shade and scarce vegetation. Lena stopped periodically to water and rest her horse.

Anger, hope, and adrenaline carried her through the first day of travel. Once night fell, she was painfully aware of her situation. Being alone overnight in the Sweeping Sands would test her resolve, so when she saw the protruding stone structure in the distance, she knew she wouldn’t find better shelter than that.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized the slabs of stone not only provided an elevated place for her to sit and room for her mare, but

they also provided shelter to her back and from above.

Her grandfather had told her about the Sweeping Sands and the creatures that resided underneath the tiny granules. The area was also called the Living Sands or the Weeping Sands depending on the type of experience travelers had here. The creatures didn't pose a huge risk, like some of the beasts found in the plains, but obtaining too many stings from the tiny pincers on the wriggling bodies of horned needleworms would cause excruciating pain. Lena wasn't exactly keen on getting stung but worried more for her mare. Horses were more affected by the stings, which could be fatal to the animal.

She set up a small camp just before sunset, making sure her horse was secured close by. It was evident she wasn't the only traveler to have camped on the stone as she spotted blackened logs and fieldstones. Adding some dried brush to the firepit, she struck two stones together and managed a small fire. She knew that both her grandfather and Henry would be proud, and in that moment, she didn't feel so alone. Rather, she found that she felt *capable*. That was something she hadn't felt in a long time.

With the small fire burning nearby and a small meal in her belly, she reached for the broach to lay down her cloak and found it missing. She couldn't help the tears that threatened to overwhelm her as she realized her mother's broach was yet another thing she'd lost.

I'll find a way to get it back, she promised her grandfather.

Now that the events of the day had passed, the ache in her muscles returned, along with the throbbing of her wounds. While the cuts on her body and sprained ankle were healing nicely, they were still sore. Instead, she focused on repacking her belongings since they'd been shoved back into her pack haphazardly. In doing so, she found extra provisions and a few apples gifted to her by the Innkeeper. Lena smiled, looking up at her mare.

Leaning back against the stone, she drew the sheathed knife out and placed it at her side. It wasn't long before the sands came alive, bizarre noises reaching her in the makeshift shelter as strange insects emerged to start their hunt for something to eat.

Stars slowly emerged to illuminate the night sky, joining the large planet she'd seen in the plains. Far in the distance, lighting strikes cut through the darkening skies but disappeared as quickly as they'd struck. Eventually, the dancing lights returned, casting radiant greens and blues along the existing

canvas. She marveled at the beauty that still existed on Eteris despite the horrors that now plagued Reimar.

When she grew tired of watching the aurora, she turned her attention to the sands where she spotted hundreds, if not thousands, of horned needleworms trying to wriggle up onto the protruding expanse of stone she sat upon. Luckily, all manner of insect and creature seemed deterred by the fire.

A glimpse of bright orange eyes peering down from above set her at ease. The eleuth came down and sat on the other side of the fire. She reached out a hand towards it, but it did not come closer. Sighing, she set her arm down.

“What do I call you?” she asked it.

But it only cocked its head, large ears twitching, and hopped back up onto the stone above. It was such a mysterious animal, and yet she could rest easy knowing the eleuth would keep watch and no doubt signal if there was danger nearby. Knife in hand and stomach full, Lena settled in and began her watch.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-FOUR

By the time dawn came, Lena was as stiff as the very stone she sat on. She stretched her sore muscles in a failed attempt to ward away the pain, but when that didn't work, she shifted her attention to packing her belongings. The day was already shaping up to be warmer than the day before, so she packed her cloak, rolled up her sleeves, and tied her hair back.

After checking that the needleworms had indeed returned beneath the sands, she loaded up her mare and checked for the eleuth. It was perched atop the stones waiting. She mounted her horse and nodded at it. In response, it launched itself into the sky and Lena set off after it.

Hope coursed through her as she realized that by nightfall, she'd be in The Whispers, uncovering its secrets. She rode as long as she could manage before stopping, both to find some solace from the sun and to rest her mare.

The terrain had changed once more, going from sweeping sands to craggy rock with scattered trees. She found a shaded area, only a couple of trees standing close together near a stream, but it was enough. She tugged off her shirt and discarded it on the ground, the heat making each movement a struggle. Lena inhaled through her nose and out through her mouth, willing her heart rate to slow and her body to cool, and tried to ignore what it might mean about her that she kept overheating in the winter. But it was hard to do. Her body had been changing for weeks now, culminating with the turn at MontTier. First, it was the change in her eyesight, then her nails had fallen out to make room for the claws that could extend at will from her fingertips, and then the shift in temperature tolerance. Finally, she'd developed enhanced strength now that the wraith was at full power inside

her. She was terrified of the day when she could no longer consider herself human. The only way she managed to keep going was by putting her focus on Henry and pushing the doubt and fear away. She'd always been good at shutting things out, and while lately it'd been harder to do, this was no different.

Lena had just caught her breath when the eleuth screeched, the sound sharp and clipped. A warning cry. She picked her discarded shirt off the ground, threw it in her bag, and surveyed the area. Unwilling to stick around to find out why the eleuth had alerted her, she mounted her horse and followed the eleuth, who veered north.

North? Why would it be turning north?

She realized then that something must be coming from the east. Heading north would keep her from backtracking. Just then, her wraithwound began to prickle. The eleuth screeched again, but this time the warning was cut short. She glanced upward to see the creature falling out of the sky.

"NO!" she screamed. Lena urged her horse on faster as the eleuth plummeted toward the earth, wings mangled. She looked around frantically trying to figure out what could have caused it to fall from the sky when an explosion went off in the distance, followed by two others. Colored smoke billowed into the air trailing crimson, black, and a shimmering yellow. More importantly, she finally spotted the danger the eleuth had warned her about.

Six figures on horseback raced toward her, or was it the eleuth they wanted? Behind them, the colored smoke drifted together, triggering a memory. The combination of colors resembled something she had seen many times before.

A banner.

Lena's blood ran cold as she realized those were the Commander's men, and the smoke was meant to signal their allegiance, cause, and sworn mission. It wasn't the eleuth they were after then. Pushing the mare to its breaking point, Lena looked between the eleuth and the ground trying to calculate the time it would take for her to reach it.

She was too far. She wasn't going to make it in time.

Lena watched helplessly as the eleuth neared the stone scattered earth and knew she would never recover from this loss.

Just as the eleuth was about to make contact with the earth, a blast of power intercepted it. Cushioned from the impact, the eleuth bounced off the ground, the sudden force causing it to be thrown farther still from Lena's position. The blast of power dissipated, and behind it was a night-dark horse, its coat gleaming both brown and black, and a familiar rider who wore a furious expression.

Lena almost wept in relief at Cross's arrival. Her relief was short lived though as three more explosions blasted colored smoke into the air, and five more riders appeared behind him.

Lena reached the eleuth first, dismounting her mare and running over to it. Its fur was slick with blood, a bolt protruding from its shoulder. The creature's wings were crumpled beneath it, but it was breathing. Its little chest rose and fell steadily. That was a good sign. A very good sign.

Lena swallowed her desperation as Cross neared and dismounted his horse.

"Is it alive?" he demanded.

"Yes," she breathed.

"You need to trust me. Can you do that?" he asked.

"Yes," she said immediately.

Cross turned his back to her and asked her to do the same. They were quickly surrounded by the Commander's men. Cross reached for her hand, his callouses scraping against her skin. He lifted her hand behind their backs and then moved his wrist down. Something smooth and cool met her fingertips. Lena had never fully recovered feeling in her hands, and it took her a moment to understand what it was.

His gauntlet, or bracil, as Row had called it. She pushed on one of the vials that popped out into her hand.

The group that had ridden in from the east approached them first, weapons drawn. Despite their travel-worn faces, and ragged uniforms, they exuded volatile energy. The man in the center of the group, clearly the leader among them, addressed the others first.

"Oh, that's her. Look at her." He smirked, eyes landing on Lena's chest and shoulder. It was only now she realized she wasn't wearing a proper shirt.

"I am Officer Wesher from the Commander's force, and we ride here to retrieve a wraith that evaded capture in the Overgrown Wood, soulbound," he said.

“That can’t be her, she’s still—well, she still looks human,” interjected the man standing next to him, “and what is that?” He poked his sword at the eleuth. “I thought you said it was her falcon.”

“Don’t—” Lena started, but Cross stepped toward the man named Wesher, drawing his sword as he did.

“She *is* a wraith, and she’s *mine*,” he said, violence leaking from his tone.

“That one will come with us,” said another man. “We’re under strict orders to retrieve her for the Commander.”

“It doesn’t matter what your Commander wants. My authority in this matter supersedes his,” Cross said.

“The Commander would be indebted to you if you were to grant him this favor,” said a voice from behind her. The man’s uniform indicated that he, too, was an officer.

The group from the west had sealed their exit, forming a circle around them that closed them in tightly.

“No,” Cross said, finality in his voice.

“But—” one of the men started.

“We’ll be on our way now,” Cross said, his voice turning into a growl.

The men shifted on their feet, hands twitching near the hilt of their swords. A cold sense of dread wrapped itself around her chest and squeezed. How long had they been out here, searching for her?

“There is one of you soulbound and eleven of us,” the other officer said.

“Move forward with that course of action, and it will be your last,” Cross promised.

When she saw the officers from each unit make eye contact and nod, she knew they’d made their choice. She turned to warn Cross, but he was already moving.

Pulling the dagger from his belt, he slit the throat of the first man and impaled another on his sword. The stillness of death filled the space for a moment, and Lena thought briefly the others might reconsider, but they did not.

Cross killed effectively, striking down the next man before the last fell. He moved around Lena, working to tuck her behind him to keep her out of harm’s way.

Once a hole opened in the guard’s formation, he pushed her toward it and shouted “Run!”

Ignoring the pain in her ankle, she ran, hoping to give Cross the space he needed to fight. Lena's heart pumped madly as she pushed her body through the rocky terrain. Skittering pebbles and heavy footfalls let her know that there was more than one guard who had given chase. A quick glance behind her revealed four guards had split off from the group to hunt her down.

Despite the suffocating heat, she thought she'd make it a lot further before her legs gave out. She hit the ground, grabbing for her thigh when something slick and warm coated her hand. Protruding from her leg was an arrow—no, not an arrow, a bolt. All sense left her as she realized it was the same as the one sticking out of the eleuth's shoulder.

Lena barely had time to react before she was being dragged on her stomach toward the guards. She tried to find purchase in the rocky terrain but realized she still held a glass vial clenched in her fist. A glance backward told her the same man dragging her away was the one who'd fired the bolt. Both bolts. She flipped her palm to reveal the vial clenched in her hand.

Red.

"Red means dead." Rowena's words echoed distantly in her mind.

The man yanked her roughly toward him and ordered the others to bind her hands and feet. The others seemed hesitant to approach her, to which he shouted, "Do it, now!" Then he leaned over her, asking, "Why haven't you turned? Is that what the Commander deemed so special about you to have us out here for weeks?"

His hate-filled eyes took in the exposed wraithwound on her chest. Mouth widening into a cruel smile, he procured a small blade from his boot and dug it into the blackened flesh there. Pain erupted from the spot, and Lena had to bite down on her tongue to avoid screaming, but to her surprise and his, the knife did not cut her flesh.

The others gathered around to take a closer look. The man who'd finished binding her feet moved closer, a length of rope hanging from his hands intended for her wrists.

"Maybe we can use your flesh as armor when you've finished turning," he said to her, placing a knife at her throat. He waved over a straggler who hadn't originally given chase. "Come here, Bruto, take a look."

The man went to grab her wrist. She had no way of knowing what the vial did, but this was her only chance to escape; she refused to be captured

again. Lena flipped her palm up, showing the blood red vial that had been concealed in her palm.

“Wha—” But the guard didn’t have the opportunity to finish his sentence as Lena shoved it into his mouth with one hand and used her elbow to deliver a strike to his jaw with the other. The crunch of bone on glass assaulted her ears. Red mist poured from the man’s mouth as he screamed.

The pain was swift and excruciating once the vibrantly colored mist touched her skin. Lena tried to scramble backwards, to move away from the red cloud that expanded rapidly, but the bolt in her leg made it difficult. She wiped at her arms and face, trying to get the red mist off her skin but the burning only intensified. Writhing on the floor, Lena opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The edges of her vision began to turn black when she heard Cross’s voice.

“FUCK!” he shouted. If the situation weren’t so dire, she might have smiled at the familiarity of it because he sounded furious. So furious.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-FIVE

The agony disappeared as quickly as it'd begun. Confused by the sudden absence of pain, she opened her eyes. Cross knelt over her, something like annoyance on his face. But the words of protest died on her tongue as she took in his features. Reflected in his sapphire blue eyes were her own, a golden ring bright as flame glowing in her irises. He extended a hand and brushed a lock of hair from her face with a touch so gentle it made her shiver.

She couldn't help but notice his dark lashes, and the light dusting of freckles that covered the bridge of his strong nose and dimpled cheeks. She didn't know how long she swam in those eyes, the expanse of blue and flecks of brown calling to her. She had this intense desire to touch him, and her gaze fell to his lips, parted in what could have been surprise. Awe, maybe.

Lena suddenly remembered there was a bolt protruding from her thigh and sat up, the sudden movement releasing her from whatever pull she'd felt from him. Her hands went straight to her leg, only to realize there was no bolt there. In fact, there was no pain at all. Lena flexed her foot, rotating her ankle, nothing. She patted herself down, feeling for the still-healing cuts from her encounter with the Nychtyra. Nothing.

She turned to Cross, her eyebrows drawn together in confusion, and in his hand, was a ruptured crystal. He'd used the land's rarest and most coveted resource. On a wraith.

Lena's mouth fell open.

"What did you do?" she asked, half shouting.

She was certainly grateful he'd healed her but to use a crystal on a wraith. It seemed blasphemous somehow, and yet, Lena had to remind herself she wasn't entirely sure what she believed about the Goddess.

"I take it you're fine?" Cross smirked and stood.

Lena stood as well, and that was when she noticed the bodies. Faces eaten away, they were more like pools of liquified remains. The guard that fired the bolts had disintegrated entirely; the only thing left was the crossbow. Lena stared at the corpses, not feeling a single ounce of regret.

"I can't believe you pulled the red vial," he said jaw going tense.

"I'm glad I did," Lena retorted. "What would I have done with green or black? White?"

"You almost killed yourself. I had to inject you with the antidote and then use the crystal. You'd lost a lot of blood—"

But Lena stopped listening when he said the word blood—*the eleuth.*

Lena ran, leaving Cross as she sprinted toward the creature. She found it lying on the ground in the same spot. Its fur was matted with blood that appeared to have clotted, but the bolt still protruded from its shoulder. She knelt on the ground before it, assessing how she might tend to its wounds.

Lena knew next to nothing about animal anatomy, but she wasn't about to let that stop her. Reaching her mare, she pulled open the saddle bag, tossing aside her cloak, shirt, and gloves to reach her pack. She rushed back to the creature and readied what she might need. Cross approached and stood nearby in quiet support.

"I'm so sorry," she said to the eleuth. It blinked up at her, trying and failing to lift its tail.

"I have to pull this out. Once that's done, I have to clean the wound," she told it, feeling both obligated to let it know and foolish that she was talking to an animal.

It blinked again, slower this time, and Lena got the sense that it understood. Which likely meant she was losing her mind, and yet, she continued speaking to it.

"Okay, let me set things up and then I can get to work," she said, lining up the supplies.

But when Lena reached for the eleuth, it screeched and thrashed. Lena halted, hands in the air.

"It *is* going to hurt. I'm sorry, but we have to get that out," she said.

Lena reached for the eleuth again, and it screeched a second time, trying and failing to get away from her. Lena couldn't help the tears that stung her eyes. She swallowed thickly, thinking that it might not let her save it, and she wondered briefly if that was how Cross had felt when she'd refused his assistance the night before last.

The eleuth's eyes darted around and landed on her discarded clothes. She turned to look but couldn't identify what it might want. She was just about to try again when it flicked its tail at Cross. Lena pulled back, turning to look at the soldier. He was standing by Kharon, no doubt observing the strange interaction with a solemn look on his face, when the eleuth's tail flicked towards him again.

"You?" she asked indignantly.

"Me?" he asked, appearing just as confused.

"You . . . want *him* to do it?" she asked, turning back to the eleuth.

The creature chittered softly and flicked its tail again. Confusion and more than just a little hurt flared inside her, but she tucked that away. As long as it would allow her to help, she wouldn't question its choice.

"It wants you to do it," she said to Cross, unable to hide the annoyance in her voice.

"I want to help, but I'm not a healer," Cross said hesitantly.

"You are right now," she snapped.

Cross put his hands up in defense, his voice taking on a gentle note. "Of course, I'll do it. You'll just have to guide me."

So, she did. Lena walked Cross through pulling the bolt out of the eleuth's shoulder, ensuring he wouldn't cause the animal more harm, and then cleaning and dressing the wound. She was pleased at how carefully he tended to the creature and followed her instructions.

By the end, the eleuth had fallen asleep after being placed on Lena's cloak.

There was still the matter of the dead guards and finding a place to camp now that the sun was lower in the sky.

"Do you have a plan for where you're going to camp tonight?" he asked, keeping his gaze on the horizon. "There are likely to be other patrols out there."

Lena exhaled through her nose. No, she did not have a plan. She hadn't anticipated the Commander would send men to look for her. Lena thought Vince would have kept her escape to himself, seeing as how the

Commander hadn’t been aware of her presence. Not to mention, without her little companion scouting the skies, she’d be less prepared to face other incoming threats.

“I know where we could camp. It’s secure and on the way to your destination,” he said when she didn’t answer.

Lena considered. Cross had saved her life. Didn’t that mean he was no longer indebted to her? If that was the case, he could kill her at any moment. Technically, he should. And yet, she wasn’t afraid of him. Lena chewed on her lip. Spending another night with Cross would be a risk, but the terrain was unfamiliar, and she didn’t have a better plan.

Lena nodded her agreement, and they packed up. She made Cross bundle the eleuth in his arms like a newborn babe. He didn’t protest and gently cradled the animal in his arm as they rode the rest of the day, at a much slower pace.



A HEAVY SILENCE hung in the air between them, brimming with all the things they left unspoken. Now that he’d repaid his debt, she wasn’t sure why he continued to offer his assistance. Despite her hurt feelings about the way he’d chosen to confront her, she was grateful for his help, but she had to remind herself that while he’d come to their rescue, it was only because he’d had to.

Cross led them through unfamiliar terrain until they reached a more wooded area, viridescent foliage becoming more abundant as they went.

Without the eleuth scouting above, Cross was more vigilant, surveying their surroundings and checking the skies regularly. They rode until they reached a dramatic stone outcrop. Despite the inconsistent sizes of the stones, they looked like building blocks that had been expertly carved by a behemoth blade.

Cross dismounted Kharon and pushed aside a large bush that could have also been a small tree to reveal a hidden passageway.

“It’s leads to a large cave,” he said, leading Kharon inside.

Lena followed, glancing over at Cross to ensure careful handling of the eleuth. She was pleased to see he was being gentle.

Once inside, Lena couldn’t contain her gasp. Blue-white crystals embedded in the walls of the enormous cavern cast an other-worldly glow over the smooth stone surface of the cave and provided enough light for them to see comfortably. Distantly, the unmistakable gurgle of water echoed off the stone walls, serving as a melodic score for the ethereal setting.

“Is that—”

“Yes,” he said, nodding.

“How do you know about this place?” she asked, unable to keep the awe from her voice.

“I found it one night when I was trying to outrun a storm. I’d heard rumors about crystal mines in the area and suspected this might be one. There are tunnels and smaller mines that run through this area and cover quite a large expanse,” he said, offering more detail than he normally would.

“It’s incredible,” she said, taking in the space.

Cross set the eleuth down still bundled in her cloak. She made note of how he took care to spread it out like a blanket on the floor. The creature stirred, cracking a bright orange eye and surveying its new accommodations. Apparently satisfied that all was well and they were safe, it went back to sleep, chittering softly as it nestled further into the heavy fabric.

Lena lay her things close to the eleuth so she could keep an eye on the creature overnight. Satisfied with the placement of her bedroll, she reached up to release the tangle of hair that’d once been a braid and headed towards the spring. Each step felt heavier than the last, but she was determined to glimpse the bubbling waters.

When she finally came upon it, she was stunned by the sheer size of it. Akin to the size of a small lake, the water glowed a soft blue that hinted at the crystals that lined the bottom. Standing at the water’s edge, she decided the allure of the water was too great.

Lena unlaced her boots, stepped out of her pants, and pulled off her shirt, leaving only her under clothes. The cool water felt like a balm to her skin; the bubbling was a sensual massage that worked the exhaustion from her bones and the fog from her mind. She ventured out further into the middle of the spring, gliding onto her back and floating there, letting the feel of weightlessness ease the grief and worry that consumed her thoughts.

A nearing presence alerted her to Cross's company, and she opened her eyes to see him standing at the water's edge, his gaze sweeping over her. At the sight of her attention on him, he averted his eyes but sat, nonetheless.

Keenly aware that her wraithwound was on full display and her undergarments would be completely see-through, she let her body sink under the surface of the water.

"I owe you an apology," he said meeting her eyes.

Lena took in the solemn look on his face. But it was the sincerity in his eyes that showed he meant it.

"I'm so sorry, that wasn't me. You didn't deserve that. I *heard* Row, but I had to be sure because to have lost a soulbound would have meant the loss of their family too."

"What?" Lena said, horrified.

"Sera and Zebos joined for their twins. If one of them dies, one of their daughters dies too. If they both die . . ." he trailed off.

"So, if you hadn't made it out of the woods, does that mean that Kiara —" she asked, unwilling to finish the sentence.

Cross nodded.

"What illness does she have?" Lena asked, unable to stop herself.

"The ageless death," he said.

Lena gasped softly. That was the very illness her grandfather had been studying. Characterized by crimson streaks that originated in the affected limb, they spread slowly until reaching the heart and claiming the person's life. It had been given that moniker after people realized it could kill anyone of any age at any time. If only they'd managed to find her grandfather's journal after he'd passed, she'd likely know much more about it, but alas, it'd gone missing.

"Why did you save me, Lena?" Cross asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

She took in his face once more, noting his expression had shifted. Was that pain in his eyes?

Lena inhaled deeply; it was a question he'd asked before. She hadn't really known how to articulate the answer then, but she did now.

"I found myself at a crossroads and knew I had two choices: I could either choose the monster and live or choose my humanity and die," she said, finally admitting the words out loud.

Cross stared at her, his sapphire eyes glowing in the iridescence of the crystals as he took in the meaning of what she'd admitted. The silence between them seemed to stretch on, growing increasingly charged.

"Thank you for saving my life," he said finally. But she knew he was thanking her on behalf of Kiara, too.

"Today, I don't regret it," she said, a ghost of a smile appearing on her lips.

"What exactly are you looking for in The Whispers?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" she asked softly.

"Why wouldn't it matter?" Cross asked.

"Your debt has been paid. You're free to get back to your family, your wife," she said.

Cross's brows furrowed in confusion.

"Wife . . .? Ah." he said, standing. When he returned, he had two pieces of parchment in his hand. Unfolding the first, he turned it around and showed it to Lena. "This is Mirelle, Kiara's mother. And *this* is Kiara."

He unfolded another piece of parchment, so worn it was torn at the edges.

Oh.

"I would like to ensure you reach your destination safely. It's the least I can do," he said.

Lena considered this. But she was also aware she had previously considered the same proposition, and it had not gone well.

"I've made it this far. I think I can complete the journey on my own from here," she said, feeling surer of herself with every word she spoke.

"Please, Lena," he said.

"It's your job to kill wraiths. To kill monsters," she said delicately.

"It's my job to kill those who might bring more misery and suffering to our world. You still have agency," he said, vehemently.

But they both knew her control was tenuous at best.

"For now," she said.

Cross didn't answer, dropping his gaze. Lena sighed.

"The reason I remain in control of my body is because I have help. I think it's some sort of spell. But I don't know how much longer it will last," she said.

"Magic? How?" he asked.

“My brother. I don’t exactly know how he’s doing it, but he’s weak. There is a Seer rumored to live in The Whispers who might be able to help me get some answers. To help him,” she said.

As if sensing Lena wouldn’t elaborate, he nodded and, after a moment, strode away, leaving Lena to her soak in the spring. She couldn’t help but watch the muscles of his back flex through the pulled fabric of his tunic as he did.

When she’d scrubbed enough of the day’s dirt and grime from her skin and hair, she reached the water’s edge only to remember she hadn’t brought any spare clothes with her. Silently cursing her impulsive decision to bathe in the spring she debated how she might return to her pack for a spare set of clothes when she noticed one of Cross’s tunics had been laid out by her pile of filthy clothes. A warm sensation filled her heart as she pushed herself out of the spring and dressed quickly.

Once she was tolerably warm and dry, she settled next to the eleuth, watching its small chest rise and fall. As she settled in, she wondered where it had come from and why it’d chosen to help her. It was such a strange creature with a heightened degree of intelligence and intuition . . .

“Lena?”

The tenor of Cross’s voice was low and rough. It stirred something in her belly, causing heat to form between her thighs. She rolled over to see Cross staring at her from across the cavern. She wasn’t sure what it was about his stare that stripped her bare and left her feeling so exposed, vulnerable in a way she hadn’t been in years.

“You’re not a monster.”

The earnest look on his face made her throat close up and chest feel tight.

“Aren’t I?” she whispered.

“I’m not sure what horrors you’ve endured since that thing attacked you, but I’ve seen evil. You are neither of those things. Even with that wraithwound, you are more human than others I’ve met.” The gentleness with which he said it struck her, and she struggled to fight back tears.

“I have committed atrocities,” she said, barely able to speak the words aloud.

“As have I. That doesn’t mean we can’t yet upset the course of the harm we’ve caused by contributing something good to this forsaken realm.”

Lena let his words sink in. It was true she might yet contribute something positive. She considered Nora's words about helping to educate the Healer's Organization on wraiths. Even so, that would never absolve her from the things she'd done.

Would Cross still be able to say that about her if he knew?

She could only nod in return, the emotion too overwhelming to produce any more words.

With that, he settled on his own bedroll and turned over, leaving his back exposed. The gesture of trust, albeit foolish, did not go unnoticed. Lena only hoped if the wraith attempted to surface again, he'd be ready.

Willing the emotion she felt to subside, she couldn't help the gratitude that bloomed inside her. With one last look at his large form, she turned back over to keep an eye on the eleuth. A sense of peace settling over her, Lena let the bubbling of the spring lull her to sleep.



FOR ONCE, Lena wasn't the one waking up in a panic. She sat up, her gaze zeroing in on Cross, who flinched and jerked on his bedroll.

"Cederic," he mumbled in his sleep.

Lena's sleep addled mind slowly cleared, and she debated whether she should wake the soldier herself or if he'd soon wake on his own.

"You're staring," Cross said from across the cavern.

Lena startled and noted that she had indeed been staring.

"I—You were having a nightmare, I think," she said by way of explanation.

Cross stretched his neck and sat up, leaning into the stone wall at his back. The soft glow of the crystals highlighted his strong jaw and the angular planes of his face. Even so, his features appeared softer somehow. It made him look more handsome and less *death soldier*, she realized.

"Something we both have experience with, it seems," he said.

"Seems so," she said, lying back onto her bedroll. "Who is Cederic?"

At the question, Cross's eyes widened almost imperceptibly before he schooled his features into a mask of indifference.

"Someone from my past," was all he offered.

She wasn’t sure if she was influenced by her own boldness, the ungodly hour, or the slight sense of anonymity the darkened cavern offered, but the question found its way out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“Do you—do you see their faces?” she asked.

Cross seemed to think for a moment, staring off behind her before he answered.

“Perhaps, not the ones you’d expect. I let a wraith go once, a young man. He hadn’t turned completely and begged me to let him disappear into the Overgrown. I took him at his word, only to learn he’d gone back to his village,” he said, anger flickering in his gaze.

“How did you find out?” she asked.

“I followed his energy, or echo, back there several hours later to find he’d slaughtered half his village. Every time I disposed of a wraith after that, it was those faces I saw,” he said.

“I’m so sorry.” Lena considered how Cross must have felt when he was saved by a wraith, witnessed the turn, and then was forced to endure both the danger and the risk of keeping her alive. At least until he repaid his debt. “Were you tasked with investigating an echo in Virdeen?”

Lena thought back to the attack on her village and the strange creature the energy seemed to have lured there and to MontTier as well.

Cross’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes. How do you—that’s where you got that?” he said dropping his gaze to her chest and shoulder.

She nodded.

Cross looked away, seeming to get lost in thought. Thinking the conversation might be over, she shifted on her bedroll, planning to close her eyes. But then he spoke.

“How’s your friend there?” he asked, using the same term to refer to the eleuth that she’d previously used.

She turned to look at the small creature who still slept soundly at her side. “Better, I think. Thank you for helping us today.”

He gave her a curt nod before he too shifted to lie on his bedroll.

“You’re welcome.”

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CHAPTER

FORTY-SIX

Soft chittering nearby roused Lena from sleep, and when she opened her eyes, it was the eleuth's bright orange gaze that greeted her. She propped herself up on her arms and conducted a visual assessment. Its breathing looked stable, its eyes were bright, and its movement seemed a bit stiff but unhindered. The relief she felt nearly brought her to tears. The eleuth chittered again and then scampered toward the cavern opening, albeit a little slower than she was accustomed to seeing it move. She watched it go, feeling lighter than she had in days.

She sat up and ran her hands through her hair, frowning at the coarse texture that seemed more prominent on the left side of her head. Yawning, she looked around and didn't see Cross, so she wandered back to the spring. She was still working her fingers through her hair when movement by the water caught her attention.

Lena froze mid-step, mouth falling open at the sight of Cross exiting the spring naked. Lena promptly clamped her jaw shut and spun so quickly she made herself dizzy.

"I'm sorry," they said in unison.

"I thought you were still sleeping," Cross said.

"I was—" she started saying. *Wait.*

Lena turned on reflex and then realized she hadn't given him enough time to get dressed. Cross was pulling his pants on. She averted her eyes immediately but not before catching another glimpse of, well, everything. But it was the blisters and sores on his arm that she wanted to look at. She couldn't help herself; every injury was like a call to action.

"I'm sorry, just let me know when I can look," she said.

“Again? You mean?” he asked, amusement evident in his tone.

Lena’s cheeks reddened, and her pulse grew faster.

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to get a look at that,” she said pointing in the direction where she thought his arm might be.

She could see in her periphery that he turned to look behind him.

“I’m dressed,” he said, his voice still edged with amusement.

Lena sucked in a breath and pulled herself together before she turned and met his gaze.

“Your arm,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady, nonchalant, while trying not to stare at the sculpted muscles of his chest and abdomen. Cross turned his arm to give her a closer look. But she wasn’t looking at his arm. EverGods, he hadn’t even had time to dry off. She watched as a single droplet of water trailed down his pectoral, over the ridges of his abdomen, and into his trousers via the defined “V” of his obliques.

“Needleworms,” he said slowly, tracking her gaze.

She snapped her head up to find him staring at her, eyes falling to her lips.

“I heard those stings are . . . exhilarating, uhm, excruciating,” Lena said shaking her head to dislodge the thought about what it might feel like to trace the exact path of that water droplet with her fingertips.

“I can think of a few other things that might be more exhilarating,” he said, eyes lifting from lips to meet hers.

Oh.

“What about those?” she asked in an attempt to change the subject, and yet she found herself taking a step closer to him.

He held out his arm in invitation, and she finished closing the distance between them. She lifted his arm, examining the inflamed pinpricks on his wrist, and was fascinated by the little zaps of current that ran from his skin into her fingertips. She looked up, searching his face to see if he felt it too, but there was no sign he’d detected the phenomenon. She chalked it up to the numbness in her hands.

“Those are from the bracil. Some potions you use independently like red, but others require access to the bloodstream. I used boost yesterday,” he said.

“Is it painful?” she asked, rubbing her thumbs across his skin on the periphery of the swollen pinpricks.

“Nothing is as painful as red,” he said, amusement returning to his voice. Mesmerized, she watched the mirth dancing in his eyes. EverGods, he was stunning. Lena had to fight the urge to run her hands down his chest.

“Have you ever mixed any of the vials?” she asked.

“No. We’ve specifically been advised *not* to do that. There’s no telling what could happen, but it’s likely to be worse than liquified remains,” he said with a smirk.

“Killjoy,” she said, gently releasing his arm from her grasp. It was her turn to stare at his mouth. His lips parted slightly, and her stomach flipped. Lena tore her gaze away, returning her attention to the arm with the needleworm stings.

“Let me know if you want me to treat that,” she said.

“There’s no need to waste your supplies on it,” he said.

“All right,” Lena said casually before stepping around him and heading to the spring.

She briefly considered throwing herself in to ease the throbbing between her legs but settled for splashing her face with the cool water instead.



Lena and Cross collected their things in silence. Once the horses were tended to and packed, they led them outside. Thick, heavy clouds hung low in the sky, obscuring the sun, and Lena was happily surprised to learn that it had snowed overnight. The absence of the emerald broach on her cloak was painfully evident as she pulled it on along with her gloves.

“Are you sure I can’t accompany you on your journey?” Cross asked, the muscles of his jaw tense.

“I think I can make it there on my own,” Lena said, meeting his gaze.

For a long moment, silence filled the space between them, but then a screech rang out from a tree nearby. It wasn’t a warning screech though, more of a protest. When she didn’t respond, the eleuth scampered down and sat on its hind legs facing Lena.

“Don’t think I haven’t figured out what you did,” she said, coming down onto one knee.

The eleuth turned to look at Cross and then screeched again, more softly this time.

Lena looked up at Cross, who shrugged his shoulders.

“You must have seen him from up there,” Lena said, pointing at the sky, “and you didn’t tell me.”

The eleuth chittered and took a step toward Cross. Lena gasped softly and looked between the two. She was trying very hard not to take that personally when Cross came to the creature’s defense.

“I don’t think it has any interest in me. It’s trying to keep you safe, and it sees me as a means to do that. There could be other patrols out there if the units we ran into managed to get a falcon out before they approached, and you don’t know what you’ll find when we get to The Whispers. Not to mention that I can’t be sure whether Taryk has continued to follow or not.”

“What does he want?” Lena asked. Was he intent on hunting her, too?

“I haven’t quite figured that out yet. It’s troubling,” Cross said.

Lena mulled things over. With Taryk likely still on their trail, the possibility of other patrols, and the uncertainty of what she might find in The Whispers, she couldn’t disagree with him. She also knew the eleuth wouldn’t let Cross near her if it felt he was a danger. Despite him being a wraith hunter, she felt safe with him. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to have him accompany her.

Sighing, she agreed.

The eleuth screeched, a noise of approval this time, and scampered over to her, rubbing its head briefly into her hand, which hung loosely at her side. Lena’s eyes went wide, and she looked at Cross, who gave her a nod and a hint of a smile on his face. She couldn’t help the lump that formed in her throat. Lena swallowed thickly, trying to dispel the emotion. The eleuth simply crinkled its nose and blinked at her. Having settled that, they mounted their horses and went on their way.



THEY RODE AT A STEADY PACE, headed northwest toward The Whispers, a region long since abandoned due to strange sightings, mysterious disappearances, and most notably: the strange whispers that were said to drive anyone who dared enter mad.

Unease slithered through Lena’s gut at the thought of entering the cursed land, but Ada and Eduard had told her The Collector resided there and that he had access to a Seer, so she knew at least two people resided in the area. Just then she remembered Laney and Riley intended to travel there and hoped they’d made it safely.

Hours passed, the falling snow slowly wiping the terrain free of any discernible features, yet Cross was not deterred. Lena’s thoughts drifted to Henry and the great black tendrils that had attacked them. Lena sent up a silent prayer that he was okay. The wraith still hadn’t tried to take over again, and she briefly wondered what it was about sleep that triggered the infection to lash out.

“There,” Cross called out, pointing to a towering structure in the distance.

A plateau, Lena realized as it came into view. She took it in, the peculiar hue of stone that was not quite orange, and not quite red, seemed to serve as a warning to outsiders. As they drew closer, a long, narrow passageway revealed itself through the stone.

Cross scanned the terrain, eyes drifting upward periodically. The eleuth, unable to fly, currently lay cuddled against Lena’s chest in a makeshift sling she’d put together. Dead trees protruded from cracks in the stone, limbs stretched upward like clawed hands awaiting the flakes that drifted down from above.

Once they reached the entrance of the passageway, Cross brought Kharon to a stop.

“We’re here,” he said. Kharon snorted and pawed at the ground. Cross bent forward and pet the beast.

“Is he nervous?” Lena asked. She was also waiting to see if her shoulder would prickle, but the sensation did not come.

“No,” Cross said with a chuckle. “He’s annoyed we’ve stopped.”

“He really is the perfect horse for you, isn’t he?” she said, hoping the humor would lessen the unease in her gut.

“That’s quite the compliment,” Cross said to Kharon, bending down and patting his side. The horse snorted in reply. “I’ll go first; you stay close. Once we’re through, we can look for your Seer.”

“Have you ever been in there?” she asked.

“No, I—Are you stalling?” he asked, amused.

EverGods, this man sees everything.

“No,” she lied, “just trying to get an idea of what I should expect.”

Cross lifted a brow, no doubt smug in the fact Lena was expressing some hesitation, which likely meant she was glad he’d requested to accompany her.

“Let’s go find your Seer,” he said, nudging Kharon.

The second they crossed into the passageway, the air seemed to shift, becoming somehow thinner and thicker at the same time. The passage was much narrower than she’d originally thought, wide enough for only one rider. The towering walls of stone at either side closed them in, making her feel claustrophobic. At different points the passageway opened up, but it was often blocked by fallen boulders or decaying logs. Some of the obstacles took longer to clear than others, forcing Lena and Cross to dismount to determine a way around them. Despite their progress, she couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. She knew Cross felt it too by his rigid posture and the visible tendons in his neck.

When they finally exited the passageway, they were greeted by an abandoned village surrounded by an enormous stone formation that welled up and curved over itself, like a cresting wave. Lena took it all in, her head tilting back to capture the enormity of the stone wave and the peculiar markings etched into the stone. It looked as if a gargantuan needleworm had borne its way through the rock. It went as far as the eye could see on the north side while the rest of the area was closed in, surrounded by towering red-orange stone.

Nestled at the foot of the curved stone were crumbling structures, the snow softening the edges of cracked roof tiles and blunt bricks. The skeletal remains of an entire town sprawled before them. Winter-hearty plants grew out of broken windows, old garden beds, and in the middle of the road, their serrated leaves a warning for people and animals to keep their distance. Dramatic, towering stalks grew from the center of the browning plants, empty seed pods adorning the tops. The small homes stood in different stages of decay and destruction.

Cross urged Kharon onward, and Lena followed, her mare huffing loudly. As soon as they crossed into the deserted city, an eerie silence met them before the whispers began.

. . . the death of many . . . gone too soon . . . where did they go . . .

. . . killer . . . monster . . . murderer . . .

THE SOUNDS SEEMED to snake around them, growing louder as they slunk through the air.

"Do you—" Lena started.

"Yes," Cross answered.

A chill crept up her spine as the whispers continued. Perhaps this place truly was cursed, and she'd been sent here on a fool's errand.

. . . their flesh . . . bones will rot . . . decay . . .
. . . coward . . . murderer . . . thief . . .

"LET'S KEEP MOVING," he said.

"All right," Lena replied, although she couldn't quite keep the tremble out of her voice.

Navigating between the crumbling structures, Lena did her best to ignore the snaking voices that called her names and revealed truths she hadn't yet faced. The eleuth chittered softly, and Lena looked down to see two piercing orange eyes blinking up at her from the sling.

"Do you hear them too?" she whispered as they continued their exploration of the abandoned city.

Cross held a hand up, motioning for her to stop. Dismounting, he strode to a small home that still stood and disappeared inside. When he returned, concern creased his brow.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Bones. Scattered about inside," he said.

Lena shuddered, wondering just how many of the dilapidated stone cottages held the remains of lives past.

She was just about to ask Cross what they should do next when she noticed a trail of black shadow that seemed to slink around just outside her field of vision. Cross turned slowly, apparently having noticed the same thing.

The whispers seemed to intensify, shifting in volume.

. . . wraith . . . Wraith . . . WRAITH . . .

LENA SPUN around on her horse, chasing the sound as a sense of foreboding creeped into her gut.

“Let’s keep going,” Cross said, once more seated upon his steed.

The sun, which had been hidden by the low hanging clouds, had since sunk below the curved stone structure, creating deep shadows between the decrepit residences. Lena’s heart hammered in her chest as they worked their way deeper into the city, finally reaching what must have once been the city square. A round, three-tiered fountain rose before them, the once brilliant stone now laden with cracks. Atop the highest tier was the figure of a woman, arms open as if she were waiting for an embrace. Long hair flowed down her back and over her shoulders but had also been strategically placed over her bare breasts and other sensitive areas.

The whispers seemed to come from everywhere now, assaulting her ears and her heart with horrid names and accusations. Lena swallowed down the dread building in the pit of her stomach as she realized they might never find the Seer in this gods-forsaken place. Just as she was about to express her resignation, she spotted a plume of smoke rising in the distance that disappeared into the sagging clouds.

She and Cross looked at each other, and she knew they were both wondering the same thing: was that where the Seer resided or was it a lure of another sort? She caught another glimpse of inky black in her periphery and gulped. While she had acquired the ability to see death, these black shadows weren’t the same as the aura of the dying.

Cross gave her a look, seemingly unwilling to speak aloud. *What do you want to do?* he seemed to say.

Fear churned in Lena’s gut, making her legs feel weak, but she hadn’t come this far to retreat, especially not when they’d found a sign of life. Turning her mare towards the smoke, she urged the horse forward, working her way through the streets until they came upon a small cottage.

Winter blooming flowers poked up from the snow in a garden box just outside the window, and the mat at the door appeared to have been cleared of snow. The light of a fire cast an orange glow on the snow-covered ground, giving the appearance of a cozy and well-kept interior.

Cross dismounted his horse and walked over to help Lena dismount, so as not to disturb the creature cradled in the sling. Her feet had just hit the ground when a woman stepped out of the small cottage. She had short

brown hair that floated just above her shoulders and wore a thin, black cloak. She halted the moment her gaze landed on Lena.

In a movement almost too quick to detect, she pulled a dagger free from her thigh and flung it directly at Lena's face.

Cross's sword split the air in front of her, deflecting what would have been a fatal blow. In an instant, his sword roared to life, the purple black flames so bright they overtook the soft orange glow from the window. Jaw clenched and muscles tight, as if awaiting retaliation from the woman, he stood in front Lena, sword angled to strike. The eleuth had also come to her defense, jumping out of the sling and transforming before the woman, its claws and teeth on display as it hissed.

Black eyes locked on Lena, undeterred by the threat of death. "You killed them, didn't you?"

"What?" Lena managed.

The woman pulled a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and threw it at the ground in front of Cross. He bent to pick it up, not taking his eyes off the woman and passed the damp piece of parchment back to her. Lena slowly unwrapped it to reveal a drawing of a woman standing near a splintered tree, hand outstretched to brace herself on it. Lena's world cracked and shattered, the pieces she'd managed to put together crumbling before her.

It was a drawing of her. One that she'd seen before. But when she'd first seen it on the worn writing desk in Ada and Eduard's cabin, she didn't understand it was a depiction of her right when she'd arrived at the meadow. The horrific scene replayed in her mind more vividly than ever before. Eduard approaching her on the path. Ada's body bent over his as he lay dead on the ground. Every part of her shut down. Even the whispers seemed to cease.

"Yes. I killed them," she heard herself say.

Cross didn't so much as flinch, the blazing sword unwavering in his grip.

But then a familiar face with long, sandy-brown hair, striking features, and high cheekbones emerged from the cottage behind the woman. Riley took up the spot beside her and slipped her hand into the woman's, squeezing it gently.

"That's the woman who saved my life, Taya," Riley said, voice low but still easy for Lena to hear.

Taya turned to look at Riley, searching her face.

“As I understood it, you saved her life too,” Taya said.

“Taya, please,” said familiar voice. Leonid emerged from the cabin. Once he caught sight of Lena, he paused.

“It’s you,” he said, voice filled with surprise.

Cross extinguished and sheathed his sword but maintained his position in front of her. The eleuth shifted and then scurried up her back and perched on her shoulder. For the amount of damage it could cause to larger predators, she’d thought it would have weighed more. Nevertheless, she felt comforted by its presence.

“I take it you’ve come for some answers?” Leonid asked.

Lena nodded once, the movement foreign in her disconnected state.

“Good. We have questions as well. You’re welcome to enter, but . . .” he said, choosing his words carefully, “in your state of transition you would have to agree to confinement.”

“What do you mean by confinement?” she asked.

“A cell,” Taya said firmly.

Lena exhaled a shaky breath through her nose. She’d done everything in her power to avoid being locked in a cage. But considering how she’d almost lost control in Lythara, she thought better of protesting. For Henry, she would do it.

“What if . . . what if she had a guardian like some of the others?” Riley asked, assessing the warrior.

“Soulbounds are not welcome here,” Taya said, clearly appalled at the suggestion. Leonid eyed Cross, clearly mulling over Riley’s suggestion. But Lena didn’t know if the soldier could stay, or if he’d want to. Surely, he had to return to his duty.

“I’m not sure—” she started.

“I’ll do it,” Cross said, cutting her off.

“No. You don’t have to—” she tried again.

“I’ll do it,” he repeated.

“Then it’s settled,” Leonid said, exchanging a meaningful glance with Taya despite her obvious objection. “Come, my muscles are already getting stiff.”

“And the horses?” Cross asked, looking back at Kharon.

Leonid gave him a long look. “Someone will be out shortly to lead them inside, Cross.”

A blink was the only sign Cross had been caught off guard. He turned to face Lena, conducting one of his silent assessments, but whatever he'd gleaned, he didn't voice it. After grabbing their belongings, they headed for the door.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-SEVEN

Once inside, Lena realized the house was merely staged to look lived in. A worn sofa sat in front of the fireplace, there was a small round table with four wooden chairs in the kitchen, and a desk with blank pages scattered over the top sat under the window. The exposed shelves in the back of the cottage were empty with not a single personal touch on any of the available surfaces.

Stopping at the small round table, Leonid pulled forth a large bottle of water. After pouring two glasses, he reached for an ampule in his pocket and placed a drop of the clear liquid into each glass. Holding them out to Cross and Lena, he said, “Here, drink. This will negate the side effects of the pollen.”

“Pollen?” Cross asked.

“The pollen from the sighing stalks works as a hallucinogenic that causes those who inhale it to hear words or phrases, usually of whatever torments that individual. This is the antidote.”

Cross sniffed the glass, eyes narrowing slightly before throwing it back. After a moment, he nodded at Lena. She drank most of it, leaving about a third. She offered the rest to the eleuth, who lapped it up from the glass, just in case it too had been affected.

Collecting their glasses, Riley put them into a sink and then extended her arm towards the back of the cottage where a sloped passageway descended into the ground beneath them. Lena thought of the maze of tunnels at the manor house where she’d first met Leonid and paused, hesitant to descend into darkness once more.

“Where are we going?” she asked, peering into the tunnel below.

“I thought we might sit down and talk. In my study, if you’re open to it,” he said.

Cross stepped closer, silently filling the space beside her as they began their descent. The dirt path eventually gave way to solid stone and the darkness to a blue-white glow. Encrusted with the same blue-white crystals that’d been embedded in the walls of the cavern, the light they emitted was soothing. Cross’s presence at her side made her feel more at ease and she tried to focus on that instead of the questions that filled her head.

As Leonid led them down the long passageway, she couldn’t help but notice that even though his gait was steady, he walked with a subtle limp. The injury hadn’t been treated properly, then, or perhaps it had been treated too late.

He stopped in front of a narrow wooden door, unlocking it with keys he pulled from his belt, and held it open for them. A small fire smoldered in a hearth toward the back of a space lined with overstuffed shelves and so many books. Plush rugs were layered over each other in contrasting colors and mixed patterns. At the center of the space was a long wooden table with mismatched chairs abandoned haphazardly around it, as if the meeting held in the room prior to their arrival had ended abruptly. Hand drawn sketches of plants covered many of the exposed surfaces, and peculiar trinkets sat out amongst the books.

Leonid walked over to the fire and fed another log into it.

“If it gets too hot, you’ll let me know?” he asked, addressing Lena.

Lena nodded and walked towards the table where Leonid gestured for them to sit.

“I must say, part of me never expected I would see you again, and yet another part of me hoped,” he said. “I dare say we’ve been waiting for you.”

“What do you mean you’ve been waiting for me?” she asked, suddenly feeling exposed.

“Taya. She’d seen a half-turned wraith would end up here, but we had no way of knowing who you’d be or even why you’d come.”

Lena’s heart sank as her suspicion was confirmed. It made sense that she would have known about Ada and Eduard and that Lena had killed them. She’d likely sketched the drawing after seeing the vision.

“Have you come for assistance in delaying the turn?” he asked.

“No, I—” she started, unsure of what to say.

“Have you come to help then? That you have yet to turn completely is nothing short of miraculous. Perhaps we can apply what we learn to help the others.”

“The others?” she asked slowly, the exhaustion she felt battling with her comprehension.

“Yes. We’ve had some success in slowing the progression of the infection with the treatment we’ve developed, but it’s not enough,” Leonid said.

“Treatment?” Her voice sounded hollow.

Nora’s words echoed in her mind as shame crept up her neck. They thought she was here to help.

The hope on Leonid’s face made her stomach lurch because the truth was, she had come to help herself. To help Henry. She’d never imagined there might be others out there who were still alive, let alone to warrant such a set up. The precautions, the secrecy, and apparently healers and caretakers were all trying to help find a cure.

Then suspicion and doubt crept in, warring with the disgust she felt for herself and what appeared to be a noble cause. Was Leonid just another person who would try to use her like the Healer’s Organization had tried to do? Would she end up in a cell to be experimented on like the missing maidens? She didn’t know these people, and in Reimar, extending trust before it was earned was an excellent way to get yourself killed or locked in a cage.

“I’m not sure how I might be of help to you,” she said, shifting in her seat.

“Will you let me show you?” Leonid asked.

Cross looked over at her, the message clear in his eyes: *It’s your choice. I’ll support whatever you decide.*

She was so close to finding answers, perhaps she could offer some insights, and maybe in turn, *somehow*, Taya would agree to help with her mother’s diary. She had to remind herself she wasn’t alone. Cross was with her, the eleuth was with her, and together they would ensure her safety.

Lena nodded slowly, and a smile appeared on Leonid’s face. He led them from the room and further into the passageway. Crystals lit their way, becoming more numerous the further down they went.

He turned down another passageway that veered left and opened to an enormous space beyond. A dining hall. The soft murmur of conversation

melded with clinks and tings of silverware jousting with metal trays. Each of the large wooden tables was full of people, some young, some old, and others in between. Only a few weary faces looked up to examine the newcomers, but most were focused on their meals or each other.

Cross's expression was unreadable as he stared into the room beyond, taking in the faces of those whose gaze snagged on his.

"Many of the families whose loved ones survived the infection chose to stay, and we do our best to accommodate them," Leonid said and continued past the arched entrance.

They walked a bit further, the temperature around them dropping as they continued to descend. Finally, he approached another door and knocked.

A small man stood inside, very much in contrast to the cavernous space. This one was full of glass jars, vials full of colorful liquids, steaming crucibles, and so many plants. Papers filled with sketches covered many of the exposed surfaces. Most of them depicted plants, while others contained scribbles or strings of numbers, but all were stained in one way or another. Lena recognized the perfect circle of a teacup on one of the papers, while another sported red tinged drops.

"Dauen, this is Lena and her friend, Cross. Would you mind showing them the serum you and the others have been working on?" Leonid asked, a hint of pride in his voice.

"Oh, yes, yes," Dauen said shuffling towards the center of the room. He was hunched over slightly, probably from too many hours spent poring over his work. As he shuffled over, Lena caught a glimpse of the tattoo inked on his hand, almost concealed by the dark tone of his skin. A twisted letter "S" curled over a long thin letter "H," indicating he'd matriculated from Reimar's Schola of Healing, the innovative and experimental academy. Her mother's hand had sported the same marking since she'd been a part of one of the last classes to graduate from the school before the city fell.

Dauen reached the center of the room and pointed to a series of glass jars and vials that were connected by thin tubing suspended on metal stands. At the bottom of a particularly large jar were what appeared to be ground herbs. The solution the herbs were being steeped in was siphoned off into another container, and the trace of green from the original solution had leached away. She followed the connective tubing between the jars and

vials to find the final product: a viscous clear liquid that dripped into an ampule.

“We start with leaves of mystara, which has uses for things like sedation, pain management, and has a mild paralytic effect. After a series of complicated dilutions, we found that it was effective in slowing the rate of transformation for those infected by wraiths,” he said succinctly. “We think the healing properties of the plant bind to the infection and slow it down.”

Lena was fascinated, staring at the complicated set-up of jars, vials, and tubes and the process of dilution that yielded such a miraculous substance.

“How did you come to discover that this particular process would yield viable results?” she asked, unable to help herself.

“We had some help. The rest was a lot of trial and error,” he said, smiling sadly.

Cross stared at the medicine collecting slowly in the vial, shoulders tense. Lena wondered if the possibility of a cure shifted his perspective on his oath as a soulbound.

“Thank you,” Leonid interjected when the silence stretched between them, “we’ll let you get back to it.”

Lena nodded, tearing her gaze away from the work that was being done in the fully functioning lab. Lena had only ever heard of the labs at Schola from her mother, but seeing one in person stirred the healer inside her. Cross didn’t so much as look at the old healer before he turned and strode toward the door.

“There is one last thing I’d like to show you,” Leonid said, holding the door open for them.

Leonid led them down passageway after passageway. Lena lost track of how many turns they’d taken, but it didn’t escape her that they were still descending further into the earth where it continued to get colder and the blue-white crystals grew scarce. Finally, they reached a metal gate that sealed off the passageway. The rusted bars were as thick as her arms, and at the center was a solid metal door. Leonid reached for a barely lit torch on the wall and held it up to the gate’s lock. Using the keys on his belt, he unlocked the heavy door and dragged it open. Stepping past the threshold, he beckoned them forward, but Lena hesitated.

“What’s in there?” she asked.

Was this where they intended to put her? She stared beyond the threshold and into the darkness. And then she felt a peculiar tug in her gut,

something inside beckoning her in. To step beyond the dim glow of the torch. She found she already knew the answer.

“The people, Lena,” he said, extending the torch to the space behind him. “It’s unfortunate we must keep them down here, but it keeps them safe and us safe too.”

He turned to walk further into the depthless dark.

Lena looked to Cross, wondering when she’d come to trust him so deeply. He nodded. He wouldn’t let them cage her down here. Tentatively, she stepped past the threshold and followed Leonid. Cells lined both sides of the passageway, and she realized there must be hundreds of them, going back as far as the eye could see.

He led her to one of the cells near the opening and held up the torch. As her eyes adjusted, she spotted a woman crouched toward the back of the space.

“She was just brought in here yesterday. Asked to be brought down here actually,” Leonid said softly. “Laney. A friend has come to see you.”

Lena’s blood ran cold.

“Laney?” Lena repeated, the word both familiar and foreign on her tongue.

At the sound of her name, Laney looked up and approached the bars. It was all Lena could do to hold in her gasp of horror as Laney drew closer, squinting against the dim light of the torch.

“Lena? Is that you?” Her voice was partially distorted, but then she cleared her throat, and it was Laney’s smiling voice. “You made it! It’s so nice to see you again.”

Lena started to approach, but Leonid held out a hand. When she looked back to Laney, her face had changed. The light was gone from her eyes. Instead they’d gotten cloudy, the color absent from her irises. On instinct, Lena took a step back and stumbled, but Cross gripped her elbow, steadying her.

“That’s why she requested to be brought down here. She didn’t want to be a danger once she realized the turn had truly taken hold,” Leonid said.

“But—” she started.

“We should go. They find the light disturbing and can become agitated,” Leonid said and began walking towards the door.

Lena stood rooted to the spot. That was Laney in that cell, turning into a wraith right before her eyes.

“Lena,” Cross said softly, but she didn’t want to look at him, knowing what she’d see written on his face: *There’s nothing we can do for her right now.*

Reluctantly she turned to follow Leonid, and as she did, she caught sight of others who’d wandered out from the back of their cells. They looked like creatures from the darkest corners of her imagination, but there was something different about them. The energy they gave off was similar to Laney’s but different. She didn’t have time to contemplate it further as Cross’s question cut through her thoughts.

“How long do they survive down here?” he asked.

“The serum has done wonders for slowing down the course of the transformation, but it varies. Those who develop the ability to resurface from within themselves fare better. But once they stop eating, they don’t live very long,” Leonid said.

Heart hollow, she followed Leonid through the gate. Cross’s face was unreadable, and she couldn’t help but wonder what he might be thinking. Leonid didn’t lead them the same way they’d come in. Taking a corridor on the left, they walked on, the crystals growing in number as their path sloped upward slightly. Then, the vibrant sound of a child’s giggles reached her. She knew Cross had heard it too because he stiffened.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Ah, that’s likely Lilith and her mother,” he said walking a little further.

Stopping in front of another solid metal door, albeit a much smaller one, he knocked on a small, sealed window at the center. It slid open, and inside was a small bed and children’s toys.

“Sorry, are we being too loud?” a soft female voice said, a note of mirth evident in her tone.

“Not at all, Brin, I just wanted you and Lily to meet a new friend, Lena. She’s come to help.” Waving at Lena to step toward the window, Leonid stepped aside. Lena stepped forward, forcing a smile to her face, and Brin moved away allowing her a view of Lily.

“Lily, come meet Lena,” Brin said.

A little girl, about the age of six, dressed in a simple cotton dress walked over and hid behind her mother’s leg. She had long, chestnut brown hair that curled naturally at the ends. On her face, black veins branched from her jaw, up her cheek, and toward her eye while others ran down her neck beyond the neckline of her dress. One of her eyes was a stunning

amber color while the other was milky white. She brought up a small hand to wave, also covered in black veins.

“Hi, Lily,” Lena said, forcing the words out beyond the shock she felt. “Are you playing a game?”

Lily shook her head. Her mother caressed the little girl’s hair, waiting for her to answer.

“We’re reading her favorite book,” Brin said, “it’s a funny one, huh?”

The little girl nodded.

“Brin, we’ll let you get back to it. Oh, and Riley will be by later to bring Lily some biscuits,” Leonid said. After waving, the window in the door slid shut, and Leonid started walking again. “Brin and Lily are recent arrivals, but it won’t be long until Lily will have to be moved below. We try to make people as comfortable as we can when they arrive, especially the children, but . . .”

Leonid continued talking, but Lena was no longer listening. Before she knew it, she was standing in front of the door to the study once more, having no idea how she got there. Once inside, she couldn’t think past the shame burning on her neck and the pit of guilt in her stomach. There were so many people locked in those cells. So many people who were withering away slowly.

“So, you see, Lena, anything you could tell us about the attack, or the course of the infection, but most importantly how you’ve managed to survive it could be the key to helping those people down there, or those more fortunate like Lily,” he said.

She couldn’t imagine telling them about how she’d ingested her brother’s soul, the people she’d put at risk in Enora, and those she had killed, and yet, she so desperately needed to see what was in her mother’s diary. She needed to know if there was information in there about how to control the infection because if there were, then she’d have time to find a way to free Henry’s soul.

“What would be required of me?” she asked instead.

“We’d ask that you work with Dauen to provide as much information as possible and some specimens for him to look at.”

“Am I to stay in a cell below then?” she asked, afraid she already knew the answer.

“No, not below. You’d be set up in your own room. Adjoining rooms,” he clarified, glancing at Cross. “Although yours would be locked.”

“Okay,” Lena said slowly, having made up her mind. “I’ll help, but I would request some help in return.”

“What is it you need help with?” he asked.

“I need to find a way to control the infection. Make it go dormant.”

“Make it go dormant? But haven’t you already accomplished that? You stand here now as you, not as a wraith.”

“I—I have help, but when it runs out, the wraith will be free to take over.”

Leonid’s eyes went round. “Magic?”

“Something like that. My mother’s diary is said to contain the information to help me, but it requires a Seer to open it.”

It was Leonid’s turn to consider what she’d said.

“Ah, I see. Well, you are welcome to work with Dauen and trial the serum. As for the diary, I will talk to Taya, but I can’t make you any promises,” he said, face solemn. “It’s late. We can talk more tomorrow. Let me show you to your rooms.”

Leonid led her and Cross to rooms like the one Brin and Lily occupied. Sealed by metal doors with a small window, the rooms connected in the middle with another metal door that could either remain open or be locked. The eleuth scampered in and settled at the foot of the bed in the room on the right, effectively making the choice for them.

Lena was surprised the eleuth was still tired. After knocking over some books on the uppermost shelf of one of the bookcases in the study, it had settled in and fallen asleep, waiting for Lena to return. She had offered to pick them up, but Leonid refused, murmuring something about the ladder in the study being broken.

“Good choice,” Leonid said to her after the eleuth settled in. “This one has a bigger washroom than the other one.”

The room she’d been given was small but comfortable. There was a small bed in the corner with fresh linens and a wooden chair next to the unlit fire. After setting her things on the bed, she turned to see Leonid holding out the key to Cross.

“I’ll have someone send over food shortly. If you choose to combine the spaces, you’ll both be locked in together. If you decide to keep them separate, Cross can hold onto the key for your room, Lena,” he said.

Lena glanced at Cross, who was standing behind Leonid, blue eyes intent on hers. Leonid, attempting to read the look between them, added, “I

can give you a moment if you'd like to talk—"

"We'll keep them separate," Cross said before Lena could reply.

She found herself taking a step toward Cross as he walked out and shut the door behind him, following Leonid to the other room.

Once they were gone, Lena perched at the end of the bed and watched the eleuth. It slept soundly beside her, its little chest rising and falling. She wondered if it'd been Henry who had sent it to her. And if it hadn't been sent by her brother, why was it so loyal to her?

Shaking thoughts of Henry from her head, she wandered into the washroom and was surprised to see there was running water. It flowed from a small hole in the ceiling, down a path carved through the dark stone. The water filled a carved, square basin on the ground before flowing back out, following a curved path off to the side and into the wall there. The running water reminded her of the bubbling spring in the cavern and soothed her. She was thrilled to discover the water was cool.

Just as she'd begun to think about how amazing a bath with running water might be, she heard a knock on the door. When the slot in the door opened to reveal a young man holding a tray, Lena smiled and thanked him for the food, but found she was disappointed. Setting the tray on the bed she realized he'd included some fresh clothes and soap along with the meat pie and spiced apples. And yet, she couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment. Had she been expecting Cross? Leonid had told her he'd send someone by with dinner.

She focused on eating as much as her stomach would tolerate, swallowing the disappointment with her meal, and then headed into the washroom.

She couldn't help but marvel at the soft glow of the crystal encrusted walls. That this place of hope could exist in the midst of so much death and darkness spoke to the wonders and strength of humanity. The thought brought forth the memory of her brother's pained face the last time she'd seen him, and she had to fight the panic that threatened to creep in. Henry was strong, but he'd been keeping the wraith at bay for some time now. She had no idea how much longer his power would last. She had to make this arrangement work, no matter what they asked of her.

Lena took her time bathing, enjoying the sound of the water as it flowed through the path carved into the stone. She brought the bottle of soap up to her nose. It smelled like a muted version of the God's Eye flower that she

loved. Her grandfather used to pick them for her whenever he found it on his travels. After he died, she'd found the flower on her windowsill several times. She knew Henry had found it on his travels and left it there for her to find. He'd never said anything about it, so she hadn't either, but on the days that it had seemed impossible to get up, seeing that flower on her windowsill was the only thing that got her out of bed. She missed him so much her chest hurt.

She missed them all.

Her family. And while she knew Henry was still with her, she still felt alone. A soft chittering from beyond the washroom had her reeling herself back in, locking the emotions away. She couldn't think about her family now. Not when there was another thought she'd been avoiding. Lena had long since wondered where the eleuth had come from and why it'd decided to accompany her, but being that it was an animal, she couldn't exactly ask it. But the situation with Cross was a different story. The soulbound had no reason to stay or to help her, not after repaying his debt. And yet, there he was, staying in the room next door instead of going about his sworn duty. There was also the fact that his niece's life was dependent on his duty. It was this thought that nagged at her as she finished bathing, dressed, and climbed into the small bed. The eleuth hadn't let her check its wound, screeching at her every time she tried. That hadn't done anything except sour her mood further.

Lena stared up at the ceiling, noting how the light from the crystals pulsed softly around the room. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't ignore the sense that there was something about Cross that she had missed. She knew that, eventually, she'd have to ask, and she wouldn't be prepared for his answer.

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CHAPTER

FORTY-EIGHT

Lena slept fitfully that night, unable to get comfortable and half aware of all that still stood between her and the answers she so desperately sought. She hadn't told Leonid she completed the turn and the only reason she remained human was because of Henry. Instead, she'd let him believe it was a form magic. But wasn't it? She wasn't sure how long she'd be able to keep that a secret. She couldn't help but feel if her lie of omission were discovered, Taya would refuse to help her.

By the time she got up, used the washroom, and was rejected once again by the eleuth, her mood couldn't be saved. A knock at the door shook her from her thoughts, and she dressed quickly, donning her cloak and gloves. But it wasn't Cross who stood there as the door swung open. Instead, a familiar face with bright hazel eyes and brown wavy hair filled her vision. It was the woman who'd been trapped inside the cage during the ursus attack and knocked her unconscious in the forest. Behind her were three guards. They wore mismatched uniforms and eyed her warily but otherwise kept their distance.

The eleuth nearly tripped her as it tore out of the room, and she sighed with a huff as she watched it go.

"Lena! I'm happy to see you made it out of the forest," the woman said. Her voice just a note too cheery for Lena's mood. Little did she know that Lena, the woman she'd been then, had not, in fact, "made it out of the forest."

Lena tried to smile but knew by the look on the woman's face that it probably looked more like a grimace.

"Oh no, are you okay?" she asked.

“I’m fine. I just had some trouble sleeping,” she said, trying to shake off her bad mood.

“I’m sorry about knocking you out, by the way,” she said.

And the woman looked so genuinely sorry that Lena couldn’t help but laugh. It was preposterous.

“As opposed to the alternative?” Lena said, shaking her head. “What’s your name?”

“Oh, sorry, I’m Jade,” she said, “Are you hungry?”

“Where is Cross?” Lena asked, peering past Jade.

“A pack of raberdins wandered in through the eastern tunnels,” she said. When Lena’s brows twisted in confusion, she added, “The size of a large dog, beady eyes? No? They infiltrate tunnels and underground caves searching for prey. A pack can take out fifteen men, easy. Riley asked Cross to assist in getting rid of them. So, I’m here to take you to breakfast. Come!”

Lena considered Jade’s invitation for a moment but didn’t have to for long. It was the first time in a long while she’d felt hungry, and her sour mood made her feel a little reckless.

Jade led her out into the corridor, and they walked together to the dining hall. She took Lena over to the serving line where she made herself a plate of food and then walked over to one of the smaller tables that sat at a distance from the others.

“I’m so sorry about the chains,” Jade said before dropping her tray on the table, one of the biscuits she’d selected nearly toppling over the side.

“The—” Lena started, but she didn’t have to finish her sentence because one of the guards pulled up a metal clamp attached to a chain bolted to the wall.

Oh.

Lena extended her leg, just as she’d gotten used to doing while on the plains with Cross, and the guard fastened it to her ankle, giving her an apologetic smile. Lena couldn’t be upset about the precautions.

“How do you know Leonid?” Lena asked.

“I’d heard rumors about The Collector, much like everyone else, and I decided to investigate. Let’s just say I’m good at finding people,” she said.

“The Collector?” she asked, making sure she heard Jade correctly as realization set in.

“Yeah, that’s what they call him. Out there,” she said gesturing above them.

“What does he collect?” she asked, her curiosity shifting to suspicion.

“Everything, from what I’ve seen. But mostly, people,” she said casually.

“What do you mean *people*?” Lena asked.

“He collects the lost, the oppressed, the displaced. The infected. He gives them a home, hope, and a purpose,” she said.

Oh.

They sat together and chatted for a while. Apparently, most everyone there knew who she was, and word had spread that she had somehow overcome the infection. *The first person to do so.* Jade told her there was a renewed sense of hope amongst those staying there, and they attributed that to Lena.

Any enjoyment she’d felt in meeting Jade was gutted. The taunts she’d heard while hallucinating on pollen spores seemed to whisper to her again: *liar, murderer, fraud*. That was what she really was, not a signal of hope.

“What’s wrong?” Jade asked.

“I need to speak to Leonid. Do you know where he is?” she asked, eager to learn when they might move forward with their agreement so Lena could obtain the answers she was seeking and leave this place.

Every day that passed without answers put them all at risk but especially Henry.

“I’m not sure. He might be in the study,” Jade said.

“Can you take me there?” she asked.

Jade nodded, motioning to one of the guards to free Lena’s ankle.

The two women had just rounded the corner into the next passageway when Lena’s shoulder was clipped so violently she was knocked to the ground. She squeezed her eyes shut as intense pain radiated through her wraithwound, the leathery skin there more sensitive to pain.

That sensation was quickly replaced by the sharp edge of steel placed precariously at her throat. Lena opened her eyes to see Taya, mere inches away, face contorted with rage.

“You had to steal from him too?” Taya hissed, her words laced with hatred. Pure and absolute.

It took her a moment to understand what Taya was pointing at with her free hand. Scattered amongst the rest of her belongings, Henry’s medallion

lay on the stone, glinting in the blue-white light. Lena opened her mouth to speak, but it was Cross's voice that filled the space.

"The medallion is hers," he growled.

Taya shoved off Lena and picked it up.

"Liar," she sneered.

"It is. There are others in existence, much like this one," he said, with a clipped tone, pulling his own medallion from beneath his armor.

"That's not possible," Taya said, eyes wide with disbelief.

Taya inspected the medallion, her thumb tracing over the back when the metal disc flashed orange and an image was projected onto the ceiling of the stone corridor.

A boy with golden hair looked down at them. He stood atop a sand dune in leather armor, hair whipping in the wind.

Henry.

Lena stood in a movement so swift her muscles didn't seem to register it.

"*That* is not yours," she said, each word punctuated by the rage, pain, and grief she felt clawing its way out of her chest. Lena was only vaguely aware that her voice no longer sounded like hers.

Taya dropped the medallion, the image disappearing abruptly. Face white with terror, she lifted her knife and backed away.

"Lena," she heard a familiar voice call.

Cross materialized in front of her, his blue eyes glowing softly in the dim light from the crystals. In his hand, he had Henry's medallion and held it out to her.

"No one is going to take Henry's medallion," he said calmly. "Lena *look* at me."

She tore her gaze away from Taya, forcing herself to meet Cross's eyes.

"Beautiful," he whispered, a note of awe in his voice. It was enough to snap her out of her rage.

"What?" she asked, her mind beginning to clear.

"Your eyes," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "They're glowing."

Lena reached up to touch her face and realized she was holding Harry's medallion. She couldn't seem to remember grabbing it. The weight of the metal disk in her hands felt reassuring, grounding, and she loosed a breath.

Taya looked both horrified and disgusted. Leonid stood next to her now, but Lena wasn't sure when he'd arrived.

Lena dragged her gaze away from Cross to address Taya.

"Threaten me again, and I guarantee you won't live to do it a third time," she said, the truth of her words hanging in the air between them.

"Who was that?" Jade asked, eyeing the medallion now dangling from Lena's hand. Lena hadn't realized the young woman was still in the corridor.

"Henry. He was my brother," Lena said.

"That's not possible," Taya said, shaking her head.

Lena didn't deign to look at her.

"We're going to meet in the study in an hour. See you then. All of you," Leonid said. With one last look at Cross, The Collector headed back down the corridor, and Taya stalked off after him.

"Are you all right?" Cross asked. The heat of his body let her know how close he stood.

"Fine," she said, pulling the pack out of his hands and heading towards her room.

He followed close enough to make his presence known but also give her space. When they reached her quarters, he stood at the threshold, almost as if he couldn't let himself enter her space. She knew she should thank him for saving Taya's life. It was best he'd stepped in when he did or else Lena might have eaten the soul of only Seer in The Whispers. Despite it all, the nagging question about why Cross continued to stay danced on her tongue.

A young man's voice came from the corridor, breathless and urgent. "Sir, you're needed back on the surface. Right now. Uh, please, sir."

"What is it?" Cross asked, refusing to take his gaze off Lena.

"Two tahorites, sir, likely after the raberdin corpses," he said.

"Lena—" Cross started.

"It's all right, go," she said.

Cross exhaled through his nose forcefully and gave Lena one last look, his eyes searching her face before shutting the door reluctantly. Lena flinched at the click of the lock. Would she spend the rest of her life locked away? Because even if she did somehow manage to stop the infection and free Henry, she would still be a wraith. Anything short of a cure meant she would always be a threat to others.

Lena shook her head, willing the tears that had welled up in her eyes to clear. It seemed like everybody had some sort of preoccupation with Henry's medallion. She pulled it out of her pack and ran her thumb over the back, just like Taya had done. Nothing happened. It had been both incredible and heart wrenching to see him as a boy again. With a sigh, she set the necklace aside. As she was clearing out the interior pockets of the pack, she found a tear in the lining. Lena had never noticed that before and reached inside.

Her fingers grazed a small item, and she pulled out a small velvet pouch. It was a deep purple, the beautiful iridescent stitches flashing with every color of the rainbow as it caught the light. Lena pulled the flap open and inside was a worn piece of paper. She unfolded it to find a small drawing that fit in the palm of her hand.

Taya.

She looked several years younger in the drawing, but the likeness was unmistakable. Hanging out of the pouch was a thin, silver chain. Lena pulled on it to find a medallion. Lena gaped at it. It looked exactly like Henry's. And finally, tucked into the bottom, was a ribbon now yellowed with age. Lena stared at the three objects on her bed.

Memories of Eduard approaching her in the dark, a small pouch in his hand, flashed before her. He had put this pouch into her pack, probably tearing the lining as he fell onto her. Had he been trying to help her find the Seer?

With that memory so vivid in her mind, the anger Lena felt was doused by grief and then extinguished completely by a sadness so heavy it made it hard to breathe.

A knock on the door had Lena reaching for the items and tucking them back into the velvet pouch.

It was Jade's cheery voice that sounded from the other side of the door. "Are you ready?"

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CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE

The study was already full of people. Riley stood by the hearth and gazed into the fire, but she looked up and smiled at Lena when she entered. Taya stepped closer to Riley, placing a hand on her shoulder. Lena noted the protective gesture and stopped near the entrance. Leonid stood near the head of the table where he quietly conversed with one of the guards. Seated to the right was Dauen, a fresh notebook open before him, ink pen in hand. Jade perched bright-eyed on the arm of an oversized armchair that matched her namesake.

Lena took a seat closer to the door, wondering where the eleuth might be. As if she'd summoned it with a single thought, she heard scratching and chittering at the door.

Lena smiled at this and got up to open it, but before she could, Cross pulled the door open, letting the creature scamper in. He was covered in dark splatters, and although the edge he appeared to have been riding earlier seemed to have dulled, he held a rigid posture.

The eleuth hopped onto the table in front of her, placing itself between Lena and the others before it lay down. Half the room shifted uncomfortably at the animal, its bright orange eyes scanning the space. Dauen, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by the creature while Jade looked like she was fighting the urge to pet it.

Cross walked over to stand behind her, just visible in her periphery.

"Let's get started. Lena, you've agreed to help us in return for having the crystals on your mother's diary cast. We can help each other," Leonid said.

“*If* what you tell us helps save lives, I will agree to cast your mother’s crystals,” Taya corrected, taking a seat next to Dauen.

Leonid shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Riley walked over to the table and took the seat next to Taya. Lena was already sweating, her cloak and gloves making the heat feel oppressive. The eleuth, now sprawled on the table before her, chittered softly and nudged its head into her hands. The gesture gave her the courage to voice her terms.

“No. You get to ask me a question. One you think will be helpful in aiding your research. For every question I answer, Taya casts a crystal,” Lena said.

Leonid looked to Taya, who seemed to be considering her offer. She knew Taya was curious about Henry and how he’d come to have a medallion. This way, they’d be required to ask her only the information they deemed necessary instead of demanding she tell them her whole story, which frankly, was none of their business. She figured she could always volunteer more information later.

“Think of what we could learn,” Dauen said to Taya. “Not only did she survive the initial attack, but she’s managed to remain human for longer than anyone else we’ve seen.”

“Human?” Taya scoffed. “All right, fine.”

Leonid nodded, and Dauen raised his ink pen.

“How did you get infected?” Leonid asked.

“I’m not sure,” Lena said, thinking back to the moment she woke up in the funeral field.

“That is not an acceptable answer,” Taya interjected before Lena could consider her response further. “She didn’t answer the question.”

Riley put her hand on Taya’s shoulder and whispered something in her ear. Taya huffed in response but remained quiet.

Lena resisted the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes. She hadn’t exactly had time to contemplate what had happened. She still didn’t remember anything about the initial attack.

“It was not my intention to avoid answering the question,” Lena said, directing her response to Leonid and Dauen. “The truth is I don’t know how it happened. I was in the field outside of Virdeen for a funeral that was meant to occur at sunset for one of the village elders. The last thing I remember was standing around the funeral pyre with everyone else. When I

awoke the next morning in the field, I had a wraithwound, and everyone else was dead."

She looked to the others to see if they found that answer *acceptable*.

"What did the wound look like? How did it feel?" Dauen asked eagerly, still taking notes about her previous disclosure.

"I will answer your question, Dauen, but after that I hope to see the contents of a crystal," she said.

"Taya?" Leonid asked after the silence stretched out uncomfortably.

"Fine," Taya said.

"Gashes in the skin, four of them, that started at my shoulder and ended just above my heart. The exposed flesh inside was discolored and oozing. It didn't bleed, but the affected area was inflamed. Black veins were visible just underneath the skin, small at first but they eventually grew, marking two separate paths, one towards my brain and the other toward my heart," she said.

Dauen wrote furiously in his notebook, and it was only when he was finished that Lena looked to Taya. She stood reluctantly, eyeing her warily. Lena pulled the trinket out of her pack and held it out to her. Taya walked over and reached for the twist of metal, avoiding the eleuth as best she could. She inspected it carefully, the crystals clinking gently in her hand.

"How do you release the crystals?" she asked Lena.

Lena stood, hoping to get a better look at the object.

"I'm not sure. Do they have to come free to be cast?" Lena asked, genuinely curious.

"Yes. These are dream crystals, designed specifically to respond to a Seer's magic. If the crystal you want me to cast is attached to anything else, those elements will interfere with the memory it projects," she said.

They examined the object together, their conflict forgotten for the moment.

"What about this here?" Taya asked, pointing to two smaller holes on the outside of the wider part of the loops. Lena took the diary from Taya's hands, inspecting the holes in the metal. And her heart sank.

She knew exactly what would fit in those empty slots.

"There is a key. Two of them. And I no longer have them," she said, letting Taya take the diary out of her hands for further inspection. Lena turned towards the table, bracing her hands on it. "My mother always wore

a broach; two thin crystals hung from it, and I would bet those were the keys."

Lena couldn't fathom having to ride back to Lythara to see if she could buy the broach back from the innkeeper, not to mention that she had no money nor anything else to offer him for it. A sense of futility began to build in her chest when Cross's voice cut through her mounting despair.

"Lena."

In his palm, he held her mother's broach. The small crystals clinked lightly as he placed it in her gloved hand. Lena didn't have the words to ask how, or *why,* but Cross merely gave her a curt nod before taking up his previous position. Lena swallowed the emotion that built in her throat before turning back to Taya, who still held the diary. Lena unclipped the key crystals from the broach and stuck one into the lock.

Nothing happened.

She tried the other lock, and still, nothing.

"Together, I think," Taya suggested, lifting the diary up.

Lena fit the keys into the locks at the same time. With a click, the rings holding the larger crystals in place unlatched, allowing Lena to pull one free. She marveled at the pink tinted crystal before handing it to Taya, who seemed to have remembered herself.

Taya walked to the center of the room and, cupping the crystal in her hands, brought it to her heart. For a moment, nothing happened, and then light began to glow in Taya's eyes. It erupted from her, the white light pouring from her mouth and ears too. Lena had to shield herself from the brightness, her eyes aching as she squeezed them shut, but when she opened them again, Taya's features had returned to normal, and she stared at the wall.

That was when Lena saw her. Her mother. She choked back a sob as she saw Marisee's image projected onto the stone wall behind her. She was scribbling into her treatment journal, dressed in her usual trousers and a linen shirt. Lena focused on the writing in her journal which read:

PHYTOTHERAPY: Creeping Vine
Serum Variation #4

THE CREEPING VINE plant seems to slow the transformation for those infected by wraiths.

PATIENT #1:

Date of infection: 2 weeks ago

Symptoms: Severe black veining from infection site, skin grey with black on outer edges, brief loss of consciousness since serum was administered 7 days after the attack.

Patient #2:

Date of infection: 1 week ago

Symptoms: Moderate veining from infection site, wound is inflamed but decrease in discoloration. No loss of consciousness since serum was administered 2 days after the attack.

Patient #3:

Date of infection: 3 days ago

Symptoms: Light veining from infection site, little to no discoloration in skin although wound/infection site remains inflamed. No loss of consciousness since serum was administered same day as the attack.

PONYTAIL SWINGING WITH THE MOVEMENT, her mother looked up from the treatment journal to the plant growing in a clay pot by the window. That was no doubt the plant she was writing about. She sat there for a minute, drenched in morning sun that poured in through the window with a look of pure amazement on her face, before she smiled and turned back to her journal.

It was the smile that gutted her. The quiet joy on her mother's face as she worked something out. She loved any and all kinds of puzzles, something she'd inherited from her father. Lena's grandfather. Lena felt like a bolt had torn a hole through her chest. And then the memory faded. Lena stared at the spot on the wall where her mother's face had just been.

"*That* is your mother?" Leonid said from behind her.

"Yes," she choked out, still staring at the blank wall.

"Then it's your mother we have to thank for the serum," he said.

Lena turned to look at him, bracing herself on the table for fear her legs would give out.

"What?" she asked, the words not registering in her mind.

“It was a healer who provided us with the serum that slows the transformation. We knew she was a part of the Org, but we never found out who she was. She only had three vials, but we were able to make a synthetic version of the serum. It doesn’t work as well as what she gave us, but it’s been a lifeline for those infected,” he said.

“She shared it with you?” Lena asked.

“Yes. We sent people to track her down when we ran out, but we were unsuccessful. Where is your mother now?” he asked.

“She—she disappeared. Three years ago. In the fallen city,” she answered. Saying it out loud somehow made the ache in her chest worse. Leonid and Dauen looked at each other, some silent conversation happening between them. Cross still stood near the door, but she could feel his gaze on her back.

Returning to her seat, Lena felt a sense of dread settle into the pit of her stomach. The eleuth nuzzled its head into her hand, blinking up at her from the table.

“What is your next question?” she asked, voice hollow.

“How did you manage to heal the wound? We’ve seen some that are resistant to most healing remedies,” Dauen said.

At least this one was easy.

“Crushed khardia seed, mixed with the pulp of vardint leaves,” Lena said, recalling the two components that made up the malodorous goop. “Consistent application after washing and dressing the wound yielded moderate results after about twenty-four hours with steady improvement after that.”

Dauen nodded and took down note of what Lena had shared.

Lena shifted her gaze to Taya who stood once more and headed towards the place on the table where the spun metal diary lay.

“Which one?” she asked Lena.

“The next one in the line, I think,” she said, hoping they had been hung in chronological order.

Taya unhooked the next crystal and projected it onto the wall. As soon as the image took form, her heart stopped dead in her chest. Lena inhaled sharply at the undeniable resemblance between Taya and a young Ada, who held the hand of a youthful looking Eduard beside her.

Her parents. Ada and Eduard were Taya’s parents. *Were.* Because Lena had killed them. *Murdered* them.

Taya brought a trembling hand up to her mouth, her movement sending a ripple through the projection.

"HELLO TAYA, we hope this finds you when you need it most," Ada said, and then paused, taking a deep breath. "Your Father and I hoped it would never come to this, but I've had a vision, and unfortunately it has confirmed our deepest fears. You need to know that there will come a time when the Goddess disappears, imprisoned by a man who would stop at nothing to possess the magic and knowledge that she embodies as one of the EverGods. Believe it or not, I once called him a friend. He is powerful, cunning, and he can See. Remember that.

She resides in a prison of her own making. Above anything else, Taya, she must be freed. The answer lies in the Tower."

"We love you more than the suns, Taya," Eduard added.

BEFORE THE MEMORY VANISHED, Lena caught a glimpse of a thin silver chain hanging around Eduard's neck. Taya stood frozen in the center of the room until Riley reached for her hand.

"Perhaps it's best if we take a break. Lena, I'll send Jade for you once—"

"She means the Tower of Two Worlds," Taya said. "They used to tell me this story when I was a child. About a man who trapped a Goddess in a crystal bottle. Well, not the bottle, exactly, but inside the crystal itself. He'd been obsessed with finding the magical vessel, but for what, he wouldn't say. I guess we know that he found it. And what he used it for."

"The vessel from the Maiden's story?" Leonid asked softly.

Taya nodded. Lena had also heard this story. Her grandfather used to tell it to her when they were picking or mulling herbs together.

There once was a maiden who was lured away from her family by an offer of courtship. The young man was sweet and attentive to the maiden, taking the time to learn what she loved. One day, he invited her up to the peak to stargaze. She was thrilled, and having donned her finest dress, they set off toward the ledge.

You see, just north of here, on one of the lower peaks, a ledge was carved out of the mountain, and below there is a grand crater that was said

to have been the place where the Goddess landed when she first arrived on Eteris. Over time, it filled with water and now exists as a lake.

Once they arrived, she learned the young man had set up a picnic with her favorite flowers and treats. But the young man had other plans, and he attempted to accost her. In the struggle, she fell from the jutting slab of rock they went to stargaze from and into the lake below.

The Goddess intervened for the first and only time, charging the water with her power to save the maiden, thereby creating the source for the healing waters. She trapped the man's soul in a crystal bottle made from her essence. The Goddess gifted the maiden the bottle after she emerged from the water and cursed his family, forever changing the landscape of the place that is now referred to as the Drowning Woods.

Sometime later, the maiden went on to marry, thus creating the only magical bloodline on Eteris. The knowledge of the bottle was lost forever, but the healing waters remained.

IT WAS REPORTED that the maiden was the first Seer. As the familial line became mixed over time, they developed some other abilities albeit none as powerful as the original maiden's.

That meant that Ada and Taya were both from the original maiden's line.

And Lena had killed her. She had killed possibly one of the last Seers in the realm. Her *friend* and Taya's *mother*.

"What does this all mean?" Cross asked. He'd been so silent that she almost forgot he was standing behind her.

"I think it means we've finally answered the question about where the Goddess has been. Where she went," Taya answered.

"But where did she go?" asked Dauen.

"I think she's being held in the Tower of Two Worlds," Taya said again.

"Quintessa's private temple? Isn't that said to be in the Untethered Realm, where no human can go? I thought that was just a myth her acolytes shared to try and humanize the Goddess," Riley said.

"Who is it that managed to trap her?" Dauen asked.

"The King's Master of Magic," Taya answered, half lost in thought.

"But the King's Master of Magic was said to have died when the city fell," Leonid added.

"I don't think he did," Taya said.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Leonid said. “As Riley mentioned, no human can gain access to the Tower, but even if he did, how do you trap a Goddess? Only an extension of her power resided in the water that flowed through the lands, not the Goddess herself.”

“And why? To what end?” Jade asked, brows furrowed.

“The diary seems to be providing all of the answers. I think it’s time I cast another crystal,” Taya said. Reaching for the object on the table, she unhooked another crystal.

The image that flashed on the wall showed Ada and Eduard sitting at their small kitchen table across from her mother and Henry. Eduard looked several years younger in this memory but not as young as the last. Given her mother and Henry’s appearance, Lena could tell this meeting had taken place four or five years ago.

“Thank you for coming. I will admit we sent for you not because we required care. That was a ruse, sorry, but we needed to speak with you about, well, several things,” Ada said.

“Oh?” Marisee said, sitting up a little straighter.

“I would like to talk to you about Lena, and Eduard would like to talk to Henry about his past. It seems like there will come a day when Henry’s past might dictate Lena’s future, if he so chooses, and Lena’s future could very well affect us all,” she said.

“Go on,” Marisee said, and Henry nodded, although she could see the uncertainty on his face.

“This won’t be easy to hear but—” Ada started.

“How about we address Henry’s past first?” Eduard suggested, reaching over to put his hand on Ada’s arm and patting it gently.

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s start with that.” Ada smiled and nodded, reaching over to place her free hand atop his.

“Henry, would you mind pulling your medallion out?” Eduard asked.

Henry hesitated but after a moment pulled the medallion from around his neck, unhooked it, and handed it to Eduard. Just as Taya had done, Eduard slid his thumb over the back of the metal disk, and Henry’s image appeared on the ceiling before them.

Then, he pulled a chain from around his own neck, revealing a medallion that hung concealed underneath his shirt. Pressing his thumb into the back, another image was projected where Henry’s had been, but

instead of a young boy, a warrior stood there. He was dressed in gold plated armor, a sword strapped across his back.

Henry stared at the image of Eduard standing atop a sand dune, two suns glowing in the sky behind him.

"You—we—are not from this world, Henry. Our home is a different planet called SecaTerr. We were pulled here through a tear between worlds that was caused by a disruption in the magic that was gifted to us by the Goddess. There were six of us that were pulled through. And you, my apprentice. I didn't realize you had been pulled through also. It wasn't until—well, it's a long story. You wouldn't have remembered. Your training was not complete and so your memories and knowledge about our world would not yet have solidified in your being."

"I've held that medallion so many times over the years. Why didn't it work for me like that?" Henry said, gesturing at Eduard's image still projected above them.

"The magic in the medallion only responds to converted energy," he said.

Henry's brows furrowed in confusion.

"We are beings that transition from flesh and blood to an existence of pure energy. It's how we survive on SecaTerr. The medallion does not recognize you as a mature adult, and thus you cannot project your own image for safety, in case a rival family ever got a hold of you."

Henry sat in stunned silence, and Marisee mirrored his shock.

"I will tell you more about it, but now is not the time. What's important is that you'll have the opportunity to save this realm if the time comes. By helping Lena," Eduard said.

Ada nodded and added, "Because, Marisee, she'll be attacked by a wraith. But depending on the help she receives and the choices she makes, she might be the one who ends up freeing the Goddess."

"No," Marisee said, face draining of color.

Ada reached across the table and placed a hand atop hers. "Visions are not set in stone, but it's possible Lena might be the one to free her. She didn't just disappear. Those of us in this room, we can give Lena a chance."

"If all goes well, you may very well end up saving SecaTerr as well. Come, let's have lunch, and we can tell you more about it," Eduard said.

AND THEN THE IMAGE FADED.

“You?” Taya asked.

Lena couldn’t see how it was possible either. But what Ada had said, “*Those of us in this room, we can give her a chance.”* The words clanged around in her head, her mind unable to make sense of them. Because that meant that Henry—

“She’s not even trained. How can *she* be expected to free the Goddess?” Taya said looking around at the others.

“You understand Seering better than the rest of us,” Riley said gently. “Is it possible that your mo—she was mistaken?” Riley asked.

Taya’s face crumpled briefly, but she composed herself quickly.

“Like she said, visions are not set in stone, but historically speaking, it wasn’t often that her visions proved to be incorrect. It stands to reason that she *could* fail,” Taya said, jabbing her thumb towards Lena, but still addressing Riley, “but considering they went through so much trouble to orchestrate all of this, I have to think there must be a strong possibility that Lena could succeed.”

No one else spoke. The quiet snick of a door being shut was the only sound. Lena turned to see that Cross had exited the room, and she blinked. A sense of shock and disbelief settled upon her along with discovering a new ache in her chest. The initial sense of shock soon gave way to unfiltered panic.

She’d come for answers about Henry, how to save him, how to help him, and instead, she’d learned that everything was so much more complicated than she had ever imagined.

What was more, her mother and Henry had both known she would be attacked. They had known, and they had worked to help her survive it. She suspected her mother had developed the serum for her, and Henry had given up his existence for her. The weight of their sacrifices was devastating. And yet, the things she’d done, the lives she’d taken . . . Those had been a result of her own choices. Her family’s machinations made her no less a monster.

Lena blinked as she realized where she was standing. She hadn’t realized where she was headed until the prospect of knocking turned into an inevitability. Lena looked around and found Jade standing several feet behind her in the shadows. Seeing that Lena had made her way to Cross’s door, Jade gave Lena a small smile before she walked off, likely headed back to the study. Gathering the courage to knock, she rapped on the metal

door once before reconsidering. Cross pulled the door open and stepped aside to let her in. His belongings were laid neatly on the small bed.

Well, that answered her question. He'd come here for information, likely to learn as much as he could about wraiths before he returned to duty.

"You're leaving," Lena said, the pit in her stomach growing bigger.

"You came here for answers. Now I need some of my own," he said, tucking the last few items into his pack.

Lena's heart sank. She'd known Cross didn't have any reason to stay. It was surprising he'd stayed this long, but she couldn't help but feel like he was abandoning her. She peered at the ground, willing the disappointment to shift into something neutral.

Cross tucked his finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. There was a softness in his bright blue eyes, and something like understanding. EverGods, he was handsome.

"I won't be gone long. When I get back, we'll talk," he said, scanning her face.

She knew he saw it all, including the relief that washed over her as she realized he planned to return. Standing in front of Cross, exposed and vulnerable beneath his assessing gaze, she realized she *wanted* to talk to him. In a world where safety often hinged on the ability to keep secrets, to keep one's identity hidden, she longed for someone she could open up to. She longed to be known.

"When will you be back?" she dared.

"If everything goes as planned, in two days' time," he said reassuringly as he released her chin. With one last glance, he grabbed his pack and walked out the door.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY

Jade came by to escort Lena to dinner sometime afterward, but she declined, opting instead to have a tray brought to her room. The eleuth arrived with it, evidently having terrorized the young man who had been tasked with bringing it. His voice shook and his eyes darted nervously between her and the furry creature as he opened the window in the door to pass her the tray. The eleuth squawked at him before squeezing in through the window, startling him further. Lena tried to hide her smirk as he stuttered over his words and excused himself promptly.

She was relieved to find that Dauen had requested a book be delivered to her. It would give her something to do while Cross was away. It was a monograph on creeping vines. Lena knew instantly why he'd sent it. He was hoping she would recognize the plant her mother had used to derive the serum. She was happy to skim through its pages while she ate a hearty dinner of braised beef and potatoes with a tin of mulled cider.

The eleuth sprawled in front of the fire, and from its round belly, Lena figured it had likely gone out to hunt after the meeting. She was happy to see it laying on its back, its range of motion unrestricted. That brought a smile to her face although the animal still wouldn't let Lena check on the injured area.

She wondered where Cross might be and wanted to kick herself for not having asked where he was going before he left. But asking personal questions went against everything she'd been taught growing up. Even when evaluating patients, she had to be careful what types of questions she asked because asking personal questions could get you killed if they aroused enough suspicion.

Lena sighed and sent a silent prayer to the Goddess to keep Cross safe. She didn't know if the Goddess would hear it but hoped she would. Lena had long since stopped believing in the Goddess after her grandfather's death, but she found that in moments of hopelessness or helplessness, it was comforting to say a prayer. To believe the Goddess might heed her requests.

Despite the shocking news of the day's events, Lena fell asleep quickly. The next morning, she was pleased to see Jade at her door.

"How are you doing?" the woman asked tentatively, making her way slowly through the corridors as Lena followed.

Lena thought about it for a moment. The truth was she didn't quite know what to make of everything.

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. Jade nodded in return. Lena was certain Leonid and the others were looking into the revelations from her mother's diary, but she was happy to avoid the topic for the time being, at least until she could process all she'd learned. She thought back to Cross's promise that they would talk when he returned.

"Dauen wanted to know if you'd be interested in meeting with him after breakfast to test his serum," Jade said, changing the topic.

Lena was grateful for it. "Sure."

While she was also grateful for Jade's company, Lena ate quickly, eager to get to Dauen's lab. Jade escorted her to the lab where she found Dauen staring intently at drawings of her mother's mystery vine.

"Here, come look at this," he said, waving her over.

Lena lifted her leg to show him the shackle Jade had secured around her ankle before she left.

"Oh, yes, sorry," he said, a flush creeping over the scholar's cheeks.

Coming to stand beside her, he pointed to the drawing. "See the edges of the leaves here? It looks peculiar, almost as if there are two layers."

"So it does," she said, staring at the recreation.

"And there are more sketches in here." Dauen walked back to the table and retrieved a large tome.

After pouring over the monograph together for a while, they decided that none of the vines in the book were an exact match, although there were a few that came close.

"Wait!" Lena said, reaching for her pack. She dug around and pulled out a folded piece of paper. She handed the drawing Ahgrie had given her over to him. "Look at the edge of the leaf."

“Where did you get this?” he asked.

Lena told Dauen about Ahgrie and how she’d retrieved the information from the Commander’s healer, Orvain. They both stared at the picture in silence. How was it that Orvain knew about her mother’s discovery? Lena found this troubling. If Orvain was aware of a possible cure for wraithdom, why hadn’t they used it? Dauen didn’t seem to have any answers but assured her he’d look into it.

Lena realized Ada hadn’t known about the vine. When Lena asked her about a plant that would heal a wraithwound, Ada had assumed that Ahgrie had somehow learned about the Bud of Brielle. Lena considered telling Dauen about it but figured it wouldn’t be helpful to learn about an alien flower they no longer had access to and wasn’t likely to bloom again.

After lunch, Dauen offered to dose her with the serum. Lena gladly accepted, hoping it might relieve Henry’s burden. He monitored her for the rest of the day while she helped him crush Khardia seeds for the fetid goop. By late afternoon, she knew the serum hadn’t worked, and her arms were well and truly aching. She excused herself from the lab and was escorted back to her room. After another hearty dinner, Lena pulled open a book Dauen had sent her off with: *Distribution and Absorption: A Study on Foreign Agent Infiltrations*. This one detailed how rashes and other infections spread in the body. She spent hours looking through the pages until her eyelids were heavy with sleep. She stared at the velvet pouch by the bed and thought of Ada and Eduard.

Their faces followed her into sleep, and she awoke several hours later with the eleuth on her chest squawking softly at her to pull her from the nightmare. Unwilling to close her eyes once more, she returned to the book. After reading about the spread of infections, she moved over to the section on rashes and spent the rest of the night reading up on varying presentations and different mechanisms that could be responsible for the spread.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-ONE

The next day after breakfast, Jade led her through corridors she hadn't been to before, the blue-white crystals guiding their way.

"Where are we going?" Lena asked.

"The library!" she said a big smile growing on her face.

"The lib—You have a library here?" she asked.

"Yes, it's incredible." Jade beamed. "Dauen is checking on patients this morning, so he isn't in the lab. I thought you might want to do something different."

It was then Lena realized the guards hadn't followed them from the hall.

"Did you dismiss the guards?" Lena asked, looking around. "Aren't you worried I might turn?"

"Why, are you sensing you might?" Jade asked in return, cocking her head to get a better look at Lena.

"No, I just—" she started.

"I can defend myself," she said. "Don't worry."

"From wraiths?" Lena asked.

"Of course," she said patting her thighs. Closer inspection revealed Jade had small blades tucked into hidden sheaths all over her body.

The smile on Jade's face grew the moment Lena pieced it together.

"Who do you think taught Taya? Yes, I heard about her steely greeting," Jade said.

"But, in the Overgrown Forest . . ." Lena started.

"Those brutes took my things! And I like to be careful about how I present myself out there. You know how fast rumors spread."

“What happened to her? The girl who was in the cage with you,” Lena asked.

“Gia didn’t make it,” Jade said, a shadow passing over her face.

“I’m sorry—” Lena started.

“Oh! I went to see Laney this morning!” she said, changing the subject abruptly. “She’s been less lucid lately, but when she recognized me, we were able to chat for a few minutes. She says, hello.”

Lena’s gut twisted as she considered how Jade must have felt returning to the cage to find the girl had died. She also thought of Laney, locked in that cell below. If it weren’t for her brother, she’d likely be locked down there too, that was, if she would have even made it to The Whispers in the first place. Lena doubted she would have.

“Is she not responding to the ser—” but Lena’s words failed her mid-sentence as she took in the library’s enormous double doors.

They looked hand carved, the marks of a chisel still evident in the wood grain. She had to take several steps back to make out the scene depicted there. It looked like planets. Three of them, suspended amongst a multitude of stars represented by tiny crystals embedded in the wood. As Lena took it all in, she realized the planets and stars were suspended inside what looked to be the body of a woman with her arms spread wide, as if the universe were contained within her. She didn’t have a face, but her long hair flowed around her, with God’s Eye flowers scattered in the strands. The Goddess. This had to be a representation of her.

Jade giggled and pulled on one of the doors. Lena’s jaw dropped further when she stepped in to be greeted by a gargantuan crystal jutting out of the center of the stone floor. It was bigger than the Moon Maiden’s temple in Enora and pulsed slightly, blue-white light illuminating the entirety of the space.

A library. She was standing inside a real library. Bookshelves like spokes in a wheel stretched out and up into the darkness where the light couldn’t reach. Lena walked to one of the nearby shelves and read the title of the first book that caught her eye: *A History of Kings: Rulers of Reimar.*

“How?” Lena breathed.

“I told you, Leonid collects things,” she said smiling. “I’ve been asked to put you here.”

Jade gave her a regretful look, but it was the jangling of keys that caught Lena’s attention. She looked down to see Jade was pointing to

another clamp attached to a chain.

“Asked by who?” she asked.

“Taya. She and Riley, plus a small group of guards are helping with researching the Goddess and the Tower. They’re going to ask you to go to the Tower, you know.”

Lena knew. She’d been wondering when it would come up again. But she had no intention of going to the Tower of Two Worlds. She’d set out to do one thing, and she was so close to finding answers. Especially now that she’d been given access to a lab and a library and learned about the vine her mother had been studying.

When Lena didn’t answer, Jade picked up the clamp and put it around her ankle.

“You’ll have access to this row. If you’d like to explore further, I can accompany you. Just know that the books that have been set further from the light have been placed there for a reason. Feel free to contribute to the search or read whatever you’re in the mood for. I’ll let you know when Dauen is back in the lab,” she said before walking towards the low murmur of voices beyond another row of stacks.

Lena looked around noting the soft velvet sofa behind her and the worn wooden table illuminated by the golden glow of a lantern. Inhaling deeply, she took in the mixture of musty and earthy notes.

Turning toward the stack nearest to her, she began to wander. She ran her hand over the stiff spines of old tomes, all of varying heights and widths. She marveled at the titles stamped into the worn leather in faded gold foil. Gently, she pulled one from a random shelf and scanned through it, and then she picked another and another until she finally found a book on the subject she’d been searching for. *Magic throughout the Centuries: Historical Accounts of Ancestral Magic in Reimar*. She lifted her hand to pull it out when the hint of a familiar scent wrapped around her. Lena closed her eyes and took it in, the smell triggering a vibrant memory of her grandfather in her mind. Warmth spread through her at the sight of his face, the hint of his scent.

Lena opened her eyes to find that she was much farther down the stacks than she remembered. She took several steps back toward the light when the weight of the heavy silence caught her attention. She looked down to see the clamp was no longer fastened to her ankle. Had it fallen off somewhere,

or had Jade failed to secure it properly? She couldn't remember when she'd stopped hearing the clank of the chain.

Another hint of that familiar scent had her halting in her tracks, and she turned back towards the darkness. It couldn't be . . . Lena wandered even further, deviating from the row she'd been browsing in. Her eyes adjusted quickly, the darkness becoming lighter, comforting somehow. She caught the scent again, this time a little stronger, the notes brighter, and then it disappeared.

Was it possible she'd just been imagining it?

Lena sighed, looking for the row she'd just been in, when a small light flared before her. She took a step back, but the small light flared brighter. She squinted against the brightness in direct contrast with the welcoming dark. As if sensing her, the pulsing light dulled until it finally winked out. Lena reached for the book, smaller and thinner than its stocky neighbors. The worn leather warmed at her touch, the gentle heat seeping through her gloves.

The instant she pulled it off the shelf, she was met with an overwhelming scent; floral, gentle, and so very familiar. The scent of the God's Eye flower. She recognized the book she held in her hands. It was her grandfather's journal.

She didn't feel the impact of the stone floor when she fell to her knees clutching the journal at her chest. It had gone missing the day her grandfather was killed. She truly never thought she'd see it again, never have the opportunity to read his thoughts or explore his insights, for the journal contained so much more than his knowledge or findings. Each entry was followed by something personal, a summary of what he'd done that day, details about a new game he'd played with her, places he hoped to take her and Henry. It included quotes from his friends, new ideas, and his goals for the future because he liked to link his findings to his life, claiming it made the technical side of healing easier to recall in a medical crisis.

But she had found it. Or rather, it had found her. What she would do to see her mother once again, to share the journal with her and Henry, too. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Lena stood and turned to find the light of the crystal.

"Do you typically hug books before you read them?"

Jade's voice came from behind, and Lena turned to find the young woman leaning against one of the stacks, genuine curiosity on her face. She

had no idea how long she'd been standing there or what she might have seen, but Lena didn't care.

"Dauen is back in his lab," Jade said. "Do you want to head there now?"

"I'd prefer to go to my room," Lena managed.

Jade nodded. Concern lined her features, but she walked Lena out of the library and back to her room, departing with a promise to send dinner. Lena was shocked to learn she'd spent the entire day in the library.

Unlike the night before, Lena fell asleep immediately with the leather-bound journal still clutched to her chest. When she awoke a few hours later, she felt rested, like a piece of her soul had settled. The eleuth was curled in front of the fire yet again, and she smiled at the sight of it.

Lena wandered over to the tray that had been left by the door to see what had been served for dinner. Put off by the thin film of fat that had settled atop a bowl of soup, she reached for the hard cheese and bread that accompanied it instead. Lena pulled the small plate atop the bed next to her and reached for her grandfather's journal.

Inspecting the worn leather, she noticed a small God's Eye flower had been stamped into the spine. When she touched it, gentle energy zinged her finger. It was this design she'd seen glowing in the dim light of the library. Lena marveled at the magic that emanated from the book, wondering how it worked, and wished she could ask her grandfather about it. About all of it. She'd always been told the land was devoid of magic, but that didn't seem to be entirely true. Taking a deep breath, she flipped open the cover and began to read.

Lena let the heartbreak spill out of her as she cried, laughed, and reminisced. While the grief she experienced anew made her feel raw and tender inside, it also reminded her why she'd gone into healing in the first place. She remembered the hope she'd brought others and the relief she'd felt when she managed to spare them from pain or grief. Lena revisited all of the most wonderful parts of her childhood, holding the memories close to her heart as they healed yet another broken part of her.

It was in those pages that she found herself again. Reconnected with who she'd been and found forgiveness for who she'd become after her mother disappeared. Lena would always mourn the loss of her family, and although grief made her life feel darker, heavier, it also connected her to her humanity in a way nothing else could.

The last few pages detailed information about the final patient he'd worked with. Something about the case struck a note of familiarity, clearing the fog of sleep from her mind, and she set to work piecing it together.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-TWO

Lena nearly burst out of her room the next morning when Jade showed up at her door. She'd been up the rest of the night reading through her grandfather's journal and was eager to speak to the healer scholar about the things she'd learned. Lena and Dauen spent the entire morning together discussing everything from infections to viruses to poisons. Dauen was fascinated, pulling notebook after notebook from his own shelves and scribbling notes. He didn't seem at all surprised Lena had found the journal in the library.

They tested her mother's serum once again, upping the dose while Dauen continued to evaluate her and take notes. She already knew it wouldn't have an effect on her but still felt hopeful, even if not for herself.

After she and Dauen wrapped up their discussion, Lena sent for Jade, and the two women conversed quietly over lunch. Leonid joined them briefly as well.

A guard was escorting her back to her room after the meal when she heard Cross's voice.

"Would you like to join me above for some fresh air?" Cross asked.

"You're back," she said, unable to keep the happiness from her voice.

"Come on. I want to show you something," he said, relieving the guard who'd been escorting her with a nod.

After she'd unloaded her cloak and gloves in her room, they walked in silence for some time. Every step she took away from the tunnels and the truth she'd learned felt like a small weight lifted from her shoulders. They finally emerged atop an expansive flat stone structure, but it wasn't the plateau that captured Lena's attention. Gasping, she tilted her head back to

see two enormous planets had descended further into the sky, almost blotting out the sun.

“Wha . . .” she started, her voice trailing off.

“Beautiful and terrifying, isn’t it?” he asked.

Cross led her to the edge of the plateau where he sat, gazing at the celestial bodies before them.

Lena gaped at the sight before her, unable to wrap her mind around the fact that both Eduard and Henry were from a different world. So much knowledge had been lost when the city fell and the scholars died. She couldn’t help but wonder what the astrologers had discovered before they all perished.

She sat beside Cross, unease growing in her belly, and it struck her then that one of those planets might be SecaTerr where Henry was from. The one on the left was smaller than the other. It was dark, with swirling clouds that obscured its surface. The one on the right was xanthous in appearance and so much larger than the first.

“This is because of what’s happened to the Goddess, isn’t it?” she asked.

“I think you’re right. These other planets have been visible in the night sky for some time but not like this,” he said, glancing over at her.

“What happens if they continue to get closer? If the Goddess isn’t freed?”

“Things will get worse,” Cross said solemnly.

“I’m not the chosen one in some prophecy, Cross. I’m just a healer from a small village and not even a very good one. Before all of this,” she said, gesturing to herself, “I was just a ghost of myself, barely able to get out of bed, incapable of doing the one thing I’d sworn an oath to do.” She shook her head.

Cross was silent for a long moment, a shadow passing over his face. “There is still strength to be found in our darkest moments.”

“That sounds like something my brother would say,” she said, smiling sadly.

Cross looked over at her, his bright blue gaze taking in every detail of her face even as the strong line of his jaw was set.

“Tell me about him,” he said.

Lena closed her eyes, summoning her memories of Henry. The way his eyes nearly sparkled with mischief when he teased her or when he’d share

his wildberry pastry with her. The moments his presence soothed the bitter edges of her grief and the way his laughter could cut through her very soul, letting a bit of light in.

“He was joy, light, hope. He kept me tethered to this life when I was sure I would slip away into the darkness. He was a steady presence, never too intrusive but there when I needed him. And he loved people; he wanted to help everybody. He’d agonize over it if there was somebody he couldn’t heal,” she said as tears rolled down her face. “He is all I have left.”

Cross reached up and swept his thumb across her cheek, wiping her tears. Lena didn’t look away. In that moment, she let him know her. Know that part of her that crumbled when the world became too much. She let him see the woman who clung to her little brother while drowning in the ravaging sea of grief she couldn’t escape. It was yet another shame she bore, putting so much on her brother when she should have been the strong one. The one to help him through his own grief.

“How do you plan to help him?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, but I hope to continue my mother’s work until I can figure it out,” she said, wiping her face with her hands.

Cross was silent but attentive, allowing space for her to continue.

“I miss them so much, but I’m also *mad* at them. They *knew*. They knew I would become *this*. And they didn’t tell me,” she said, gazing out at the celestial oddities above. “Can you imagine keeping a secret like that from someone you love?”

Cross stiffened beside her but didn’t say anything more. Lena considered the complicated web of emotions she’d experienced in the last few days. She’d felt shame for going to The Whispers to find help for Henry, devastation at learning she’d killed Taya’s parents, and pride about her mother’s work. She’d felt anger and resentment after learning her mother and brother had known she’d be attacked by a wraith and then awe and joy about finding her grandfather’s journal. And more recently, fear and doubt had clouded her mind. Her emotions were such a *mess*. She almost missed the numbness she’d become so used to.

The thought gave her pause. Human emotions were messy, indeed. But like her grief, those messy emotions connected her to her humanity. She wouldn’t take that for granted.

After a while, she dried her tears, the winter wind carrying away her sorrow. “Did you get the answers you were looking for?”

“You know, soulbounds—” he started, before Lena cut him off.

“What is *that*?” she said, pointing to the sky at a black figure quickly approaching the plateau.

“Inside, right now,” Cross ordered, helping her off the ground.

They sprinted towards the concealed entrance to the corridors. Just as they slid behind the large boulder, Cross pushed Lena back into the corridor wall, concealing her with his body. The ground trembled slightly beneath their feet. She felt every muscle in his body tense. The weight of his body against hers made her heart beat wildly. He was so close she could feel his warm breath on her face and see the flecks in his eyes. She’d been wrong; they weren’t brown; they were gold. They seemed to flare in response to the danger nearby although she couldn’t help but wish it was in response to her.

After a moment, Cross put a finger over his lips and stepped back. He edged around the boulder and stole a glance outside. The look of concern on his face sparked her curiosity, which drove Lena to do the same. She didn’t need to look for long because standing there was a creature she’d seen before, her long silver hair reflecting the colors of the celestial bodies above. The ground trembled once more, and Lena guessed it had gone back into the sky.

“It’s looking for something,” Cross said.

“Me,” Lena said.

“What?”

“At least I think it’s me. The same one landed in my village after I was attacked,” she said.

“Maybe,” Cross said, “you weren’t the only one in that area at the time.”

It was true. There must have been other wraiths in the area to have killed everyone in her village.

“I think that’s an Aurynn. Laney was scratched by one when she was carried off after the Moon Maiden Ceremony in Enora, and it was after that she turned.”

“Is it a different kind of wraith then?” Cross asked.

“I don’t know what they are, but Laney might,” she said.

They strode down the corridors searching for Leonid but instead found Dauen on his way back to his lab. He informed them they’d heard the disturbance above and sent everyone to their rooms. Leonid, Taya, and

Riley had descended into the cells below to ensure everyone was all right and to make sure the disturbance hadn't originated from one of the infected.

Lena and Cross made their way down to the cells to find the iron door open and the three of them standing in the center of the hall, discussing something intently. At the sight of them, the trio fell silent.

"There is a winged creature scouting this area. Lena believes it's an Aurynn," Cross said. "Do you know what it might be looking for?"

"An Aurynn?" Riley asked, confusion cinching her brows. "You mean the same creature that scratched Laney?"

"Yes, I was hoping to ask her about it," Lena added.

"You can't," Taya said, a hard edge to her voice.

"Why?" Lena demanded.

"See for yourself," Taya said, gesturing towards the cell.

Lena walked over to see a terrifying creature standing at the bars of Laney's cell. She felt simultaneously pulled toward it and repelled by it. By Laney.

Her skin had turned grey with black veins now fully visible under most of the exposed skin. Her eyes were milky white, and her face was frozen in a sneer. She held her hands close to her torso, long black nails protruding from her fingertips.

Lena approached the cell, unable to reconcile that the creature standing before her was her friend. How had she turned so quickly? Lena didn't have a chance to ask before Laney's arm shot out of the cell, wrapped around her throat, and *squeezed*.

On instinct, she reached up to grab Laney's arm and the world exploded in a cloud of glittering black.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-THREE

When Lena opened her eyes, she was no longer standing in front of Laney or in the vast cavern that held the containment cells. Instead, she stood in a white room, a column of light shining down on her. The injury on her shoulder and chest didn't feel the same here. There was no pull of the skin as she whirled around, trying to figure out where she might be. The long black fingernails that had replaced her own were absent. Her hands looked normal, the black scarring gone. She reached up tentatively and ran her fingers through her hair, pulling some of it forward. The strands were healthy, silky soft, and a rich, deep brown. That confirmed her suspicions. She was not a wraith here, wherever here was.

Lena made to step from the column of light when a tug in her gut told her to stay within it.

"Come out," Lena said, sounding a lot braver than she felt.

Two small, white lights appeared in the darkness in front of her, and when they narrowed, she knew what they were. Eyes.

As the darkness began to lighten, a woman materialized in front of her. She was beautiful, with a long, thin face that was almost delicate looking despite the absence of irises or pupils in her wholly white eyes. She wore intricate leather armor that covered every inch of her apart from a golden chest plate that started at her neck and ended in a "V" at the center of her chest. The shoulder pieces made her look taller, curving up menacingly at the ends, but it was the metal circlet that told Lena all she needed to know. The engraved metal came to a point between her brows with two long, thin spikes jutting out like horns reaching ominously into the air above her.

No, not a woman. This creature might have appeared in the body of one, but Lena knew deep down it was not human.

“Who are you?” Lena asked, her heart beating wildly in her chest. The creature gave her a too wide smile. A predator, amused with her prey. And Lena realized her mistake because the question she should have asked instead was: “What are you?”

“Hello, Alina. We meet at last,” the creature said.

Horror struck as Lena realized where she was and exactly *what* stood in front of her because she could count on one hand the number of people who knew her name. Her *full* name. The only explanation was that this creature was one that lived inside her. One privy to her inner most thoughts, her consciousness. The world seemed to narrow all around her, the white room condensing to the creature that stood before her.

“Who are you?” Lena asked again.

“My name is Runa,” the wraith said.

“Where is Henry?” Lena asked, her voice betraying the fear she felt.

“I *believe* he finally burned out,” Runa said as she began to pace around the column of light.

No, that couldn’t be true.

“Do you think I’d be standing here like this if it wasn’t?” she said, cocking her head.

Lena knew it could very well be the truth; she could sense an absence where Henry had been.

“What do you want?” Lena asked.

I want you. *And I’ll have you, just as soon as I please.* The words slithered around in her head, but the wraith’s mouth didn’t move. Lena opened her mouth to speak, to demand the wraith tell her more about Henry, when golden sparks ignited in the air, and she was thrown from the column of light.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-FOUR

Lena awoke several feet from Laney's cell. She sat up in stunned silence, her mind working to process what she'd learned, to make sense of the last several weeks as she understood the truth of it all. She was not *infected*. Was she *possessed*?! No, not that word. She didn't like that word. Inhabited? Was that a better term? And Henry—

Across the way, a familiar face, eyes round with shock, stared back at her. Her reddish-brown hair and honey brown eyes were a welcome sight. Lena went to stand when the flash of violet light drew her attention. She turned to see Cross standing there, his sword not only drawn but alight with flame. The others stood behind him, weapons also drawn.

"Lena?" Laney's voice rang clear across the space between them.

Cross's head snapped to her cell.

"Laney? You're—you're you?" Lena said.

The maiden nodded, sitting up from where she'd apparently collapsed on the stone floor.

"I—" she started but then reached for her tunic, pulling it up to expose her ribs. There was a scar where she had originally been scratched, but the skin was no longer grey, and the black veins had vanished. Riley rushed forward, skirting Cross who stalked towards Lena, after having sheathed his sword.

"Lena?" he said softly.

She took in the concern on his features.

"It's me," she reassured him.

"What happened? And who in the EverGods is Runa?" Taya kept her distance. Leonid stood beside her, a mixture of awe and curiosity on his

face. When no one answered, she lowered her weapon. “So we’re all just going to pretend like that didn’t happen?”

Riley slid a key into the lock at Laney’s cell.

“Wait, we don’t know if this is temporary,” Taya objected.

“It’s not. It’s not temporary,” Lena said, somehow knowing Laney was no longer infected *or inhabited*? That seemed to be enough for Riley, who opened Laney’s cell and rushed in to hug her.

“How is this possible?” Laney asked.

Lena stepped away from Cross to greet Laney as well, the two women holding each other for a long moment. Lena was so happy to see Laney like this again, and she wanted to bask in the moment but knew she’d have to cut it short.

Where she should feel burning outrage over the wraith’s brazen entitlement to Lena’s body, she only felt determination, a strengthened resolve. She had made up her mind. Now that the wraith was free inside her, she would spend however much time she had left making her own choices. She’d spent far too long reacting to things that were entirely out of her control. If she was going to go out, it would be on *her* own terms, not those dictated by the thing inside her.

“I have to get to the Tower,” Lena said, turning to the others. “I don’t think I have much time left, and if I can release the Goddess before I’m lost, then that’s what I intend to do.”

“Who is Runa?” Taya asked again.

Lena didn’t ask how Taya knew that name although she could guess. Part of her didn’t want to know what happened when she was unconscious. For Cross to have ignited his sword, it had to have been pretty *unsettling*.

“Turns out, I’m not infected. I’ve been *inhabited* by some creature who’s decided it is entitled to my body. To me. I don’t know what it wants, but it won’t matter if I can free the Goddess,” Lena said.

“What?” Taya asked.

But Lena ignored her and turned to squeeze Laney’s hand. “How do you feel?”

“Exhausted and hungry. Starving actually,” she admitted. Lena marveled at Laney, her heart squeezing in quiet joy.

“It might be best if we have Dauen check you over,” Leonid said to Laney. Then he turned to Lena. “We’ve started searching for anything that might give us an indication of where the entrance to the Tower may be.”

“The Tower of Two Worlds?” Laney asked. Everyone else turned to look at the maiden.

“Yes,” Leonid confirmed.

“Why are you going there?” Laney asked, looking around and trying to glean information.

“It’s likely the Goddess is trapped there, and Lena may be able to free her,” Riley said.

“I know where that is.” Laney’s soft voice echoed in the space. “I met an acolyte of the Goddess in my travels, on my way to Enora.” When no one spoke, she added, “She was stranded on the road, and we helped her. She travelled with us for some time. She was quite the oversharer whenever she had vanilla wine.”

They all gawked at her.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” she asked, raising a small hand to her cheek.



After Leonid assured Lena he’d take Laney to the healer, Lena left the others to figure out the details for where the entrance to the Tower was located. She needed time and space to think, to collect herself. Henry was gone. She could feel the empty space where his energy had once been. The very last of her family and the final barrier between herself and the monster that resided within had disappeared. Now she was well and truly alone. The ache in her heart was so deep Lena had to rub her chest to coax the ache away. She’d run out of time, and it had cost Henry his soul.

The threat of losing herself and hurting others was more real than ever. Likely an inevitability.

No.

She would have Cross end her life before it could get to that. But there was still one thing she could do before that happened. To honor her family, to honor Ada and Eduard, and their sacrifice. If she could free the Goddess, she could do so much good. Perhaps it would end the Commander’s reign, free the moon maidens, dissolve years of suspicion and distrust that had wormed its way into the people of Reimar like a festering rot. Maybe the land would heal. And maybe, just maybe, if she succeeded, she could give

Henry one last gift. Perhaps she could ask the Goddess to restore his soul so he could still enter the afterlife.

Cross trailed closely behind her as she made her way to her room, his presence more reassuring now that there was nothing else holding the wraith back. Pulling the door to her room open, she headed straight for her pack. Cross waited at the threshold.

“You’ve decided to go to the Tower,” he said.

“I finally got the answer I was looking for. Turns out there is nothing else I need here,” she said, collecting her things.

Cross walked into the room, his presence filling the space, and stilled her hand with his. “We can head out at first light.”

“I don’t know if it’s safe for me to stay another night,” she said, staring at their connected hands.

“I’ll make sure of it,” he assured her, the flecks of gold in his eyes coming alive. She could drown in those eyes of his.

“We?” she heard herself say, just realizing that was the word he’d used a moment ago.

“I figured I could get you as far as the entrance to the Tower,” he said.

Lena nodded, unable and unwilling to look away. She didn’t know what it was about the warrior, but she’d never been drawn to someone like she was to him.

A knock at the open door interrupted the moment. Riley stood there, a solemn look on her face. “Our scouts reported the Aurynn has circled back. And that’s not all. There’s another soulbound out there too. Friend of yours, Cross?”

“I doubt it,” he said.

Lena thought back to how she was drawn to the presence of other wraiths and considered the Aurynn could have been drawn back after the eruption of power in the cavern beneath. That was, if the creature was somehow part wraith.

“Taya’s men are monitoring the situation, but she’s asked you join us in case we need to head off the other soulbound. He seems intent on searching the area,” Riley said.

“Fine,” Cross said to Riley before turning back to Lena, giving her a curt nod before striding out of the room.



A LITTLE WHILE LATER, she heard the click of the lock and a knock on the door, but it wasn't at the main door of her room but the adjoining door. Lena pulled her side open to reveal Cross standing there.

"I'm going to use the washroom, but after that, I thought we could get something to eat. If you're hungry," he said.

"I don't—" Lena started.

"We're not going to the dining hall. There is a place I wanted to show you, somewhere we can go eat and talk. It'll be safe."

Lena considered. Cross had proven to be a skilled warrior, and she trusted his ability to take on the wraith if he needed to. "All right."

Lena washed quickly and sorted through the clothes Jade had left for her when she'd first arrived. In the pile, a flash of iridescent fabric caught her eye. She held the garment up and realized it was opalsilk. The same fabric that'd made up the stitching on the skirt she wore to Neema's funeral.

It was stunning. The white pearlescent fabric slipped through her fingers, light turned fluid. She slipped it on knowing she'd likely never get to wear anything as exquisite ever again. Elegant in its simplicity, two thin straps crossed at the center of the deep "V" that exposed most of her back. The shape at the front mimicked the back but in a more modest sense. She paired the dress with soft, pointed flats. She likely looked ridiculous, but she had no intention of letting anyone see her in it. She'd throw her cloak over the top to conceal it but would take delight knowing she was wearing something beautiful. Her life had been too ugly for too long.

When she was ready, she checked in with the eleuth, who blinked at her wide eyed.

"You like it?" she asked the creature, half turning to show off the back.

The eleuth sat up on its hind legs and chittered softly. She took that as a yes and summoned the courage to knock on the adjoining door, making sure to pull her cloak together at the front.

When Cross pulled open the door on the other side, she was surprised to see he wasn't wearing his leathers. Instead, he had on a white, loose linen shirt tucked into beige trousers. A small dagger hung from his belt, and he'd pulled half his hair back. Lena frowned at the dagger.

"It will be enough," he said. "And I've set up other precautions should the wraith attempt to take over."

"All right," she said nodding.

"Ready?"

Lena followed Cross out of their rooms. They walked in silence through winding corridors she'd never seen before, the crystals in the walls becoming scarce the further they went. Then, he stopped and pulled on her hand gently.

"This way," he said and disappeared into the wall.

Lena blinked. She reached out, placing both hands on the wall to discover a slit in the rock. Peeking behind it, she realized it was a hidden passageway, designed to give the appearance of an uninterrupted corridor. Cross gave her a nod of approval, a hint of amusement in his eyes as she slipped into the tunnel behind him. Cross had to turn sideways to move through the narrow tunnel, and even then, his chest and back scraped along the wall. Lena fared better and managed to avoid the roughhewn stone as she too navigated the narrow space.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll see. We're almost there," he said.

After a few more turns, Cross disappeared yet again. Lena followed, ready to be out of the enclosed space, but when she walked out of the hidden passageway onto an expansive ledge, the air froze in her lungs.

Before her was an entire universe of stars. No, not stars. Crystals. Thousands of them. They winked in and out of a stone ceiling hundreds of meters above her. Walking to the edge of the ledge, arms slack at her sides, Lena marveled at the crystal sky above.

"Are you . . . glowing?" she heard Cross ask from behind.

Lena turned, wondering what Cross was talking about when his eyes flared in awe and his lips parted. It took her a moment to realize Cross was staring at her. When she looked down, Lena gasped in surprise at the opalsilk, which was indeed glowing. Tiny lights seemed to wink in and out of her dress where the cloak had fallen open, exposing the material to the crystals above.

Cross took large strides, closing the distance between them. Lena tilted her head back and met his eyes, the golden flecks brighter than she'd ever seen before.

"May I?" Cross asked, lifting his hands to her cloak.

Lena nodded, unable to tear her gaze away from his. Pulling it off her shoulders gently, he let it fall to the floor and took a step back.

"You look like starlight," he said awestruck.

Emboldened by his words, Lena turned slightly, just as she'd done with the eleuth, to show him the back of the dress. Cross looked utterly speechless as he stood there taking her in. She realized just then that her wraithwound was on full display. Instead of moving to hide it or covering it back up, she let him see it although he didn't seem to take an interest in it.

"It's the opalsilk," she said softly.

The words seemed to break him out of the spell, and he cleared his throat.

"It's very beautiful."

"It is," she agreed, unsure of why the words stung. Opalsilk was indeed very beautiful. "Uh . . . how did you find this place?"

"I think it might have found me," he said.

Lena thought back to her experience in the library and decided there must be some unspoken magic in The Whispers.

"I thought you might enjoy coming here."

"It's incredible, I—thank you," she said.

Cross simply nodded and reached for the bag he'd been carrying. He pulled a woolen blanket and placed it on the ground along with two small bags.

Leaving her cloak on the ground where it lay, Lena walked over to the blanket and heard the soft rush of water. "Is that what I think it is?" she asked, stunned.

"Yes," he said smirking.

Lena peeked over the ledge to see a large river flowing peacefully far below the ledge they stood on. "What is this place?"

"I'm not sure, but I think we're standing inside the structure that is the plateau."

It made sense, Lena supposed, because there were no mountains in the area.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, and she turned to see he'd set out a picnic for them.

Lena's heart squeezed as she walked over, the opalsilk shining softly as it moved with each step she took. He watched, drinking her in as she approached and settled on the blanket.

The simple spread included a variety of soft and hard cheeses, meats, crusty bread, and a deep crimson spread of some sort, accompanied by a

glass bottle that held a tawny liquid. Lena was just about to ask him what it was when she heard the soft woosh of flame behind her.

Cross stood beside a lit torch that hung by the wall near the exit. That must be a part of his “other precautions.” *Good.*

After making sure the torch held a steady flame, he came to sit on the opposite side of the blanket. Her heart stuttered with his nearness, and yet she wished he were closer. Lena leaned back onto her hands, taking in the crystals that sparkled brilliantly through the darkness and dared to glow in spite of it.

“It’s amazing that such beauty can exist amidst so much suffering. That bravery can prevail over fear. I hope I can embody that spirit of bravery when I enter the Tower,” she said.

“You will,” Cross replied. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“They were all so brave,” she said. “My grandfather gave his life to save one of his patients. A young girl. He was murdered for it when the village turned on him thinking he was hiding a wraith. My mother disappeared in Dovia doing the same, and Henry, he . . . gave his life for mine.”

And it was only in the crystal illuminated darkness that she could say the words out loud. They seemed to hang there in the air in front of her for a long moment until they drifted away, taking the shame she felt with them. When Cross didn’t answer, she dared to look at him, but there was no judgement on his face. Only thoughtful consideration.

“I didn’t know your brother, but from the way you describe him, he was intelligent and capable. He believed in you. I don’t know that anyone else would save their sworn enemy. Twice. Or wander into the trees after dark on the plains. Or be so cavalier with the red vial. Trust that you embody those qualities too, especially the bravery.”

“It’s easy to be brave when you have nothing to lose,” Lena said.

“But you did have something to lose,” he said, something like hurt in his eyes.

Lena could only nod as she swallowed the emotion that clogged her throat. After a moment, she found her voice again.

“It’s true. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have chosen to wear this dress tonight,” she said, wiggling a little to disturb the glow of the fabric.

Cross tried but couldn’t hide his smirk as he reached for one of the small plates he’d brought.

They ate in silence as they gazed at the crystals and listened to the soft rush of the river below. Lena was delighted to learn that the fruit spread was sweetened winterberry jam and the tawny liquid, citrine nectar, a sweet and tangy drink that paired well with the flavors of the selected meats and cheeses.

Beyond the awe-inspiring view above them, she was also struck by the fact that a fully turned wraith and a soulbound soldier willingly sat and shared a meal together. But more than that, she was stunned at her willingness to be vulnerable. To share her secrets and shame with Cross, the man who hadn't abandoned her, even when she'd tried to abandon herself.

"Thank you for this. For bringing me here. This thing inside me will eventually take over. Rob me of my will. I don't know how many more nights I'll get to enjoy as myself, but if this is one of my last, I'm happy to have spent it here with you." Lena stared out at the crystals before her, hardly able to contain the overwhelming sadness that crept in.

Cross didn't answer for a long while, and she was okay to sit with him, grateful for her ability to feel so deeply.

"Soulbounds aren't all that different from wraiths in that regard. Once we are bound, our will is limited," he said, staring off into the distance.

It made sense. Once he swore his oath, he had to serve to keep his niece alive. She had wondered why Cross had stayed. Why he hadn't made a move to kill her after she'd ceased being his dutybound. And then it clicked. He had told her in the cave with the bubbling spring that he only killed those who would bring more misery upon the world, exercising his will where he could. It was likely he was trying to give her time. An opportunity to figure things out as long as she remained in control. But things had changed. Now, she was going to the Tower. Once she entered the gate, she wouldn't be a threat to Reimar any longer. It was likely why he'd agreed to accompany her. He would simultaneously be honoring his word and his oath.

She looked at him then and took in the sadness on his face. Sadness that mirrored her own. They were both bound by circumstances beyond their control. Cross's life had changed forever when his niece fell ill, and Lena's the minute she received a wraithwound. He was right. They weren't so different after all. In this moment, she knew Cross truly saw her.

Lena wasn't sure how long they sat there gazing at the crystals above. The mood shifted slowly as they both realized the respite, as lovely as it had

been, was over. Cross packed up their picnic. Once he was done, he lifted her cloak from where it lay on the ground and swept it across her shoulders. Lena steadied herself by placing her hands on his chest as he worked to fasten the clasp. His hands lingered there, and she wondered where he might place them next. They stood there staring at each other, the air between them becoming charged as Lena focused on the beat of his heart under her palm.

Cross cleared his throat and took a step back. Lena exhaled a shaky breath as he went to retrieve the sack. And then they were moving again, squeezing back through the narrow passageway into the corridor, where the opalsilk went dark, and the silence between them grew heavier with each step.

Once they reached their rooms, Lena checked on the eleuth and then discarded her cloak on the bed. She was just about to enter the washroom when Cross called out to her. He was standing at the threshold of the doors that connected their rooms, a bundle of clothes in his hands.

“I picked these up for you,” Cross said and handed her the bundle.

Not just clothes, fighting leathers, she realized. She looked up to thank him and paused, once again drawn in by the golden flecks in his eyes. Cross reached up and tucked a strand of hair, coarse and unruly, behind her ear. She could have sworn the skin of her cheek tingled with a slight current where he’d grazed it, and the words got lost on her tongue.

“Goodnight, Lena.”

“Goodnight,” she managed before Cross shut the door.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-FIVE

She knew morning had arrived when the eleuth somehow slid open the window in the door to squeeze out of it, like it had done most mornings. She took her time in the washroom, enjoying the fragrant soap and cool running water that flowed out of the stone, delighted she knew where it came from. Despite her efforts to stay focused on reaching the Tower of Two Worlds, her thoughts constantly strayed back to the picnic she'd shared with Cross in the crystal-studded cavern.

When she was done, she braided her hair and eyed the leathers Cross had given her. She'd never worn leathers before but found the soft material to be comfortable with a near perfect fit. She decided on a light blouse underneath her vest, aware of what could happen should she overheat again.

She packed her room and, after much deliberation, decided to leave her grandfather's journal with Dauen. A strong knock on the adjoining door had her walking over to open it when another knock sounded at the main door. She let Cross in, who was already dressed and fully armed, before answering.

Jade waved enthusiastically before settling against the doorframe, a wide smile on her face. Lena was so glad to see her. She'd enjoyed getting to know the young woman whose personality seemed to brighten any space she entered. Lena had long suspected there was more to her than she let on.

"I left my 'book' on the bed," she said with a smirk. "Can you make sure Dauen gets it?"

Jade nodded dramatically. And then added, "Consider it done," her smile somehow growing brighter. Then, she walked to the bed and picked up the journal. "Hello, soulbound."

“Jade,” Cross said giving her a curt nod and then asked Lena, “Are you ready?”

“I want to see Laney before we go,” Lena said.

It was a miracle Laney had been able to expel the wraith, and she was curious how it happened. She also wanted to confirm the details about where the entrance to the Tower was located, but mostly, she wanted to say goodbye.

“I’ll take you,” Jade said.

They walked along silently as Jade led them to the infirmary, but when they arrived, they found no such maiden.

“Do you know where she is?” she asked Jade, who had a frown on her face.

“No. We could try the dining hall,” Jade suggested. She led them back into the corridor where they ran into Riley.

“Leaving for the Tower?” Riley asked.

“Yes,” Lena said.

“We’re going with you,” Riley replied, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“Who’s we?” Lena asked.

“Taya and I. She’s already made arrangements with her men,” she said.

“Men?” Lena asked.

“We have a small force here. Mostly family members of the infected who have chosen to stay and guard what The Whispers represents. Taya trains them herself,” Riley said.

“Where?” she asked.

“In the barracks. You didn’t think the handful of tunnels you saw was all of it, did you?” she said smirking.

Indeed, Lena knew there was more to this place than what she’d been shown. After all, they had to keep livestock somewhere to feed all of these people.

“I’m coming, too,” a small voice sounded from behind Riley, and when she stepped aside, Laney stood there. “I can help you find it faster.”

Laney’s face was pale, and she’d grown thinner since succumbing to the turn, but behind the exhaustion, it was Laney.

“Are you sure?” Lena asked.

“Yes,” Laney said.

She’d survived Pirn Point and wraithdom. Lena would not underestimate her.

“Let’s head to the stables,” Riley said.

“Have any of you seen—” Lena started when she heard chittering from nearby. The eleuth scampered ahead of Riley, leaving them all behind. Lena figured the eleuth knew the tunnels better than any of them. It’d roamed freely during their stay here, only coming near enough to “check in” on her and sleep.

They exited the underground corridors at ground level where their horses were waiting for them, expertly packed and ready to go. Lena knew it was Cross who had readied theirs. She doubted he would trust anyone else with Kharon. The eleuth sat on its hind legs next to her, and its wet nose twitched cautiously as it sniffed the air around them. Taya stepped out from the corridor dressed in leathers, a familiar dagger tucked into a sheath at her thigh and a short sword strapped across her back.

“Our scouts have reported strange phenomena throughout Reimar. Everything from bizarre weather to alterations in the terrain. It’s not hard to imagine whatever is causing *that*”—She gestured at the visible planets in sky behind her—“may be the reason. Soulbound, you’ll ride out front. Riley and I will flank you. Lena and Laney in the gap.”

“I do not take orders from you, General, but I’m willing to collaborate to ensure Lena makes it to the gate safely,” he said, mounting Kharon in one swift move.

In the distance, lightning flashed through the clouds as Kharon reared up, rendering a striking image of the warrior Cross kept leashed behind his calm demeanor. The others mounted their horses with ease.

“If you spot danger, call out,” Taya said, ignoring Cross. At this, the eleuth screeched loudly.

“It’ll be our eyes up above,” Lena said, translating.

“We need to head Northwest,” Laney said.

Cross nodded in response and locked eyes with Lena before he turned Kharon and set off.

It wasn’t until they’d cleared the shadow of the imposing structure that was the jutting plateau that she understood the scout’s report. Reimar was almost unrecognizable. The air was noticeably heavier, and there was an eerie, grey shadow cast upon the land from the suppressed sunlight that made the rocky terrain appear sickly and pale. The animals had gone silent,

and even the plants, while scarce, seemed to shrink into themselves. Scattered rocks littering the ground trembled as they rode past, but Lena couldn't decide if it was from the horses' pounding hooves or something else.

The dancing colors of the auroras, twinkling stars, and celestial bodies above made it difficult to see the eleuth. Lena's only clue that it remained with their party was a brief punctuated screech, as if it too sensed things unseen.

Lena's skin prickled slightly, and she sat up straighter, reaching for the emerald broach newly fastened to her cloak. She could tell the others felt it too, their bodies tense as they rode.

The shifting terrain soon revealed a column of swirling black dots on the horizon. As they got closer, she realized the spiraling column was comprised of birds, the peculiarity of the display interrupted by the acrid smell of burnt flesh that floated toward them on the wind. Lena crinkled her nose at it to keep the stench from stuffing its way in. Cross shifted course up ahead, and the group followed. Still, Lena could see the column of birds frantic in their spiraling descent, but it wasn't until they got closer that she realized some were breaking off and diving towards a small body of water below. No. Not water.

The mirrored surface looked oddly viscous and seemed to attract them. The birds dove in headfirst only to smash into it, a tangle of broken wings and flesh that burst into flames.

Lena's gaze shot up to the sky. The eleuth. What if it, too, became attracted to the reflective surface? When after a moment, she still hadn't spotted it, her desperation grew, and she shot her hand into the air, hoping it might see. The creature didn't have a name, so she couldn't exactly call it down.

"What's wrong?" Laney asked from beside her.

"The eleuth, I haven't seen it," she said.

Each second that passed made her chest grow tighter until she felt the desperation might eat her alive. The thought of the eleuth being lured into the metallic lake was too much. She whistled loudly, drawing panicked looks from the others, but she didn't care. Lena turned her gaze upward, hoping it would make its location known. After what felt like an eternity, she saw a winged shadow descend from above. The eleuth dove from the sky, its bright orange eyes trained on her.

The relief she felt quelled the rising panic. Nearing, it swooped around her and Laney, and she could see the inquiry on its face. She turned her gloved palm upward and it grazed her hand, flapping with effort to return to the skies. Following its ascent, Lena spotted another airborne creature making a beeline for the eleuth. She shouted after it, but the eleuth didn't look back, already having spotted the incoming threat. It shifted midair. Its wings now trailed black shadows, and claws extended from its paws. Lena realized her mistake: in her panic, she'd alerted others to their position.

The eleuth screeched, a warning cry, and Lena's skin began to prickle in earnest. By the time she looked to the group, both Cross and Taya had drawn their swords, and Riley held a dagger in her hand. Cross shouted, pointing his sword west to where a company of troops had appeared from the horizon, and rode toward them. There were so many she couldn't count them.

A quick glance upward revealed the eleuth locked in battle with a falcon overhead, but the two creatures were obscured by the eleuth's black shadows.

Cross shifted course again, leading their group away from the oncoming company of men. Lightning flashed and brilliant red forks cut through the sky above. The eerie glow momentarily gave the appearance of the earth bathed in blood. The rumble of thunder that followed shook the ground and reverberated through Lena's bones. The company of men had gained on them, their horses diverting like a stream towards Lena's group.

And then the rain came, and the screaming followed.

The sheet of water appeared from nothing. It drifted along the land, having originated behind the company somewhere. Once she reached higher ground, Lena looked over her shoulder and saw men melting under the onslaught of silver-tinged water. Only acid could melt flesh and bone like that.

A screech from above alerted her to the eleuth's position. It shot straight for her, wings tucked close to its body.

Most of the Commander's men had broken formation, changing their objective from pursuing Lena and her group to seeking safety. But there was a smaller unit at the front that was undeterred. It was only when they got closer that Lena realized she was staring at a familiar face.

Vince.

Familiar, yet not. It took Lena a moment to realize it was because his face was disfigured. The skin was lumpy in some places with divots and hollows in others, most notably his cheeks, likely due to the healer's inability to set the bone. Surprise and panic swirled low in her gut, but it wasn't long until fear replaced them both.

Cross was shouting something at Taya, and she was shouting back, her face contorted in anger. Or was it panic?

When Lena looked over her shoulder again, she realized the sheet of rain had disappeared. But as quickly as it'd gone, it reappeared, just outside her periphery. She turned just in time to see it drift over another portion of the Commander's men.

The screaming was so much louder this time. And closer.

Vince and his unit shifted course to avoid the acid rain, and their unit rode parallel to Lena's group with the gap slowly closing between them. The rain had eliminated most of the threat, leaving Vince's unit and a few others. Vince didn't seem to notice or care. Instead, he turned his horse and beelined for Lena. She saw the change ripple through the remaining formation as they turned to follow.

She knew the moment Cross realized it. He shouted something else at Taya, who slowed her horse just enough to put herself between Lena and Vince. Cross broke off and rode to meet Vince, his sword taking on the eerie red glow that seemed a permanent feature in the skies now.

Vince threw himself from his horse the moment he got close, letting the spooked creature ride off. Cross dismounted a moment later, his sword extended at his side. He stalked toward Vince, his huge frame highlighting how much smaller the man was in comparison, but Vince did not balk. It was only when Vince took a jerky step forward that Lena saw the rippling black aura in his wake. It was so faint she hadn't seen it when he'd been riding toward her, the trailing wisps lost in the strange, dim light.

She didn't know what it meant, but it wasn't the same as the aura that signified impending death. As if the warning system inside her had also become unsettled by the realization, the prickling at her shoulder intensified to near pain. Something was very wrong. Somehow, she knew Vince wasn't human . . . but he wasn't exactly a wraith, either. He was something *else*. Something *other*. With that understanding, came another.

She had to warn Cross.

Lena slowed her mare.

“What are you doing?” Laney shouted.

“I have to warn him,” she shouted back before she dipped behind Taya and raced for warrior.

Just then a roar pierced the air, making Lena’s blood run cold as she looked around for the source of the sound. Vince’s head was thrown back, a gaping maw in the place his mouth should have been. The hollows in his cheeks stretched wide, elongating the opening in his face to reveal blackened stumps in place of teeth.

Cross continued to stalk towards the creature undeterred. Vince smiled, a gruesome imitation of the human he’d once been, and charged. Cross met his attack, effortlessly blocking his blows. This only seemed to enrage Vince, who became sloppier in his onslaught. Snarling, he brought his sword up, arching it high above his head. Cross did not miss his opening. He swept his sword through Vince’s center, cutting through the flesh and muscle of his stomach, effectively gutting him. Dark blood poured from Vince’s torso as he stood there, sword still over his head. Shock rippled across his features, giving him pause, but then it vanished.

The tiny spark of hope that lit up in her chest was extinguished immediately as Vince seemed to consider his circumstances and then re-engaged. He brought his sword down upon Cross, the blow meant to cut through the center of his skull. Cross blocked it just in time. Their swords locked in midair, and she saw the strain in Cross’s neck, the tendons bulging and the muscles of his arms stretching the leather of his armor.

Instinctively, Lena knew Cross had yet to face a creature such as this. Much less one that could sustain such devastating injuries and continue to attack. They appeared to be matched in strength, which was utterly confounding and terrifying. Deflecting the blow at last, Cross launched himself at the creature that had once been Vince. He moved like death, swift and sure footed, with a renewed sense of focus and a familiar fury. He had just sliced Vince’s throat open when he paused, weapon still raised.

A thick, black sludge slid from the gaping wound, slowly covering his neck and chest. Vince’s eyes went wholly black as claws shot out from his fingertips. Throwing his sword off to the side, he went down on all fours, vacating all pretense of being human. His skin turned a mottled grey, and his limbs, now elongated, morphed into something more animalistic.

He opened his maw again, and the skin in his face parted further, almost all the way to his ears, as he roared. The rest of his unit stopped just short of

them and dismounted their horses. Their jerking movements and stiff limbs were now evident in the way they moved. The collective roar they emitted behind the creature that had once been Vince made her skin crawl, and the hairs stand on the back of her neck. One by one, they began to shudder and jerk, as they too descended onto all fours. Focused solely on Vince, she'd missed the faint auras of black that trailed the men that had accompanied him.

The horde descended upon Cross, a mass of open maws and elongated claws. Cross smiled, actually smiled, before he became a whirlwind of death. He decapitated one monster after another as they advanced. She realized that was what Cross had been waiting to see after he slit Vince's throat and paused his assault. Lena felt ridiculous for thinking she had to warn him.

One moment his sword was unlit; the next it glowed brightly, the black-tipped, violet flames burning through flesh like a scalpel. He held his ground, decapitating creature after creature and wounding others until they pulled back. They seemed to sense their diminished odds and decided to regroup. The creatures did not flee though. Instead, they retreated slightly, making clicking noises. Communicating, Lena realized. They surrounded the soulbound before launching a more coordinated attack in pairs. Cross made quick work of the first ones, but then they attacked all at once, appearing to feign and then strike. One of the creatures landed a blow to his ribs, slicing the leather there. He winced in pain, whirling to take that one down. He decapitated it swiftly, but another rose in its place, its maw aiming for his head.

A blinding white light erupted before Lena, followed by a cloud of black smoke. Potions. White for *light* and black for *attack*. But after the smoke cleared, she realized the creatures were still alive, only stunned. Cross had managed to clear some space between himself and the creatures but not before receiving a couple other injuries. He was shifting his weight off one leg, and his sword arm hung limp at his side, and he'd clearly transferred the weapon to his other. The creatures began closing in, clicking loudly at each other as they approached. Using his injured arm, he lifted a small vial to his lips and threw it back, and then he raised his gauntlet and a cloud of red exploded at his feet. Lena halted her horse and waited. The wind struggled to clear the deadly red mist that lingered in the air, but once it did, she saw it worked. More of the creatures had fallen, but eight still

remained. Lena lost sight of Vince in the melee but could sense him there, waiting for Cross to be injured enough to pounce. She would not give Vince the opportunity.

“VINCE!” she bellowed.

Vince’s head snapped up, homing in on Lena’s voice.

EverGods, he was terrifying.

Sinking onto his haunches, Vince leapt past the other monsters and then sprinted for her, four others breaking off the group to join him. He, it, *they*, were so fast.

Lena didn’t have a plan; all she knew was that she *needed* to get those creatures away from Cross. She turned her mare and rode east, away from Cross and the others who’d been just north of her. Lena urged her onward, aware that speed was the only thing that might save them. A flare of green light appeared in the distance, and she knew immediately what she had to do.

Taryk’s sword was a beacon in the dark. But would it amount to safety or death? Given her severely limited options, she rode for him. A screech from the sky had Lena looking up to see the eleuth soaring above her, one of its wings tucked closer than the other. It had been injured then, but it was alive and alert. Her gaze met Taryk’s across the distance. He seemed to be making some sort of assessment. When his gaze flicked to the monsters behind her, dread grew in her stomach.

He seemed to be discerning whether those were her monsters, attacking on her command, or whether she was fleeing from them. His gaze flicked back to her, and she let him see the pleading in her eyes, the terror there.

“Taryk! Help!” she screamed, hoping her plea would reach him above the pounding of the horse’s hooves and the snarling of the animals that gave chase.

For a long moment, he didn’t react, riding towards her with his sword ablaze, face unreadable. Lena wondered briefly if she’d made the wrong choice and sent a prayer to the Goddess that the soldier would arrive at the right conclusion and offer his aid. Just before their paths were about to cross, he nodded and shifted his attention to the monsters.

Vince had fallen to the back of the pack. True to the man he’d once been, he seemed to be hoping others would do most of the work for him. Even as a monster, he was still a gods damned coward. Taryk sliced through several monsters with ease, delivering blows to their limbs with swift

efficiency, but the monsters did not slow. Confusion flitted across his face, and it was Laney who answered the unspoken question there. Lena turned to see the maiden had followed her.

“Go for the head!” Laney screamed at him as he dismounted, but Lena was no longer watching Taryk; she was scanning the area for Cross. Taya and Riley had been engaged with some of the human soldiers who hadn’t fled, but luckily, it hadn’t been many. The last time she’d seen Taya she was riding toward Cross as Lena raced away.

Apparently, Taryk had received Laney’s message because when she turned back, he was divesting the monsters of their heads, the trailing green flames of his sword telling the story of where it had just delivered the gift of death. He’d felled three of them and turned to face Vince, walking toward him. But Vince wasn’t interested in Taryk. A cold chill ran up Lena’s spine as she met the evil that shone in the black pits of his eyes.

He leapt into the air, attempting to bypass the soulbound. Lena’s heart jumped into her throat, and she felt the wraith lurking in the back of her mind. But then a swirling mass of air appeared behind Taryk. A tearing noise accompanied the appearance of a vortex as a howling wind began sucking in everything around it. Taryk ducked to the ground, embedding his sword in halfway to the hilt, but his legs were swiftly pulled out from under him. Vince flew over the soulbound, limbs flailing as he clawed the air for purchase. Lena was horrified to see that he found it, having gotten hold of Taryk’s ankle and reducing the grip on his sword to one hand.

A vast desert with golden sand dunes materialized on the other side, the air rippling with heat as the sun beat down on the scorching sands. The world around Lena lit up, and the blazing suns in the blue sky beyond illuminated the area with a piercing brightness. Lena raised her arm to shield her face as she urged her mare out of the vortex’s pull. She felt the wraith pull back and relief swept over Lena as she remembered the creature couldn’t tolerate heat or fire.

Taryk gritted his teeth as he struggled to hold on, the force pulling on his body exacerbated by the dead weight that was Vince. Grunting, Taryk strained to pull his gauntlet up to his face, using it to push a yellow-green vial into the metal contraption there.

Chartreuse. She saw when the potion took effect as the soldier was able to pull his other arm up and grip the hilt of his sword. Once his grip was

secured, he peered down toward the creature clutching his ankle and sent forth a fierce kick, but Vince didn't budge.

Relinquishing the secure hold he'd established on his sword, Taryk reached into his belt, retrieving a dagger, and flung it at the creature's wrist. She knew it'd hit its mark when Vince roared, but it did nothing to loosen the monster's grip.

Lena didn't think twice before she dismounted.

"Go!" she screamed at Laney, throwing off her gloves and cloak, lest the latter catch in the wind and send her flying into the vortex.

She lay flat on the ground and began crawling toward the soldier, doing her best to avoid the wind from getting underneath her body. It ripped at her hair, pulling pieces loose from her braid, and whipped at her face. She moved slowly, working her way toward Taryk. He gaped at her, eyes wide, as she crawled over to him. But it wasn't until she fully entered the path of the vortex that she realized she'd misjudged the force of the wind. Lena was nearly ripped from the ground, but she managed to drive her fingernails into the earth. To her astonishment, they held her in place.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Taryk shouted at her, eyes wild.

"HOLD ON!" she shouted back, the sound of her voice getting sucked into the world beyond.

Taryk cried out, and she looked up to see that Vince was trying to pull himself up. Lena pulled her nails out of the earth and drove them back in once more, finding that she now clung to stone as she continued working her way towards Vince. The wind blew violently, dragging her sideways, and she had to duck her head to avoid small shrubs and stones that had been ripped from the ground. The heat pouring in from the vortex was brutal, making it difficult to breathe through the heavy air. She'd almost reached Vince when he roared again. Squinting against the burning sun, Lena realized the vortex had begun to creep forward slowly and crossed over his hind legs. The smell hit her first and Lena almost gagged at the reek of burnt flesh, and then, she heard the sizzling.

EverGods. They were going to die. She had to release Vince's grip on Taryk's ankle, NOW.

She could only hope the dagger sticking out of his wrist was sharp because she would have to saw through Vince's elongated limb before they were pulled through.

"DON'T LET GO!" she screamed at Taryk.

“I WON’T!” he shouted back.

Making sure her nails were embedded into the stone as far as her fingertips, Lena reached for the dagger when she felt Taryk’s hand wrap around her other wrist. Feeling reassured by the security his grip offered, she reached forward and pulled the dagger from Vince’s flesh. Summoning all her strength, she drove the dagger into Vince’s limb. She almost wept with relief when it split flesh and bone easily. She began sawing frantically as Vince roared, spittle flying from his open maw. She sawed until the dagger got stuck, the angle in which she was holding it interfering with her ability to cut clean through. Lena yanked the dagger out and brought it up, hoping to drive it back down when they were struck by a fierce wind. She watched helplessly as the dagger was ripped out of her hand. Vince roared again and flexed his limb, trying as he might to pull himself toward her.

Without that dagger, they would die. She was certain the soldier likely had another, but there was no way to access it, and she didn’t have anything else that was sharp enough to cut through bone. Panic began to creep in, stealing her resolve as the wind continued to rip past her, and the vortex inched toward them.

Except, she did.

Lena looked at her hand and then back at Vince’s destroyed flesh. She reached up and plunged her nails in, willing them to grow, to extend. They met no resistance as they sank deep into the tissue there, black blood making her fingers feel slick. She had an immediate flashback of her hand plunging into Eduard’s chest and did her best shove it away.

She worked her fingers, slicing through the flesh there, and was almost done cutting all the way through when a flare of sunlight blinded her momentarily, and intense heat blasted out from the vortex, singeing the exposed flesh of her hand. Lena shut her eyes and gritted her teeth, waiting for the heat to dissipate. When she opened them again, she had to blink away the white spots in her vision. She had just resumed cutting her way through Vince’s flesh when a burst of pain exploded from her hand. Vince had used his free limb to smash it with a rock. He was about to do it again when Taryk kicked at the creature. She didn’t have any time to waste; hand aching, she used her nails to saw back and forth until she felt the flesh rip.

Vince roared as he was pulled through the vortex, his skin blistering and beginning to melt when it disappeared, cutting off the blinding sun and scorching wind. Lena screwed her eyes shut at the pain and pulled her nails

out of the stone. When she felt like she could breathe again, she pulled her hand back to inspect it and was relieved to see the skin was intact. Painful as it was, the burn was something she could treat on her own.

She looked over at Taryk, who sat on the ground next to his sword, panting. He reached down and pried Vince's hand off his ankle. Lena gagged, the reek of burnt flesh still hanging in the air. It was only after a moment that she realized Taryk was staring at her.

"Why did you do that?" he asked warily.

"What was I supposed to do? Let you die?" she asked.

"Yes. That was incredibly foolish," he said matter-of-factly.

"It worked, didn't it?" Lena said, wondering why they were having this conversation when she needed to find Cross.

"That's twice that you've helped me now. Tell me why," he demanded.

Twice? Lena struggled to think of when else she'd helped the soldier, and then the memory came back to her. She'd warned him about the sempermortem in Lythara. That felt like an age ago.

"That's just what you do when someone needs help, and for some reason, the eleuth likes you. I figured you couldn't be that bad." She was rambling now.

The pain in her hand came alive as the adrenaline wore off.

"Likes me?" Taryk said, something like confusion and . . . hope on his face.

"Well, you still have a face, so, yes, I'd say it likes you well enough . . . I—I thought you were going to ride past us," Lena admitted, scanning the area behind the warrior.

"I may be an asshole, but I'm not a monster," he said. Then, he looked down at Lena's hands, black claws still extended. "Oh, shit, sorry."

A smirk appeared on her face.

"Wait, did Vince scratch you?" Lena asked, unable to keep the concern off her face.

Taryk shook his head once, patting his ankle.

"Are you okay?" Laney asked, running over to them.

The eleuth landed on the ground next to her and sniffed at her hand, the sound of hooves alerting her to the rest of their party's arrival.

Cross was covered in black blood, his dark hair sweat slicked around his face, but his eyes were clear. His armor had been shredded in some places, and Lena knew it hid some of the lacerations he'd received. Despite his

injuries, he was moving well, but worry twisted in Lena's gut. He took in every detail of her appearance as he approached, his gaze snagging on her hand before looking at Taryk.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Taryk, his voice deceptively calm.

Taryk looked at Lena before answering. "Helping. Is that okay with you?"

"We don't need any help from you. Not the kind you tend to offer," Cross snapped.

Lena wasn't sure what that meant, but she wasn't about to ask either.

"We don't have time for this," Taya said, cutting them off. "It's obvious those things were part wraith, and you've been infected," she told Cross. "Unless you have a healing crystal, or some other soulbound trick that will keep you from turning—"

Guilt twisted in Lena's gut as she remembered he'd used his last healing crystal on her.

"I'm not infected," Cross said. "I'm immune."

He glanced at Lena briefly before sliding his gaze back to Taya. Lena's heart skipped a beat before her mind fully processed what he'd said. But it was what he left unsaid that answered her question. She had accidentally drawn blood from his arm on the plains, and he hadn't developed an infection. She figured he'd had it treated when he went and saw Row. It seemed the Bud of Brielle had truly made him immune.

"How?" Taya asked, her eyes narrowing. Taryk's brow crinkled in confusion, and she saw the same question appear on both Riley and Laney's faces.

"That's not important," Cross said. "Right now, we need to move."

"If you're lying," Taya said, "just know I won't hesitate to kill you."

Cross gave her a curt nod.

He was right. They didn't have time to stand around when any manner of death could spring up without warning. The others headed back towards their horses, Laney having brought her mare, but Cross lingered for a moment, no doubt assessing Lena for injuries, before striding off toward Kharon.

The others rode off, leaving Taryk where he stood.

Lena gave him an apologetic look. "Thank you for helping," she said, before she mounted her mare and followed.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-SIX

They managed the rest of the day without incident. A few vortices opened randomly, giving them a glimpse of foreign landscapes, but to Lena's relief, they closed quickly. They didn't encounter any more acid rain either although red streaks of lightning still marked the sky periodically.

The group found a place to camp near Misted Oak, the mysterious forest in the northeastern part of Reimar. Like many other forests in the land, rumors ran rampant about what lay inside the concealed trees, but unlike other forests, few were allowed to enter, and it was the forest that would decide.

Lena shivered at the thought of being trapped in another sentient forest but shook the thought away. The mood on the journey so far had been tense, with Taya and Riley riding up front and often exchanging meaningful glances. Cross hadn't said a word to her since they left Taryk behind, and she worried she'd somehow put them all in danger by saving the other soulbound. Her interactions with Taryk had been awkward, the warrior making peculiar comments, but deep down she felt he didn't mean them any harm. And that the eleuth hadn't ripped his face off was a big point in his favor. But it was evident he and Cross had history.

By the time she met the others by the fire, the mood had lightened.

Lena sat next to Laney, who was the furthest away from the heat of the flames.

"Does it bother you?" Laney asked her, a contemplative look on her face.

"What?" Lena asked.

“The heat?” she asked.

“Oh. Uh, yes. It’s uncomfortable, debilitating even, when it gets too hot,” she replied.

“I could sense that too . . . even when it had taken me. I was still conscious in there,” she said softly, “losing myself little by little but conscious through it all. How did you do it?”

“I was hoping to ask *you* that. Part of me wondered if it was you who managed to expel the infection,” Lena admitted.

“I don’t think so. I had no control. It almost felt like it was pulled out—I don’t know. There are so many others, trapped inside their own minds. I hope the Goddess can help,” she said.

“Me, too,” Lena said, placing her hand on Laney’s shoulder as worry grew in the back of her mind.

She had no idea what she was to face or how she might free the Goddess, but more concerning was that Runa had been freed, and she had yet to take over. Lena suspected she intended to do so earlier but had been thwarted by the heat and light from the vortex. A growing sense of dread loomed over her as she considered what might happen if Runa took over before she could free the Goddess or even right after.

“The one thing I haven’t been able to figure out is how the Aurynn are connected to all of this. The reason I went down to see you was to ask if you knew anything else about them. I think one was drawn to where I was attacked in Virdeen, a female, and then I saw another in MountTier. That one was male,” Lena said.

“I was carried by the female after the Moon Bathing ceremony. I remember thinking she was beautiful with these delicate feathers that covered her wings, but as she got closer, I could have sworn I saw her face shift. It was only for a second, but it was terrifying. She didn’t say anything to me, but I felt a scape on my ribs as she set me down.” Laney wrapped her arms around herself and let her gaze drift upward to take in the aurora.

Lena remembered the contorted features of the Aurynn’s face and the roar it emitted. She was glad they’d avoided the creatures up until now. If she was able to free the Goddess, it might not even matter.

On the other side of the fire, Riley was laughing as Taya told her a story about one of the new guards. In that moment, she didn’t look like the hardened general Lena had come to know. There was mirth in her eyes and an ease in the way she talked. When she was finished, Riley pulled out a

wrapped item from her bag and handed it to her. Lena looked away, trying to give the two some privacy, but curiosity got the best of her. Taya unwrapped the item, and her mouth fell open. She grasped Riley's hand and squeezed it before leaning over, planting a kiss on her cheek and taking an enormous bite out of what appeared to be a pastry of some sort.

Lena rose and wandered into the trees, intent on finding the eleuth. She wanted to make sure it was okay, especially after seeing its wing tucked closer to its body. Plus, there was another matter to attend to if the eleuth was to join them on the rest of their journey.

She found it easily, perched on a large branch a few feet away from her tent. It was licking its paws and rubbing its face, likely after a meal. It paused when it saw her coming and blinked at her curiously. She reached up to touch it with her bandaged hand, and it squawked, leaning away. Lena sighed and stepped back.

"All right, after today," she told it, "I've decided you need a name. Earlier, with the birds, well—I was worried and didn't know how else to get your attention."

The eleuth just blinked again, ears twitching.

"Do you have a name?" she asked.

The eleuth cocked its head slightly, and Lena sighed. But then it jumped from the tree and eyed the ground. Lena looked down and wondered if it was searching for something. The eleuth chittered and lay on the ground. After a moment, it sat up and looked at her, eyes intent, and then looked at the ground again.

Does it want me to lie down? You know what, why not? she thought. Lena lay down on the ground and watched as the eleuth came around and sat next to her forearm. She lifted her arm, and the eleuth squawked again, this time more loudly than the first.

"Okay, okay, I get it, no touching," she said, putting her hand back down.

This was ridiculous, but also, Henry had told her to "look to the eleuth" so here she was, lying on the ground and following its commands.

Then, the eleuth bared its teeth. Lena's eyes went round, and she sat up. In response, it leapt backward and chittered again. She stared at it, but it maintained its distance. Slowly, it began to bare its teeth again in what looked like a reluctant smile, albeit a scary looking one, and then stepped a little closer to her. Lena's heart was pounding in her chest, but she sensed

she was in no danger, the skin of her wraithwound unresponsive to the situation. She looked down to her exposed forearm and held it up. Not to try and touch the animal but in offering. The eleuth took another step closer and showed its teeth again, inching closer to her forearm but maintaining eye contact. It stopped just before reaching her arm and then looked up at her again.

"Are you saying you're going to bite me?" Lena asked.

The question sounded ridiculous when she said it out loud. The eleuth pulled away a little and chittered. This was insane. Was she really going to let it bite her? She thought of all that could result from an animal bite: infections, tissue damage, and disease were just a few of things that came to mind, and yet . . .

"Is it going to hurt?" she asked.

The eleuth chittered again.

"Okay," she said slowly, "so it's going to hurt. Am I going to be okay afterwards?"

The eleuth blinked once.

"You're going to bite me, and it's going to hurt, but I'm going to be okay after?" she confirmed.

The eleuth chittered once more.

Taking a deep breath, Lena lay back on the hard ground and extended her arm. It approached slowly, baring its teeth, and then made eye contact, as if asking: *Are you ready?*

"Do it," she said quickly, choosing to focus on the dancing auroras above her instead.

The eleuth didn't hesitate. It bent down and opened its mouth wide. Lena shut her eyes just before she felt its teeth break through the skin.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-SEVEN

Lena was falling. At first, there was only darkness, but then, there was peace. Warm sunlight shone beyond the darkness of her eyelids, and when she opened them, she was in a familiar cabin. The ache that exploded in her heart was almost too much to bear.

She was standing in her grandfather's cabin. A small, cozy house he'd shared with her grandmother. Her childhood artwork adorned the walls, filling the spaces that weren't already covered by framed pictures of her mother and grandmother. Herbs, ferns, large-leafed plants and tiny succulents lined almost all the other surfaces, even the windowsills. The worn sofa in the living room called to her, promising a level of safety and comfort she hadn't known since she'd woken up with a wraithwound.

She peered outside, letting the sun warm her face, when she caught a glimpse of her grandfather headed towards the trees. Lena's heart seized.

No, it couldn't be.

Lena flung the door open and raced outside, skipping more than half of the entryway steps as she called to him. When he didn't answer, she ran over to grab him, to turn him towards her, to embrace him, but her hands only grasped air as his image rippled in the soft morning light.

Her heart sunk. *An illusion.*

Lena stared at him as walked, taking in the lines of his face, the grey in his hair, and the brightness in his eyes, even though he wore a severe expression. She'd followed him a short distance into the woods when he'd stopped and crouched in front of a small log. She recognized the green tint under his fingernails from his work with herbs, which brought a smile to Lena's face, but when he lifted the log, her smile fell. Behind it was a small

creature. The eleuth. It was gravely injured, and beside it, babies. Lena counted six of them. The eleuth nudged them with its nose. None moved. Tears welled up in her eyes as she felt the creature's pain and devastation.

The illusion shifted, and once again, she was standing in her grandfather's cabin, but in the kitchen this time. He tended to the eleuth, nursing it back to health. It didn't so much as look at him as it lay atop a soft blanket. The image changed again, making it evident that some time had gone by. Once more, they stood in the kitchen, and the eleuth seemed to have recuperated some. It chittered at him softly before nuzzling back into the blanket.

The next scene showed her grandfather standing outside, seeming to converse with the creature, who appeared to be in much better shape. He stood there for a moment before lying on the ground and extending his arm toward the creature. It bit into his exposed skin. When he sat up, he gasped and stared at the creature.

"Your name is—" he said.

But he didn't have to say it out loud. The name Wyn appeared in her mind. The eleuth, *she*, chittered at her grandfather, bending down to lick his wound.

The illusion changed again, and this time, she began to sob in earnest as she watched the eleuth approach her grandfather's lifeless body and begin to whine. The picture disappeared quickly, as if wanting to spare her what happened next, but her tears didn't ease.

When the illusion shifted again, she wasn't sure she wanted to see any more. The landscape settled, and she realized she was just outside Virdeen. Wyn carried a purple flower in her mouth and placed it on a windowsill. *Her* windowsill, and the flower—the God's Eye.

She felt her surroundings melt away, and when they resettled once more, the eleuth looked down on her in the forest. Then again in the manor at the forsaken city, she watched over Lena from rooftops in Enora and as she wandered through the Drowning Woods. Lena crumpled to the floor and cried as Wyn's story became clear. As the realization hit her that she'd never truly been alone.

She was barely able to process all that she had seen when the image before her was ripped away. Lena gasped as she sat up, tears still running down her face, and witnessed the chaos before her.

Wyn had shifted, eyes black and claws extended as she flapped in the air above Lena, screeching in rage. A flaming green sword cut through the air, aimed at deflecting Wyn's attacks.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Cross's voice sounded from behind, and Lena whirled around to see him standing there shirtless, flexing a hand at his side. Taya and Riley ran up behind him, eyes scanning the darkness.

"Wyn— Taryk, stop!" Lena yelled at the soulbound. Wyn screeched at her, albeit halfheartedly, and reluctantly perched atop a branch not far from her head. The eleuth eyed Taryk and screeched loudly one last time before closing her eyes. When she opened them again, they were their usual orange.

"It was hurting you," Taryk said incredulously.

"No—that's not . . ." And then she saw the bleeding scratches on his face.

She turned to look at Wyn, and she could have sworn the animal shrugged before huffing at them and turning away.

"I tried to nudge it off you with my boot, and it attacked me," he added.

Oh.

He really thought he was helping then. It wasn't difficult to see how he might have thought she was in danger, but also—

"What are you doing here, Taryk?" Cross asked. But Taryk seemed to be more concerned with assessing the injuries on his face.

"I can't see shit out here. Can we have this conversation by the fire?" he asked, pushing past them.

Taya eyed Taryk warily as he made himself at home in front of the fire. She and Riley exchanged another meaningful glance but remained standing. Laney stared at the warrior but quickly averted her gaze when she realized Lena had noticed, and Cross looked like he was ready to throttle the man.

"Don't make me ask you again, Taryk," Cross warned.

Taryk was busy patting his face with a cotton handkerchief and let the silence drag on for a moment before he replied at last, "Things have been . . . strange, and I've begun to wonder if you and your group know what's going on."

Cross's eyes narrowed, and his hand twitched near his dagger. She could sense the fury pouring off him. Despite the tense situation, Lena caught a glimpse of his muscled torso and was relieved to see the absence of black

veins spiderwebbing from his newly bandaged injuries. She caught Taya marking the same thing.

“You are not welcome here. Not now, not ever. Leave,” Cross demanded.

Taryk looked to Lena as if waiting for her response. She had no idea what was going on between them, but if Cross was asking him to leave, it had to be for good reason. When she didn’t respond, he stood.

“Fine,” Taryk said, tucking the bloody handkerchief into his pocket and heading back towards the trees. “See you around, Cross.”

A nudge at her side alerted her to the eleuth’s presence. Lena sat on a flat stone, and the eleuth jumped up next to her, leaning over to lick her wound. Immediately, the pain ceased. Stunned, she inspected the puncture wounds on her arm and gave Wyn a grateful smile. Wyn blinked at her in response and then bounded off into the trees. Lena half wondered if she was going to terrorize Taryk on his way back to wherever he’d come from.

Taya rounded on Cross. “He’s been following you two for some time now. Why?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Cross said, still fuming.

“If he’s going to be a problem I need to know,” she pushed.

“I said, I’ll take care of it,” Cross replied before stalking off.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-EIGHT

That night she dreamt of her grandfather. She saw him more clearly than she had in years: The wrinkles at the corner of his eyes when he smiled. The look of amusement on his face as she searched the house to look for little trinkets he'd hidden for her, a game they played often. But what she remembered the most was the way he smelled of fresh herbs, mostly mint, and his warmth. Not just in his embrace, but the kindness and love that radiated from him, and not just for her but for everyone.

The next morning brought a heaviness with it that she couldn't seem to shake. The air outside the tent felt dead, and the tension that rippled off the others was palpable. Even Laney wore a grim expression as they ate a light breakfast and packed the horses. Next to her, Laney whispered a prayer to the Goddess, and Lena wondered how someone who had also endured so much loss still retained so much light. She couldn't help but wonder why the maiden still believed in the Goddess when faith was one of the first things she'd lost in the onslaught of grief.

Lena halted her preparations the moment she saw Cross. He was sporting a split lip and a blossoming bruise at his cheekbone. She opened her mouth to speak but decided against it. He'd been distant ever since they'd left The Whispers, and she didn't want to push him.

By the time they stopped for lunch on a ridge several hours later, she was ready to push. He stalked past the group, which was busy tending to the horses, and towards the ledge. Lena followed.

"What happened to you?" she asked. When Cross didn't answer, she stepped up next to him on the ledge. Tracking his gaze, she spotted what he was looking at. Just beyond the ridge, a man approached on horseback.

Taryk.

“Cross, what happened to your face?” she asked, a little softer this time.

“What happened to your hand? Your arm?” Cross shot back.

“I burned it and—never mind. What’s going on with you?” she asked again, concern evident in her tone. Cross seemed to soften at this, blowing out a breath and letting his head hang. When he looked up, she read an apology there.

“We had a chat last night,” he said, nodding once in Taryk’s direction. “I thought he’d heed the warning, but it looks like I’ll have to be more convincing next time.”

“Why?” she asked, unwillingly to let it go.

“The wound I had. The one you healed when you first found me in my tent,” he clarified. “It was from an infected ursus, and I only got it because of Taryk. Prior to that, we’d been friendly with each other, but I don’t trust him,” he said. Horror must have flashed on her face because he added, “It’s not as simple as you’re imagining—” He sighed, collecting himself. “The short of it is, I wouldn’t have been injured had it not been for him.”

Lena glanced beyond the ridge again, taking in the small figure making its way toward them. Cross grasped her chin, gently pulling her face back toward him. When their eyes met, the air around them became charged, the tiny hairs on her arms rising.

“Who was that? The one that came after you yesterday?” Cross asked, his sapphire blue eyes searching her face.

“Vince. He, uh— I had a run-in with him in the Overgrown Forest, where I killed one of his men in self-defense, and then again in Enora, when I was captured.” She shrugged off the ache in her chest at the thought of Jessa. “He meant to deliver me to the Commander, to take my head or experiment on me. I’m not sure. They must have done something to him after I escaped . . .”

Her voice trailed off as the anger that seethed beneath those brilliant blue eyes guttered. Cross took a step back, releasing her chin, something like devastation flitting across his face, but the expression was gone just as quickly as it’d appeared.

“And what, uh, what happened to your arm? Did the eleuth really bite you?” he asked, shifting uncomfortably as she brought up her arm to show him.

“Yes, she did, but it wasn’t to harm me. It was like a means of communica—wait, do you see that?”

The puncture wounds on her forearm had healed completely, and instead of a scar, there were interspersed dots, connected by thin lines. The marking was nearly invisible, only shimmering slightly in the dim light when she moved. She had never seen anything like it although it reminded her of the constellations outlined in astrology books.

“Somehow, I’m not surprised. Eleuths are rare, elusive creatures,” Cross said. “Not much is known about them at all.”

Lena nodded. Cross stood there, taking in the details of her face before he seemed to lock away his emotions once more.

“We should go,” he said, turning to leave.

She stared after him as he strode away, the charge in the air going with him.

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CHAPTER

FIFTY-NINE

An heavy sadness settled over Lena the further along they rode through the mountainous terrain. She'd have to find the temple on her own after she entered the gate. After the last several weeks, she'd gotten used to the company. Her final hope resided with the eleuth, praying that somehow Wyn would be able to enter with her.

Laney's soft voice pulled her from her thoughts: "I think we're getting close to the entrance."

Rounding the bend, Wyn screeched from above just as Cross came to a sudden halt, yanking on Kharon's reigns. In front of them was a break in the trail, like a landslide had taken that portion of the terrain with it. And sitting proud on his horse across the gap was Taryk.

He must have taken another route in an attempt to cut them off and ended up on the right side of the slide. But before anyone could say anything, Laney slid off her horse and walked over to the drop off.

"Careful not to get too close, Laney. That part of the slab could be loose," Riley called. But Laney didn't turn to look at her.

"Who are you?" she shouted across the distance.

Taryk didn't seem to know how to respond, confusion flitting across his face.

"Your *name*? What is it?" Laney demanded.

"Taryk Blaise," he said.

"Are you a friend or an enemy?" she continued.

"I—um, a friend," he answered, his voice going up in pitch at the end of the word, making it sound more like a question than an answer.

"Then help us across," she commanded.

“Laney—” Cross began, but she cut him off.

“No. The entrance to the temple is just shy of a hundred meters behind our *friend* there. We don’t have time to turn around and work our way back up. He’s already over there, and he’s *going to help us*.” She said the last part of the sentence loudly so Taryk could hear.

Stunned, the others just watched; Taya’s mouth slightly parted while Riley lips curved into a smirk.

Pulling out a length of rope, Taryk inspected the mountain side for a moment and then secured the end around a large boulder after testing it for stability. Then, he tossed the rope over the gap to Cross, who caught it easily. Cross held the end of the rope for a moment, unmoving. It wasn’t until Laney walked over to block his view of Taryk with hands on her hips that he moved. After securing the rope on their side, Laney pulled on it to make sure it was taut and began to traverse the side of mountain. They all gaped at her as she moved, testing out stones and small boulders to see if they were secure before continuing.

She made it all the way to the other side and then called to Taryk, “Come help me, please.”

And he did.

For a tall, fearsome warrior, he seemed completely thrown by Laney. That was confirmed when he cast an incredulous glance toward Lena, who shrugged in response. Lena had no idea what Laney was doing, but whatever it was, it seemed to be working.

“Can—may I?” he asked, fumbling over his words as he held out his hands near Laney’s waist.

Laney nodded and he pulled her off the mountain as if she were nothing more than a feather on the wind. Once her feet were on the ground, she squared up to him and tilted her head up to look into his face.

“What’s the deal between you two?” she asked, shoving a thumb in Cross’s direction. “Did he do that to your face?”

Lena’s eyesight *was* better in the strange dim light, but she hadn’t noticed the bruising on his face. Even so, she could have sworn a flush crept up his neck. After a moment, he straightened and nodded.

“Why?” she asked him curtly.

“I . . . lured him into a fight that resulted in an injury.”

The look on Laney’s face demanded further explanation.

“I was working on *completing a task* and thought Cross might be able to help me,” he added, turning to look at Cross.

Cross was working something out. There was something about what Taryk had said, the words he’d enunciated, that caught his attention. And then, he nodded at Taryk. Just *nodded*. The muscles of his jaw relaxed, and his expression changed from one of anger to neutral disinterest.

“All right. Well, now that we’re friends, you can’t lure any of us into danger, okay? Friends don’t do that. We help each other, like we did before, agreed?”

Taryk took in each of their faces before turning back to Laney and nodding his agreement.

“Yes,” he said simply. And that was that.

Laney turned to the group as if surprised they were all still astride their horses. “Don’t just sit there. Come.”

They all spurred into action, dismounting their horses. Riley went as far as to murmur an apology.

After ensuring the horses were secured, Taya and Riley made their way across. Taryk offered to help the women after they’d crossed but neither accepted. Then it was Lena’s turn. Her hand ached at the mere thought of gripping the rope, but she sucked in a breath and began the traverse. Cross watched silently as she worked her way across. The tendons in his neck were on full display, and the set of his jaw tensed once more. Lena tested her weight on each step before committing, lest she trigger another land slide. A screech from Wyn set her nerves on edge.

“Lena, it’s one of the Aurynn. It’s headed in this direction; you have to move,” Cross said from behind her.

Her heart rate kicked up remembering the creatures she’d seen in those death fields. At the thought, something inside her seemed to stir.

No.

Darkness began to creep in at the edges of her field of vision.

No, no, no.

“Lena!” Cross’s voice was full of panic, but she couldn’t seem to turn her head to look at him.

This isn’t happening, not now. In her moment of panic, Lena could only think of one thing to do. A way to shock her body so that she might regain control. Lifting her hand off the rope, she turned her gloved palm to the sky and smashed the top of her burned hand into the nearest stone. The burst of

pain made her see stars, and she clamped her mouth shut to avoid crying out. After a moment, the pain receded, and she felt like she could breathe again. It worked. Lena crashed back into her body and used the momentary reprieve to complete the crossing.

Taryk eyed her warily as he helped her off the rope. Cross was at her side in an instant, as if he'd leapt over the gap instead of using the rope to traverse the mountainside.

"I don't think it's spotted us yet," Laney said. "Let's go. The entrance is this way."

They ran, following Laney as she scanned the terrain and began to mumble to herself:

"MARKED BY AN ARCH, the temple awaits.
Crafted of bone and petrified slate.
Stand below, watch the world unfurl
To enter you must be marked by two worlds."

"LOOK FOR AN ARCH! MADE OF SLATE!" Laney yelled to no one in particular.

"There." Taryk pointed towards a crude arch made of blue grey stone. In the sickly grey light, it blended perfectly with their surroundings. Lena had to admit she expected something a little more distinguished and worthy of a Goddess's temple. Riley seemed to be examining the arch closely, but Taya only looked at Cross.

"Laney, what did you say about the arch?" Riley asked.

"The woman I met, she used to recite the verse in her sleep. The part about the arch says it's crafted of bone and petrified slate."

"It seems pretty straight forward to me," Taya interjected. "There's the arch. Go through. We don't have time to dissect every word of some poem."

Lena couldn't help but agree. The Aurynn was getting closer, and every moment they spent out in the open put the others in danger.

"No, there's something odd about the wording," Taryk said, pausing. "My uncle, he's a mason. He says slate signifies harmony among the elements. If the slate is petrified, I would expect things to be unbalanced somehow."

Lena nodded gratefully, hoping to ponder the words later and began walking towards the arch, but Cross stopped her.

“Wait. Just—” He started and then paused.

But Lena didn’t want to wait. The longer she delayed, the clearer it became she would never see them again. See *Cross* again.

“I have to go,” she said, averting her gaze.

Perhaps Cross had been distant because he, too, knew she wasn’t likely to return.

“Wyn,” Lena called, searching for the eleuth. It scampered over to her and nuzzled into her gloved hand.

“She really seems to like the feel of leather,” Riley said.

It struck Lena as an odd comment, but she didn’t have time to react as Laney flung her arms around Lena’s neck.

“I’m so happy I met you. I hope the EverGods bless your path,” she said before stepping back to stand near Taryk. Lena noted the look of awe on his face as he stared at the maiden and worked to hide her smirk.

“Me too,” she said, and she meant it.

Riley hugged her next, and Lena stiffened, afraid the gesture might anger Taya further, but Riley didn’t seem to care.

“Despite what’s between you and Taya, know that you will always have friends in The Whispers,” she said.

Lena’s heart squeezed at that. She couldn’t quite find the words to voice her emotions, so she nodded instead.

When Cross made his way back over, his blue eyes looked dull, troubled, and the gold specks were barely visible.

“I’ll be right here waiting for you when you get back,” he said, reaching for her hand.

Even through the leather gloves, she could feel his energy seeping into her hand. She took in the features of his face, committing them to memory. Wyn chittered and took her place at Lena’s side as the two headed for the gate. As she stepped under it, she turned, hoping for one last glance at her friends.

At first, nothing happened, and then Wyn was flung from her side by an invisible force and landed in a tangled heap near Laney. Lena only just managed to catch sight of the eleuth popping up from the ground and scampering back toward the gate when Cross was shoved toward Lena so

forcefully that he crashed into her. Time slowed as their bodies spun into a fall revealing Taya's muscled form, arms outstretched before her.

Noooooo!

Cross would die; he wasn't meant to enter the arch.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY

Cross wrapped his arms around her as they fell, tumbling through the air in a terrifying freefall. And then they were sucked into a stiff barrier. Lena's boot got caught on something solid, which sent them tumbling backwards. When she opened her eyes, only blinding white filled her vision.

"Are you all right?" Cross asked, lifting himself off her, the contact between them ending too quickly.

She felt his hand grasp hers as he pulled her up to a seated position. Remembering the visual of Taya standing before the arch, arms outstretched, made anger flare bright and hot in her chest.

"I can't believe Taya pushed you through! Why would she do that? She'll be lucky if all I do is push her when we get back! I—"

"Lena. *Lena*," Cross said calmly. "I'm *glad* she did. Now I get to accompany you."

Lena couldn't quite make out his face, but she heard the smirk in his tone.

"I don't think I've ever seen you so exasperated," he said, helping her up.

"I once poisoned an entire unit of the Commander's men after they nearly got my friends killed. They soiled themselves for weeks. I'll be looking for some bitter root powder when we get out of here . . ." A sudden ache pierced her heart the moment the words left her mouth.

Had she really lost so much of herself, so much of her fire and passion to grief? The Lena she'd just spoken of seemed like a distant memory, alive only in the stories shared between friends on a rainy afternoon.

She was shocked to learn that the answer to that question was *yes*. She wasn't that girl anymore. She didn't know who or even *what* she was now. Lena inhaled deeply. Perhaps it didn't matter; she had discovered a new purpose.

"That sounds like a story I'd love to hear some time," Cross said chuckling. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she replied, blinking rapidly as she waited for her vision to adjust.

White made up the entirety of her surroundings, and her eyes strained to make out any details. It was only then that she noticed the change in temperature. It was hot. Very hot. Discomfort seeped through her clothing and settled onto her skin.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "We're on the mountain, just past the threshold. The gate is right there."

Slowly, shapes and figures came into focus. Lush trees and rocks emerged from the blinding brightness.

"Oh, yes, I see it now," Lena replied in his general direction.

She made it several steps before she tripped, extending her arms in front of her to regain her balance. Her heart hammered in her throat, and she squeezed her eyes shut as if that would keep the heat from sinking deeper into her skin. Suddenly, her clothes felt too tight, her pack too heavy.

She felt Cross's presence before he spoke: "Did your vision change after the attack?"

She nodded. "Increased sensitivity during the day, improved vision at night."

Saying it out loud was like adding another nail to the coffin that contained her humanity.

"And the heat?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she answered quickly but then amended, "*Not* fine."

EverGods, how was she going to get through this? Already she'd been incapacitated by the blinding light and now the temperature. Her mind went back to Taryk's warning. He'd been right.

"It might be wise to shed some layers so you don't overheat too quickly."

"Are you asking me to take my clothes off?" she asked, a smirk playing on her face as she pulled off her gloves and reached for her cloak.

When had she become so comfortable around him?

But soon it was his turn to laugh when she had difficulty removing her vest and blouse, her fingertips sore from when she'd aided Taryk.

"May I?" he asked.

Lena nodded, and her stomach dipped at the anticipation of his touch. Cross unbuttoned her vest and blouse with deft hands before sweeping the fabric down and off her arms, leaving only her undershirt. The places his hands had touched her bare skin felt charged, the tiny zaps of energy giving her goosebumps, despite the heat.

"How well can you see in here?" she asked, trying to fight the shiver that threatened to expose her.

"Well enough to avoid small boulders directly in front of me," he said.

She could hear the smirk in his voice. Lena had the intense urge to smack him, but she wouldn't risk missing.

She heard some faint rustling directly in front of her and then the warmth of his hand enveloped hers. She found she didn't mind the heat that came from him.

"My vision might be better than yours in here, but visibility isn't great. We'll keep moving as long as we can and make camp once we find some suitable shelter," he said.

They moved through the trees slowly, making their way up the mountain. The blanket of white was unrelenting, and Lena found it was easier on her senses to keep her eyes closed. Cross was diligent about communicating the details about the surrounding landscape, but that didn't prevent Lena from tripping on smaller roots and rocks entirely. It wasn't long before her ankles were sore. She felt weak and sluggish, the heat sapping her energy.

After what felt like hours slogging through the heat, she could barely stand. The idea of taking another step seemed unfathomable. She pulled her sweaty hand out of his and let her pack slip off, her shoulders sighing with relief at the absence of the weight she carried. She reached for her water skein, fumbling with the lid, each attempt draining the last of her energy.

"Here, let—" but the rest of his words were drowned out by an ear-splitting shriek.

Lena's hands froze on her skein. Despite what appeared to be imminent danger, her mind struggled to clear. She felt like she was submerged underwater, her senses dull. Cross gripped her forearm, the pressure of his

touch conveying alarm. The sound of steel singing as it was freed confirmed her suspicions.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-ONE

Another shriek from above pierced the air, seemingly closer this time. Cross yanked on her arm, pulling her down. It didn't take much for her legs to comply with his request. Lena fell into a crouch next to him when a rush of wind blasted past from above.

"Stay down!" Cross shouted, dragging her forward until her hand met something rough and scratchy.

Tree bark. Distantly, she knew she should be more alarmed but couldn't summon the feeling of panic or fear. The heat continued to accost her, the world seeming impossibly brighter.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to think past the fog in her mind.

"I'm not sure, but it has claw-tipped wings and several protrusions on what I think is the head," he said.

Sand and gravel crunched nearby, and Lena reached out.

"Wait, where are you going?" she asked dumbly, but Cross was already gone.

The whoosh of flames a second later answered her question. The urge to help him was a vague sensation at the back of her mind, but she couldn't get her body to heed it.

She could hear Cross moving about in the periphery, grunting with exertion. A distortion in the white landscape gave her the impression of a body leaping through the air. The creature shrieked again, but this time it was full of fury and pain. Lena waited crouched at what she could only imagine was the base of a tree, the seconds dripping by as slowly as tree sap.

A grunt of pain from Cross cut through the fog a little bit, allowing a small wave of panic and fear to get through. The roar of pain that she heard next broke the dam. The sensations and emotions that had been held back by the effects of the heat slammed into her all at once. Terror filled her veins. Lena stood and looked around frantically, failing to capture the details of her surroundings. She groped around with her hands outstretched until she couldn't contain her fear any longer.

"Cross!" she screamed.

Lena stumbled along, eyes and ears straining to pick up any indication of where he might be. What state he might be in. Just as she was about to scream his name again, she was tackled by a wall of muscle.

"Get down!" Cross's frustrated demand came from behind. Despite the evident irritation in his voice, relief poured through her.

"Are you okay? What happened?" she asked as he flipped her over and once again covered her body with his.

Another blast of air swept over them. Lena reached for his face, and when it seemed intact, she slid her hands over his shoulders and onto his back through something wet and sticky.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"But alive," he replied, already pushing himself up. "If you'd like for me to stay that way, you *have* to stay down. I can't keep track of you *and* that thing at the same time."

"Okay." She nodded.

It was so hard to stay put, especially knowing Cross was in danger, but he was a seasoned warrior. The *best* of them. She had to trust he was capable and would return. *To her*. The thought formed quickly before she could dismiss it. She focused instead on breathing through the heat and listening for his movements. The creature, whatever it was, shrieked again, the sound so loud that she curled onto her side and covered her ears. As she lay there, she felt tiny pricks scuttling across her neck, but the sensation seemed to register only after a small delay. When it finally sunk in, she sat up and reached toward her neck, grabbing where she'd last felt the unnerving sensation. What she felt sent her skin crawling.

A long, segmented insect was attached to her neck.

When she tried to pull it off, she was stung. The bite was excruciating. Lena tried again, pulling at it with her fingers, but as she did so, the insect felt bigger in her hand, like it was growing, ballooning somehow.

Another shriek sounded from above, accompanied by the sound of snapping branches and then a thunderous noise, like an entire tree being felled. At the deafening noise, Lena covered her ears once more, the ground trembling beneath her as she braced against the log. She hoped Cross was okay, but she also knew she needed to tend to the pressing matter that was the insect attached to her neck.

Her thoughts grew murky once more, the fog slowly rolling back in. But it wasn't the heat this time. She'd been right when she'd thought she felt the insect ballooning; it was drinking her blood. Her nails extended at the thought, and Lena wasted no time, sinking them into her own skin beneath the insect, and ripped it off, taking some of her own flesh with it. Lena cried out as it came free but felt her head clearing. She crushed the insect in her palm, making sure to skewer it with her fingernails. Blood, *likely her blood*, spilled from her clenched hand.

"Why are you bleeding?" Cross asked, panting. He crouched down in front of her, placing her pack onto her lap.

"Are you okay?" she asked, unable to keep the panic out of her voice.

"Just a scratch. I've already managed to stem the— Why are you bleeding?"

She extended her palm and opened it. "Can you tell what this is? Or was?"

She knew it was unlikely he'd be able to provide any truly enlightening details, but any clue about the organism could help determine how to tend to the wound.

"Some sort of centipede, I think. Where did you find it?"

"It was feeding off me. Latched onto my neck," she said, fighting a shiver of repulsion that threatened to break out across her body.

Cross placed his hand on her shoulder, the touch ever so gentle, and slowly pulled her forward to get a closer look. He smelled of cedar and leather, mixed with a hint of smoke.

He shuddered. "It doesn't look too bad."

"Did you just shudder?" she asked.

"I—uh, I have a thing about segmented insects," he admitted.

But Lena didn't have time to reply as Cross yanked her off the ground and started swatting at her legs.

"We have to *move*!" he shouted, pulling her by the hand.

But Lena’s legs wouldn’t work. She stumbled as she ran, struggling to keep up. He held her hand firmly and pulled her up the mountain, shouting commands as they ran.

“Low branches up ahead, duck!”

Lena did as he bade, ducking under the low branches where her hair was ripped out of her braid and stray twigs cut at her face. She willed her leaden legs to move.

“It’s the trees. They move and turn into the creatures we’re seeing,” he shouted as they ran.

Lena wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly. Nevertheless, she followed, her breaths coming out in ragged pants. Blood dripped down her back, and her body ached with exhaustion.

“In a minute, I’m going to let go. Run straight ahead, thirty paces, and then stop. No further!”

“But—”

“Lena, please!”

She wasn’t sure her legs would carry her that far without his assistance, but the pleading in his voice strengthened her resolve. Cross ripped his hand from hers, and she stumbled but didn’t fall. Lena ran, hoping she’d be able to calculate the distance correctly through the fatigue.

An explosion went off behind her, and she stumbled once more, fighting the steep incline of the mountain. EverGods, she couldn’t remember what her count had been. She guessed, taking a couple more steps before she was yanked back by the strap of her pack.

She hit the ground and groaned, rolling onto her side.

“There’s a section of the mountain missing here,” Cross panted as he helped her up. “I know you’re tired, but we’re not done yet. We have to move. When I tell you to, I need you to jump.”

“What?” Lena rested her hands on her knees, gulping down air.

“We’ll take a running start. Jump like your life depends on it. Count down from three,” he instructed.

Lena pumped her arms and legs, channeling her energy into explosive momentum.

“Three, two, one—” The last word turned into a scream as the ground disappeared from beneath her feet.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-TWO

Their fall ended so abruptly that Lena's arm was almost ripped from its socket as it took the brunt of her weight when she jerked to a stop. She hung suspended in the air, her only tether to life the iron grip Cross had on her hand.

"I have a hold on a ledge above us. I'm going to lift you up." Cross grunted with effort, as he pulled her up, connecting her hand with the ledge above.

She gripped the rock with trembling hands, ignoring the pain in her shoulder and neck. Using what felt like a tree root, she pulled herself up and then collapsed on the hard ground beneath. Cross collapsed next to her a moment later.

"What was *that*?" Lena panted, barely able to form words.

"The tree roots turned into hundreds of those insects, and the stumps . . . I don't know what those things were, but they had fangs and clawed limbs," Cross said.

"And then we jumped off a ledge but up the mountain?" she asked a little more clearly now that her breathing had evened out.

"We jumped across a fissure in the mountain side, aiming for a ledge below. We must climb up and out of the fissure to continue up the mountain, but we're safe for now."

Lena wasn't sure why she did it, but she reached for him. The heat of his hand sunk into hers as their palms met, and she would have been happy with that. But he didn't stop there.

"I remember," Cross said as he placed her hand on his chest and then covered it with his.

Emotion clogged her throat as she focused on the rise and fall of his chest and the strong beat of his heart. The comfort it brought her was almost overwhelming, and she had to blink away the tears that threatened to spill out.

She wasn't sure how long they lay there, unmoving, but she didn't pull her hand away until her stomach grumbled loudly enough to make itself known. Cross huffed a laugh and gently moved her hand before sitting up.

"I guess now is as good a time as any to eat," he said.

They shared a small meal of dried fruits and cheese. Despite the heat, Lena found she had a little more energy after eating.

"So, of all the monsters you've faced, it's the *segmented insects* that haunt your nightmares?"

"There's just something *unnatural* about them. They've always creeped me out, even when I was a kid." He shuddered again, and Lena laughed. Cross went still next to her.

"What?" she asked stiffening.

"I don't think I've ever heard you laugh before," he said, something like awe in his voice.

"I haven't had much reason to laugh lately," she admitted.

"What about before all of this?" he asked, a gentle curiosity in his voice.

Lena shook her head. "Not then either."

"It's lovely," he said.

And Lena could feel the flush creeping up her cheeks.

"Ready to go?" Cross asked after a moment, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Yes."

Climbing out of the fissure was easier than she expected. Cross guided her, expertly directing the placement of her hands and feet. She'd never had to rely on somebody else so completely, and it was terrifying. She also found that it was easy.

But the heat remained a constant.

They had been trekking up the mountain for several hours, and Lena was relieved they hadn't encountered any other creatures, morphing trees or *segmented insects*, as they continued up the mountain.

Just as the thought materialized in her mind, the mountain began to shake. Lena's knees buckled, and Cross's grip tightened around her hand before tugging her down. For a moment, the trembling ceased.

“What was that?” she asked tentatively. But it was the mountain that answered.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-THREE

Cross's arm tightened around her waist. He held her close as the ground shook violently. She heard rocks come loose around them and tumble down the mountain, and she briefly wondered what other horrors this place would have in store for them. Cross's heart thumped loudly against his ribs, hers matching the same rhythm. A sharp crack split the air, and the ground shuddered and groaned.

"Another fissure opened behind us. We have to run!" Cross yanked on her hand, urging her to upward as gravity tugged on them.

Fear beat a steady drum in her chest as it warred with the heat induced exhaustion and the adrenaline that worked so hard to cut through it.

"We have to climb," Cross said, pulling her in front of him as they worked their way up the steep incline.

Lena lost her balance, arms flailing as Cross's hand cupped her behind and shoved her forward. Luckily, she put her arms out just in time to quell the momentum.

On their hands and knees, they climbed. Cross urged her from behind to feel for hand holds. Unable to escape the blinding white light that assaulted her senses, a dull throbbing had formed behind her eyes, so when Lena spotted a rippling barrier before her, she wondered if she was hallucinating. The ground shook again, and she dug her nails into the stone beneath, her fingers stiff and sore. Rocks slid behind her, and her heart caught in her throat.

She couldn't hide the fear in her voice. "Cross?"

"I'm here!" he shouted above the cracking and groaning of stone.

When she looked up again, the rippling barrier shone closer.

“Do you see it?” she yelled over her shoulder.

“See what?”

“The wall!”

“No!” he shouted back. But it was there, now only about a foot in front of them. “There’s a wall here!” she said.

“It might be the boundary to the temple!” he shouted back, his voice closer now. Lena reached for it, but Cross grabbed her hand.

“Together,” he said.

With joined hands, they reached for the wall, Cross pulling her upwards as he too moved through. The same sensation that had gripped them when they crossed through the gate met them here. They were sucked from the blinding white realm and thrown through into the unknown.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-FOUR

They'd been thrown into darkness. Lena's vision adjusted quickly, and she realized it wasn't dark, just dim, and they still stood on the same mountain. It wasn't blisteringly hot. Instead, it was bordering on cold. The wave of relief that followed was enough to ease the grip of the pounding headache that had been threatening to split her skull.

The sky was a deep violet-red, almost black, and no stars adorned the skies. They no longer stood on an incline. Instead, flat ground stretched out for miles in front of them before sloping upward again in the distance. Bioluminescent moss clung to the sparse tree trunks of towering pines while creeping vines snaked along the ground. A few flowers sprang from the cracks between the mountain and protruding stone structures that stood scattered like sentinels guarding the way.

"Well, we're not at the temple," Lena said, dusting herself off.

"Where are we?" Cross asked, his face blank.

"You can't see." It wasn't a question.

"No." Cross sighed.

Lena couldn't help but wonder if the mountain was testing them. It hadn't escaped her notice that the white realm seemed to play to Cross's strengths while this one played to hers. Or was it targeting their weaknesses?

"Really? Not even the moss on the trees? It glows."

"No," he replied.

"Looks like it's my turn to lead you," she said.

"*Looks* like?" He smirked.

Well, at least he seemed to be taking this new development in stride. Lena reached for his hand, his fingers curling around hers instinctively, like they'd been meant to fit together in exactly this way.

She tugged on his arm, and they began to walk as she guided Cross in the same detailed manner he'd used to guide her. They walked for hours, the terrain unchanging. The adrenaline from the previous part of the mountain had worn off, and her energy was flagging.

"Should we rest for a bit?" Cross asked before she could get the words out.

"If I sit, I'm not sure I'll be able to get back up."

"I'll get you up," he promised.

Lena spotted a fallen log that looked like a suitable place for a break. She led Cross over and backed him up slowly, ensuring the backs of his leg were touching the tree, and then she pushed on his chest gently.

He was midway down, arm extended to feel for the log when Lena shouted, a panicked cry tearing from her throat, "Wait!"

She cupped her hands on his buttocks and pulled upward, halting his momentum.

What might have been a humorous situation was undercut by Cross's muscles tensing and his sober tone.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The moss, it's moving. Take a step toward me, *slowly*."

Cross did as she asked, and they retreated from the fallen tree. As soon as they were three paces away, she left Cross and approached the log, hoping to inspect the moss, when a mass of butterflies erupted from the bark.

"Get down!" she shouted.

Lena threw her arms up to cover her face, tensing as the insects fluttered past, slicing into her skin as they did. Cross did the same, crouching to the ground and growling as the mass of butterflies flitted past. When it fell silent, she ran over to him.

"I'm sorry," Lena half sobbed, the full weight of their situation bearing down on her. "That was so foolish of me! Everything in here is trying to kill us, I should have—"

She shook her head, tears threatening to blur her vision. She found she was grateful for the anonymity of darkness, especially since she couldn't

remember the last time she felt so exposed. She didn't know what she'd expected when she entered the gate, but it wasn't this.

"You warned me in time," he said lowering his arms. It looked like his armor had taken the brunt of the attack.

"I—" But Lena didn't finish her sentence because when her gaze fell upon his back, her mouth fell open. "Your back…"

The armor there had been shredded, along with the skin beneath.

"I took a boost in the last realm. It numbs pain," Cross said as he stood slowly and turned to face her.

"Is it wearing off?" she asked.

"I can make it a while still. What direction?" he asked. It didn't escape her notice that he didn't answer the question.

"One second," she said, reaching for her pack to pull out her blouse.

It was probably a good idea to don more layers, given how fragile human skin was compared to the dangers they'd faced so far. But after a moment of fumbling with the buttons, she'd only managed to slice a hole into the light fabric. Lena huffed in frustration.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to put my shirt back on so I can wear the vest, but the buttons are so small. I've never had long nails before; if you're healing wounds or mulling herbs— they just get in the way." She rambled on, "And now, the only thing I've managed to do is slice through the fabric."

Lena peered down, glaring at the tiny buttons when Cross's large frame entered her field of vision.

"Can I help?" he asked, his voice like a caress. Lena's heart skipped.

"Oh . . . sure, here. There are five," Lena said, guiding his hands to her blouse.

"I remember," he said, a smile kicking up on one side of his mouth.

He felt for the first one and slowly worked it into the corresponding buttonhole. Lena's heart leapt in her chest as his scent enveloped her. She peered into his face, taking in the handsome set of his jaw and the dark lashes that framed his blue eyes. When he was done, his hands lingered at her sternum for a moment.

"There, I think that's all of them."

Lena swallowed, wondering what might happen if they were elsewhere and he were to unbutton her shirt instead. She cleared her throat to chase the

thought away and slipped her arms into the vest, finding the larger buckles easier to fasten.

“I think it’s best if you’re armed too. I won’t be able to react to threats as quickly. Here,” he said, reaching for one of the daggers sheathed at his thigh.

“Wait,” she said, rummaging around for the weapon Eduard had given her. The sight of it brought forth feelings of sadness and regret but also an understanding of how much they cared for her. She reached for his hand and placed it in his palm. “I have a small dagger.”

He ran his fingers over the leather sheath, finding the loop at the top. Then, he unbuckled one of the straps at his arm.

“May I?” he asked, sinking to one knee.

“Uh, yes,” she replied, a flush creeping up her neck.

Lena guided his hands toward her thigh where he fastened the dagger. She shivered at his touch, heat blooming low in her stomach as she looked down at him kneeling before her. It shouldn’t surprise her that he could fasten buttons and strap on armor in the dark.

“That’s better,” he said, straightening. “Which direction are we headed in?”

The terrain changed as they continued. The trees became even more sparse while the stone structures that resembled strange columns grew in number. Despite this, the moss persisted, hanging from the stone structures or on hearty bushes that grew from the cracks. Butterflies burst off the stones toward them anytime they walked too close. The sound prompted them to duck, Cross opting to tuck her into his side to shield her from the assault. When she truly felt like she couldn’t take another step, she squeezed Cross’s hand.

“I’m not sure how much farther I can go,” she admitted.

It was almost strange to think that a prior version of her would have never admitted those words out loud, opting instead to push through despite the consequences.

“Okay. Start looking for shelter. Tell me what you see,” he instructed.

Lena described their surroundings, but there wasn’t much nearby until she spotted a stone structure that turned out to be a cave. It had a narrow opening, which Cross explained would be easier to guard. Inside it was wide enough to accommodate them both.

Lena instructed Cross to sit so she could tend to the wounds on his back. He did as she bade, removing his armor before he sat and exposed the muscles of his tanned back and the crystals embedded up his spine. She couldn't help but stare at them, wondering how they'd been inserted into his skin. While the gouges on his back weren't as bad as the ones that had almost claimed his life near the Drowning Woods, the creature's claws had ripped out a number of the crystal shards. He didn't protest as she went to work, falling into a familiar rhythm of assessing, cleaning, and dressing each wound.

Her pulse picked up every time her fingers grazed his skin, the muscles in his back tensing and releasing as she worked. When she was done dressing his injuries, her eyes wandered back to the crystals.

"What—what are these?" she asked, daring to run her fingers over one of the smooth glassy pieces.

"It's, uh, part of the process," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her mind unable to fathom any sort of process that would result in implants such as these.

"The crystals help the body integrate the magic that binds our souls to the sorcerer. They don't hold any magic; they're more like a conduit."

"What if you're unable to integrate it?" she asked.

"If your body rejects the crystals, then that makes you ineligible to continue. If your mind is incapable of integrating the magic, then it fractures. You only find out by submitting yourself to the process," he said plainly.

Lena was horrified at the thought of undergoing such a brutal process.

"How long does it take?" she asked, tracing over the bandage to ensure it would remain adhered to his back.

"It's different for everybody." He shrugged.

"But for you?"

"Just short of three months."

"And you did it for Kiara?"

Cross nodded. "When we learned she was sick, we did everything to find her a cure. We took her to the best healers, researched similar ailments and possible cures. I visited some of the last remaining scholars, even chased down rumors. For months, I rode out to village after village asking after information that might help her. Eventually, this was the only path left."

“It’s incredible. What you did for Kiara. But what about your brother? Couldn’t he have—”

“My brother is dead,” Cross said, replacing his tattered shirt as he stood.

“Oh. Cross, I—” she started.

“We should get some rest,” he said, turning to lie on his side.

Lena’s shoulders sagged as she watched him settle in for sleep. She should have known better than to ask him something like that. She wasn’t exactly forthcoming about Henry and how he died either. Hopefully, she would have the opportunity to revisit the conversation once they’d had some rest and apologize for prying.

With that thought, she lay down her cloak and settled in, remembering what was at stake if she didn’t free the Goddess. Sleep came at her harder and faster than it ever had before, whisking her away into its embrace.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-FIVE

When she awoke, she felt refreshed, and that sent a spear of panic through her. Something was wrong. Very wrong. Lena sat up and looked around. Cross was gone. She exited the cave and glanced around. Perhaps he'd gone to relieve himself.

But Lena knew that wasn't the case; she felt it in her bones. She looked around frantically, searching for any sign of him, but there was nothing.

"Cross!" she called out, praying he would answer, but it was her own voice that echoed back, sounding like a mockery of her desperation.

Think, Lena, think!

There had to be a way to find him. Cross wouldn't have just left her here. She walked around the cave, studied the ground near the opening, and shouted his name again, hoping to catch a glimpse of him or hear him call out. *Something*. But the only thing she could see was the gods-damned moss.

This couldn't be happening. Not again. She couldn't lose Cross, too. They had survived so much, the latest of those dangers being those absurd butterflies.

Lena blinked. *The butterflies*. *Moss*. Lena whirled around. When they'd first found this cave, Cross had instructed her to describe everything she saw in detail. How many stone structures stood near the mouth of the cave. Exactly how many feet away they'd been in their respective directions and *whether they were covered with moss.* But now, several stone structures were devoid of the strange hanging plant. She almost laughed, hysteria climbing up her throat.

Lena ran to the nearest pillar of rock. *No moss*. She looked around. *There.* Several feet east, or what she could only assume was east, there was another structure that was also devoid of moss. She kept going, having to backtrack several times, and retreating slowly from structures that were still covered in moss, all the while hoping she wasn't following the trail on baseless conjecture. The trail ended at the edge of a cliff, and below, nothing but dark abyss.

No. It couldn't be.

Lena squeezed her eyes shut, her mind spiraling with the possibilities, but they all ended here, with Cross being lost to the darkness below. She looked around, walking up and down the edge, thinking she might see signs of a struggle or blood. There was nothing except for the last remaining stone structure that held no moss. No razor blades with wings. Desperation crept in. *Where could he be? Why would he have come here?*

Lena sank to her knees unable to stop the tears that spilled onto the ground before her. She had no idea what to do next. Lena had really believed following the vacated stone columns would lead her to him, and now she had wandered so far, she wasn't sure she'd be able to find her way back. In her haste to find Cross, she'd left her pack in the cave.

Her tears were absorbed by the ground beneath as if this miserable realm delighted in her despair. But then a glimmer of something white caught her eye. At first, she thought she'd imagined it, and then she wondered if perhaps it'd been some sort of glare from the tears distorting her vision. But it was neither of those things. She picked up a small, circular object. Wiping her tears on the back of her hand, she brought it up for closer inspection.

A button?

Lena nearly ripped the vest off her body as she fumbled to get it off. Reaching for her blouse, she pulled the fabric out to examine the buttons there.

One, two, three, four…

Four buttons.

Not five.

FOUR.

And there, where she'd sliced through the fabric with her nails, there was a button missing.

Lena looked over the edge again. Really looked this time, and there below, she saw a ledge. Leaning further out, she realized the ledge led into a cave. Joy and terror warred within her as she considered how she was going to get down there. Lena scanned the area once more, eyes landing on the creeping vine growing out of several cracks in the stone, but it didn't seem hearty enough to hold her weight. There was also the other matter of what she would do once she got inside the cave. She wasn't sure what she would find or what condition Cross would be in. But her gut told her she couldn't wait.

Shaking her head in disbelief about what she intended to do, Lena pulled the vine over the edge of the cliff and jumped.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-SIX

She'd been right. The vine was not strong enough to hold her weight, but it *had* slowed her fall, only breaking when she was a few inches above the ledge. Lena couldn't help but thank the EverGods for that. Peering into the cave, Lena noted how her skin began to prickle. The sensation was borderline painful, but she didn't stop to consider why her skin had failed to prickle before now despite the dangers they'd faced.

EverGods, she really hadn't thought this through at all.

The darkness inside the cave was almost impenetrable. Her eyes strained to make out the features of the interior, but after a moment her vision adjusted. She had never been more grateful for the changes her body had endured until now. Her heart rate kicked up, and she struggled to control her breathing as a wall of stale air stinking of rot and decay slammed into her.

Lena pulled out the dagger strapped to her thigh, uncertain of how she would wield it, but certain that she would try. She stifled a cry of surprise when her hand slid into something sticky and wet. She swallowed the gag that threatened to give away her position and wiped her hand off. Taking careful steps, she had to pause every so often to let her vision adjust further. A scraping noise past the upcoming bend in the tunnel made her blood run cold. Lena froze, ears straining to determine what the source of the sound might be.

Hands trembling, she summoned the courage to peer around the corner and was utterly horrified at what she saw. A large creature with a flattened, oval-shaped body divided into what Lena considered a head and an

abdomen, loomed over Cross. It had six legs, three on each side and pincers as thick as her arms. At the end of its abdomen was a needle-like stinger.

Cross lay beneath the creature, his face partially obscured by one of its legs. Lena almost wept in relief at the sight of his chest rising and falling, but then a picture of Henry's prone body, bloody and broken flashed before her, and she had to brace herself on the wall to keep from collapsing. Lena took a deep breath and reminded herself Cross wasn't Henry.

When her legs felt steady beneath her, she took a step into the chamber, hoping to get a better look at Cross, but the creature whirled, clicking its pincers in her direction. Lena froze, certain the sound of her heart pounding in her chest would give her away, but the creature stopped short of her. Instead, it began swaying rhythmically a few feet away. After a moment that seemed to span an eternity, it turned away. When it did, she caught a glimpse of Cross's face. He was pale, so pale his skin was a sickly grey. And his cheeks were hollow, a sheen of sweat visible on his forehead.

Just then Cross stirred, mumbling something that made her heart stop.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-SEVEN

"Alina," Cross groaned, her name a whisper on his lips.

She froze in her tracks, staring at the warrior as he lay prone on the ground and wondered if she'd imagined it. Lena never shared her full name with anyone; it was as much a matter of safety as it was a way to keep others at arm's length. At the sound of her name, she had to fight every instinct in her body demanding she run to him. But then, in response, the creature whirled, aligning its stinger with his stomach, and pierced it straight through the armor. Lena nearly vomited at the sight.

Cross stopped moving.

Panic surged through her as she considered her options. The clicking of the creature's legs on stone as it spun around to face Cross made her skin crawl. Lena had been considering how she might use her dagger to get it away from him when a rock skittered across the ground. The creature whirled around once more chasing the stone and began swaying near where it'd landed. She understood then. *Vibration*. It was attracted to noise, which meant Lena would have to disguise each step she took towards Cross. But what of the creature itself?

She considered throwing a rock towards the entrance of the cave, but the bend in the tunnel would prohibit her from throwing it far enough. As she looked around, she spotted the gauntlet on his wrist. It would be a gamble. She wasn't sure how many, if any, potions were inside, but she didn't have any other options, and Cross couldn't wait.

Lena bent down, picked up a stone, and threw it, timing her step to coincide with the impact. Just as she'd suspected, the creature chased after it. Good.

Again. Again. Again. Until she was standing close enough to get a look at Cross's gauntlet. Two vials. One white, one black. White for light, black for attack. One last rock helped her secure the vials, although by this point, the creature was in a frenzy, crawling and spinning around the cave as it hissed. It was now or never, she only hoped she could make it count.

Lena tried not to think of Cross's warning when she'd asked him what might happen if the potions were combined. As quietly as she could, Lena uncorked both potions. Positioning them in one hand, she hurled the glass bottles at the creature and ducked.

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CHAPTER

SIXTY-EIGHT

Black and white flames exploded inside the cave, melding into silver. Lena was instantly blinded by the flash of light. The creature shrieked and thrashed as the silver flames licked up its back. Before she could register what had happened, she was thrown across the cave as the creature slammed into her. Lena scrambled to stand, still gripping the dagger in her hand. But by the time her vision adjusted, it was gone. She searched the cave wondering if it had fled when a stinger descended from above. Time slowed as she watched the needle-like appendage lower before her, aimed for her stomach.

"Enough."

The voice that slithered through her mind was not her own.

Her world erupted in a cloud of glitter black, and Lena was thrown for a second time, slamming into a wall of her own making. A wall in her mind. Once again, Lena found herself trapped in her own consciousness, having been relieved of control over her own body.

Lena felt her body shift. She stood taller, her shoulders back and chin lifted. Lena's nails extended, veins crept up her neck, and her field of vision widened. The details in the cave became painfully clear.

Runa located the creature and stalked toward it, easily avoiding strikes from its stinger and pincers. Something like ancient rage pulsed beneath the calm and precision that fueled her movements. She blasted the creature with a dark force akin to wind or shadows. The monster crawled up the wall, barely dodging the other blasts she sent after it.

Lena could feel the pleasure Runa derived from toying with it, knowing that she could end the creature at any point. It sprang at her from the ceiling

of the cave, but Runa had already anticipated its attack. She tilted her head, taking in the pincers before she used the dagger in Lena's hand to slice them off with movements so quick she would have missed them had it not been her own body delivering the strikes.

Sinking into a crouch, Runa pulled her arm back and flung the dagger straight into creature's head, the blade embedding itself dead center. Still, the creature attacked, jabbing its stinger toward her. Runa sent a blade of shadow that cut the stinger from its abdomen. Green blood poured from the wound, and it whirled around frantically, shrieking as it did. Runa held up a hand and clenched her fist. The animal shrieked louder, as a hole slowly appeared in its abdomen and its flesh began to melt.

When it was done, Lena stood frozen inside herself. Runa inspected the rest of the cave before turning her gaze to Cross. It was then that Lena noticed the black aura that had formed around his prone form.

No.

Runa's apathy rippled through her and yet she walked toward Cross and knelt in front of him. She sniffed his neck, apathy turning to curiosity and then something like vague familiarity. Then, she stood and strode towards the exit of the cave.

"No. Wait. No! You can't leave him like that! You have to help him. We have to help him!" Lena shouted.

Runa stood at the ledge and peered upward. A glittering black cloud materialized around her. No. Not a cloud. Lena could see in her periphery that they were wings. One mighty flap, and they were soaring upwards towards the edge of the cliff above.

No. No. No.

"What are you doing? Go back! We have to go back!"

"I will admit I was curious how you would manage with the warrior's absence," Runa answered. "But I've wasted enough time watching you fumble about. Sleep, human. Your time is done."

"No, you can't just leave him like that!" Lena screamed.

"He'll be dead soon enough. There are matters of greater importance than the life of one human," Runa said.

Lena couldn't breathe; she couldn't think. Numbness began to spread in her chest, threatening to pull her under. But this time she decided she wouldn't go. It was the way Runa had *dismissed* him, his suffering, his *life*.

So reminiscent of the way *she* had dismissed others in her own life. Their concern for her, their interest in her well-being, and their own suffering.

"NO," Lena roared, and her legs obeyed. It was only for a moment. She felt the stab of worry and then the vague sense of amusement that coursed through Runa before she pushed through Lena's resistance and continued.

But it was enough.

Lena ran through every detail she could remember from waking up with a wraithwound and what followed, about her behaviors when she lost control, Henry's interventions, and finally the one thing Henry had advised her to do.

"Look to the eleuth." Wyn. Lena thought of the furry creature that risked its life to defend her, to warn her, to be at her side. Lena thought of how she seemed to understand more than a wild animal might. The connection to her family, her grandfather, and how that came to be.

Love. Lena thought of the love the animal showed her and the love she showed it. She focused on that . . . but, no, no, that wasn't the answer. That wasn't the direction Henry was guiding her in.

She racked her brain for smaller details, but what about them? What about the eleuth? Beyond its connection to Lena and her family, beyond their history, it was a wild animal.

All the while Runa stalked by the stone pillars, headed northwest, in the direction that would put her on a path to head up the mountain. Runa had every intention of clearing this realm . . . and then what?

"Where are you going?" Lena asked. Runa tilted her head, considering, she realized. "Answer me! I'm not going to sleep; I will not go willingly. I will continue to rage at you until you answer me!"

Runa snorted. "Our worlds are colliding. Have you not inferred that from all you've seen? Until I arrived here, we did not know why. How? It must be corrected."

"Okay, yes. Correct it, but go back and get Cross first, please. It won't take you long!"

"You would risk the lives of billions on three separate planets for a man whose soul has already been corrupted?" Runa answered as she prowled onward although Lena thought her interest had been piqued.

"We've all done things—made choices we can't come back from. He's a good person!"

“Do not feed me artifice and falsehoods. There are things you do not know about the warrior. I doubt you’d be so accepting then.”

It was this response that set her rage aflame, this creature, this monster acting like it *knew* her. Just because it had inhabited Lena’s body for some time didn’t mean it understood her or had the same lived experience.

She knew Cross had secrets. Everybody in Reimar had secrets. She could accept that. He’d accepted *her*, knowing what she was, the things she’d done, just like Henry had, and that meant more to her than she could have ever imagined.

It was this thought that threatened to drown her, to pull her into the darkest ocean until she couldn’t distinguish herself from the water pressing in around her. And there had been others. Others who had been willing to accept her, just as she was, so long as she let them in.

Let them in.

Let it *in. Just like Wyn.*

The small creature had accepted her circumstances, even early on. She had mourned the loss of her babies, the loss of her family, but not once had Lena seen the eleuth fight the change, on the contrary, she welcomed it, called on it when she needed it, and used it to her advantage to protect others.

Her heart raced as the realization sparked clarity. Lena had only ever worked to fight Runa and push her out, and instead, she’d only dug her claws deeper into Lena’s consciousness. The only exception had been when she was fighting the Nychtyra. But even then, she’d done so with fear in her heart, and she’d had to bypass Henry’s protection to do it.

Even as an incorporeal presence, Lena felt a bout of nerves as she made the decision. She closed her eyes and settled in within herself.

“To learn, you must do,” she whispered to herself. Then she began to search. Lena looked through the rooms her mind had visited, through heartbreak and regret, through her own light and darkness, until she found something. There. A loose thread.

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CHAPTER
SIXTY-NINE

An electrical network of passageways opened to her in the darkness, and Lena marveled at the sight. She could see where her body, her nerves, veins, and connective tissue ended and where Runa began. Runa's control of Lena's body materialized as darkness that had latched onto every fiber of her being, and yet there was still a clear distinction between the two.

What would happen if . . .

Lena *pulled*. She willed the darkness to come to her, to consume her completely and eradicate the line that distinguished Lena and Runa as separate entities. Lena commanded it. Demanded *all* of it. And it came, suffocating her, drowning her until the distinction between them was lost.

Lena crashed into her body so hard she stumbled backward, having lost the grace and assuredness with which Runa commanded her body. Runa tried to pull herself back out of Lena's control, but Lena held firm. She breathed deeply, maintaining her focus on drawing the darkness.

The world around her morphed. The sky looked lighter; details in the world around her became clearer. The moss now emanated a black aura that rippled away from it, as did the strange flowers growing in the cracks. Only the vines at her feet were clear of it. Her sense of smell had sharpened, and she felt stronger. So much stronger. She barely had time to notice anything else when she was yanked out of her body and slammed back into her own mind.

No. No, no, no.

She'd lost her focus. Lena tried again to pull the darkness toward her, but nothing happened. She tried again and again. Nothing. Lena's heart

pounded, her breathing turned ragged as she thought about Cross lying in that cave, alone in the dark, dying.

It had worked. She'd commanded the wraith, even if for a short time. Lena racked her brain thinking of how she might regain control because there had to be something she was missing. Lena focused on what else she'd seen in Wyn. What else she might have learned. Her mind paused on a memory of the furry creature in the plains when they'd been attacked by the Nychtyra. The eleuth had trouble with the shift afterwards. Perhaps it was just something she needed to practice. To master. Lena took a deep breath and then a few more. When her heartbeat had slowed and her breathing returned to normal, she tried again.

The world around her evolved with details and depth. *It worked.*

"You know nothing of—" Runa's voice slithered into her mind.

Lena slammed a mental door shut, cutting her off. She would not relinquish control of her body again, no matter how much Runa clawed at it.

She spun toward where Cross lay in the creature's den and ran. She moved quickly, propelled by an unfamiliar strength. She skidded to a halt when she noticed the familiar entrance to the cave she'd left her pack in and yanked it off the ground before bolting back out. It didn't take long to find her way back to the edge of the cliff. Without hesitation, Lena jumped, landing in a crouch on the ledge below. This time, her body absorbed the impact. She darted through the winding passageway and emerged in the cavern where Cross's body still lay. Falling to her knees beside him, she laid her hand on his chest and waited.

Thump…

That was all Lena needed before she got to work. She cut the buckles on the side of his armor with the swipe of a nail and peeled it back, but what she saw underneath made her stomach turn.

How many times had he been stung?

Lena held back a sob as she took in the severity of his injuries.

"Let me in Lena. If it's the warrior you want, I can save him," the voice slithered in from her mind, and she realized she'd loosened her focus on the shift. She drew the darkness all the way back in, silencing Runa.

Lena dumped out her pack, picking through the medicinal herbs and remedies that she'd brought. Nothing. There was nothing useful in her pack. Not for this. She'd managed to get back to Cross while he was still alive,

but she couldn’t help him. Panic began to creep in again, and with it, Runa’s voice.

“Let me in. Or watch him die.”

Panic swirled deeper in her gut as she contemplated her options. Black tendrils began to appear in his aura, and she knew the time to decide was now. But she couldn’t trust Runa to save him.

“You would let your aenigma die?” Runa asked.

Lena had no idea what that meant, but she refused to take the bait.

“Your kind cannot comprehend what you’re up against. The Goddess isn’t a docile maiden intent on aiding humans. The very idea of humanity was conceived by the spark that is her existence. The very planets you’ve glimpsed reside in her embrace. The fact that you haven’t even considered who or what could have trapped a Goddess in the first place implies that you are woefully ignorant and unprepared for what you might face in the temple.”

“I don’t care about the gods-damned temple right now!” Her voice echoed in the cave. As if in response, Cross’s arm twitched.

“Let me in, or it won’t be your subpar healing skills or inexperience with riddles that kills him. It will be your obduracy.”

But Lena was no longer listening to Runa’s taunts. Cross’s arm had twitched a second time. She took his wrist in her hands and examined his gauntlet. It was empty after removing the last two bottles, the other potions having been used in previous fights. She tried to remember which potions he’d used when, but she couldn’t get her brain to sift through the last day.

If only he had a healing crystal or some other potion to counteract— Lena froze. There was one more potion in this gauntlet; she knew there was. Cross had reached for it when she’d been attacked by the Nychtyra and that was before they’d reached Lythara where he’d received more. Lena studied it closely, inspecting the empty slots that usually held the larger bottles.

There!

At the top of the gauntlet was a small button that Lena had mistaken for a rivet. She pushed on it, and out popped a long, thin vial. Upon closer examination, Lena realized it was actually two vials. One of them was for pain, that she knew, but the other . . . Lena wasn’t sure what it did. She stared at the vials, considering their size, the lengths whoever designed the contraption went through to conceal the button, and the fact that it was

paired with a pain medicine, she had to believe it was some sort of last resort for severe injuries.

Before she could dwell on it any further, Lena pulled the vials apart and poured the contents into his mouth. The wait was eternal, the moment stretching out before her. Just when she thought she might have guessed incorrectly, his breathing shifted, becoming deeper, and some of the color returned to his face. Lena released a shaky breath, waiting to see what else the potion would accomplish, but the wounds in his stomach, although improved, were still severe.

Cross groaned, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

"Not enough," the voice hissed. *"Pity, especially when you have exactly what you need nearby."*

"What?"

Lena glanced at her medical supplies, but then she heard a clicking noise toward the entrance of the cave.

Runa *laughed*.

The panic that gripped her then threatened to devour her whole. The thought of facing another one of those creatures inside this cave with Cross in such grave condition made her stomach lurch.

But Lena cut it short.

She would not panic; she couldn't. Not if she had any hope of saving Cross.

Her brother had told her once that her power lay in the parts of herself that she kept hidden. Lena had been many things, selfish, irresponsible and self-absorbed, only concerned with her own grief, but she was also clever, persistent, and *angry*.

She was hardly the woman she used to be. Now, she was something different.

Lena was a monster *too*.

And it was time she started acting like it.

She tilted her head to listen, her ears able to pick up noises that her human hearing could never attune to. Lena made her way to the cave entrance and peered out. There, above her on the cliff face was another creature, albeit smaller than the last. It clicked its large pincers together several times, the noise much sharper, likely searching for any vibrations.

Lena held her breath, hoping the creature would retreat, but it didn't. Instead, it began inching down the cliff face. She couldn't risk letting the

creature inside the cave. Luckily, she'd been paying attention when Runa had summoned her power before and felt innately that her body would remember too, like a path carved through her understanding.

Imitating what Runa had done when she killed the first creature, Lena sought to draw forth energy from the wraith that had helped herself to Lena's body. Surely, if Runa could use Lena, Lena could use her too.

At first, nothing happened, and doubt threatened to flood her conviction, but then, she felt it, something like a shift in the air around her, and a crackle of power came to life in her palm. She couldn't see the energy but knew it was there. Now if only she could figure out how to aim it. Lena took a step outside of the cave to gain a clearer shot, and the animal attacked. Rotating its flat, oval-shaped body faster than Lena could have anticipated, it jabbed its stinger at her, barely missing her face. She lost the energy she'd collected in her hand and ducked into the cave, avoiding the creature's second attack.

She could feel Runa's emotions shift from mild amusement to bewilderment, which threw her focus.

"*Stupid, human*!"

"Shut up! Unless you're going to be helpful!"

But speaking had been the wrong thing to do because the creature went into a frenzy, crawling on spindly legs around the entrance of the cave and jabbing its stinger into the stone all around her. Lena exhaled a shaky breath and summoned her focus, working to pull the energy back. When she'd gathered it in her hand once more, she attempted to aim it, by extending her hand. A sorry gust of black wind blew over the creature.

EverGods!

Dodging several more strikes, just barely, Lena ducked back into the tunnel and pulled more into her hand, this time holding it there until it felt stable. Hopefully she'd be able to send a more concentrated blast toward the creature.

"No! Not concentrated, spread it out like a net to attribute for the creature's weight!" Runa hissed, guessing at what she intended to do.

Well, that was *helpful.* Lena visualized a net and sent the energy outwards. A powerful blast knocked the creature back, forcing it to retreat to level ground above the cave. A tiny spark of hope ignited in her chest, and Lena stepped out onto the ledge, waiting. She held her focus on the building energy in her palm, but the creature did not come. Just when she'd

thought that she'd scared it off, she felt a sharp pinch at her ankle and yelped as she was yanked toward the edge. Lena dug her clawed hands into the stone to keep from being pulled off entirely. One hand embedded into the stone; she peered down to see the creature turning to aim its stinger.

Lena lost control of her free arm, and black veins spiderwebbed up her fingers and into her wrist, disappearing underneath her blouse. The power there grew, but so did Runa's influence.

No.

"I will not die in this pathetic body," Runa growled as she fought Lena for control.

But this *pathetic body* belonged to her, and she would see to it that Runa never regained control of it ever again. Lena let that thought work its way through her. She let it steel her veins and fortify her resolve. Lena pulled strength from the desperation she felt and shut Runa out once more.

She didn't have the leverage to pull herself back up, and kicking at the stinger wasn't an option lest she accidentally graze the needle-sharp point. Instead, she wrenched as much power as she could from inside, gathering up a sizable amount in her palm and extended her hand. A concentrated blast was the only thing she could manage, but it hit its mark, striking the creature's abdomen and sending it plummeting into the abyss below. After several long seconds, she heard the impact of its body splattering.

Heart pounding, arms trembling, she pulled herself onto the ledge and scrambled through the tunnel toward Cross. She had not missed Runa's taunt earlier. There was something nearby that could heal him, and apparently it had something to do with a riddle.

Cross moaned, and her breath hitched, but he didn't stir again.

Lena checked his stomach, relieved to see it had healed a smaller degree more, but his injuries were still devastating. She looked through her supplies again, the disappointment somehow greater the second time, but there truly weren't any other options.

She thought back to the words Laney had recited, and the warning Taryk had shared about the environment here. *Unbalanced*, he'd said. And it had been. The first realm skewed toward Cross's strengths, and the second realm skewed to hers. But there had been other signs too. Where one might typically find safety, there'd been danger.

In Reimar, the trees had grown abnormally large to protect the realm. In the white realm, the trees morphed into dangerous creatures. *But what about*

here? She drew a blank, bringing her hands to her face. She wanted to scream, but that would likely only serve to draw other creatures to them. Lena took another breath, willing her heart to slow and her mind to clear. To examine the logic.

If this realm somehow mirrored her own—which was a safe bet because for something to be unbalanced that would indicate there was balance to be found elsewhere—then whatever Runa said could help Cross had to be something that might kill him there.

But what?

"Tell me!" she demanded, but the wraith was silent.

Lena shook her head, no doubt if the wraith told her, the information would come with some sort of condition. But she didn't know what it could be. And if she didn't figure it out—

Her anger rose swiftly, and she cursed the gods-damned realm and the fact that she'd come to care deeply for a man who should be her enemy. A man whose oath dictated he should have tried to kill her, just like everything else in this realm had tried to kill them.

Well, everything, except . . .

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY

Lena broke off a piece of the vine hanging over the cave entrance and examined the plant. It was the only thing here she'd touched that hadn't tried to kill her. It had vibrant green leaves and a sturdy stem. Lena considered. In Reimar, sometimes it was the unassuming plants you had to watch out for, but then she remembered how the flowers growing from the cracks above had given off a black aura. This plant did not.

And then she felt it. A reluctant beat of approval from within. Was that approval coming from *Runa*? It *was*. Despite her current predicament with the wraith, she was grateful for the confirmation, lest she kill Cross herself by poisoning him further.

Taking the plant back into the cave, Lena got to work. Never in her time as a healer had she worked so meticulously to sterilize a wound and create a dressing made from the xylem sap and the leaves themselves.

His body responded to it almost immediately although the change was minor. Cross moaned again, this time stirring as his breathing deepened. She set her palm on his chest, the bare skin of her hand tingling as she felt for the beat that kept her grounded and tied her to her humanity with purpose.

"Cross?" Lena swept the hair off his damp brow with her free hand.

"Alina?" he breathed.

"I'm here," she said.

Cross lifted his arm but couldn't sustain the effort. When he tried again a moment later, it came to rest over her very own, still placed over his heart. A warm sensation spread through her chest, and her heart squeezed.

When he opened his eyes, clear blue sapphires shone there, and Lena fought the tears that threatened to gather.

“Still in there,” he whispered.

He *knew* then. It was one thing to remember the action, but another entirely to have guessed why she did it.

“Tell me,” he whispered.

Lena released a shaky breath and nodded, even though she knew Cross couldn’t see her. He squeezed her hand gently, his silence an invitation. And just as she’d felt in The Whispers, she realized she *wanted* to tell him. Even if it meant shining a light on the monster she had become and the atrocities she’d committed.

“The first time I held a still-beating heart in my hand; it was that of an enemy. But the next time . . . she— she crawled to him.” Lena’s voice broke, and she had to pause in order to compose herself. “After I— attacked him, she crawled to him and tried to protect him with her body, even though he was already dead. Turns out it’s just as easy to reach someone’s heart from behind as it is when you’re standing in front of them. I can still feel it. Her heart, clenched in my hand. I can still see them lying there on the ground.”

Cross squeezed her hand again and shut his eyes, nodding.

“Feeling your heartbeat reassures me I didn’t rip your heart from your chest like I did theirs. That I’m still a healer. Still me.”

She’d never spoken the words out loud before. Keeping one hand over hers placed atop his heart, he reached up with the other. Lena guided his hand towards her face where he gently wiped her tears with his thumb. She couldn’t help but lean into his touch.

When Cross opened his eyes again, he wore a haunted expression.

“That *thing,* it fed on my nightmares. I knew that’s what it was doing the moment I saw my brother,” he said, his voice hoarse from disuse.

“Your brother?” she asked.

“Cederic. He’d been scratched by a wraith the night before, likely on his way home from the pub. But we didn’t know it at the time. I walked in on him trying to get past Mirelle to get to Kiara. He died in my arms with my dagger in his heart.” Cross paused, shifting slightly on the ground beneath. “I’ll never really know who I killed that day, my brother or a wraith, because it wasn’t the first time I’d seen him get violent.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lena said. She couldn’t imagine having to kill her own brother.

Cross blinked the memories away, shaking his head. “It was a long time ago.”

Lena flipped her hand palm up on his chest and curled her fingers around his. She squeezed his hand gently as her understanding grew about the circumstances that led Cross to become a soulbound soldier.

“Can you help me up?” he asked, grunting.

“Wait—” Lena protested, but Cross was not waiting.

He turned to his side and slowly pushed himself up into a seated position. When he was leaning comfortably on the wall behind him, Lena checked his dressings and was surprised to see he was healing quickly.

“Well, you no longer look like a pin cushion,” she said.

Cross felt for her hand and planted a soft kiss on her palm. Lena flushed so brightly, she had to remind herself that he couldn’t see her before she spoke again.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“You’ve saved many lives with these hands Alina, way before you ever took them, and even after.”

Lena swallowed thickly.

“Besides, it’s the only part of you I could feel, or I might have chosen a different way to express my gratitude for saving my life. Again,” he said.

Lena huffed a laugh.

“You mean from the *segmented* nightmare you basically summoned to abduct you?” she asked, letting her smile come through in her tone.

“*No*,” he said horrified.

“Yes! And remind me to tell you when we get out of this place what happens when you combine the black and white bottles.”

Cross looked toward his gauntlet, no doubt sensing it felt lighter than before, and smiled, but then the expression withered.

“We should get mov—” he started before a small tremor shook the ground beneath them.

No. Not again.

Lena scrambled to pack the rest of her things. As she did, she explained the location of the cave and how Runa had reached the ground above when she tried to leave him behind.

“You’re telling me that you can fly?” Cross asked, bracing himself at the entrance to the cave mouth.

A surge from Runa had Lena gritting her teeth as she worked to reinforce her mental walls.

“Fly?” Runa laughed coldly. *“Wraiths spend an age learning how to channel energy and shadow simultaneously to ‘fly.’”*

“Flying is not an option,” Lena corrected.

“Is she speaking to you?” Cross asked, his voice low.

“Yes, I can only shut her out when I’m focused,” she said, digging her nails into the stone to keep her feet under her as another violent shudder shook the ground. Lena released the cave wall and looked to her nails. “I have another idea.”

The moment the ground stopped trembling, Lena climbed onto Cross’s shoulders, and with the support from the rest of the creeping vine that still hung above her, she dug her nails into the slab, creating small holds for Cross to use.

She had to pause several times as the shaking resumed, her heart pounding in her chest as she clawed deeper into the stone to avoid falling off. Runa hissed in the back of her mind; her entity diminished inside of Lena.

When Lena finished, she guided Cross up, ensuring he also had a grip on the vine to steady him. Face pained, he still managed to move gracefully, albeit slowly, as he found the holds she’d carved into the rock face and used them to climb up. He took her direction beautifully, and soon she was pulling him up and over the ledge.

During one particularly violent tremor, Lena pulled Cross into her as she braced alongside one of the stone structures. He tucked her head under his chin and held her, the heat of him seeping into her skin more noticeably without his armor on.

A feeling of disgust, laced with something like longing, echoed deep within her. Lena shuddered as she pulled on Cross’s hand gently to lead him onward.

“I—I can feel what she feels,” she told Cross as they walked toward the slope of the mountain north of their position. Lena remained vigilant as they walked, hoping they wouldn’t see any more of the enormous stinging creatures.

Cross squeezed her hand. “I think it has something to do with this place. I believe it’s a realm between worlds. It’s possible the veil between all that exists is thinner here.”

Lena considered, thinking back to how her wraithwound failed to alert her to danger and Runa felt closer.

“I feel more wraith in here than I do human,” she admitted. “What if I—”

“You won’t,” he said, squeezing her hand again. “Wraiths are usually more animal-like, less human.”

Runa seemed to scoff at that.

“What?” Lena asked out loud, not expecting answer.

“He speaks of lesser wraiths,” Runa answered with a flit of annoyance.

Cross had begun to repeat himself, but she squeezed his hand. He fell silent guessing she was speaking to Runa.

“And you are not a lesser wraith?” she asked, but when a violent calm emanated from the wraith inside her, Lena fortified her barrier before squeezing Cross’s hand once more.

“Apparently, those with more animal-like presentations have been attacked by lesser wraiths. *She* is something else,” Lena said, feeling both unsettled and curious.

“She spoke to me. In the dungeons,” Cross said.

Lena figured that was how he’d known her full name, but hearing him say it sent chills down her spine.

“There is something she knows about me, Alina. I suspect she’ll wait until the time is *right* for her and *wrong* for you to tell you. But I can’t be sure she won’t manipulate the message either. No matter what happens— I think Taryk has already figured it out. Ask him. Before you believe any of it, ask him.”

Lena’s heart sank. Runa confirmed it, something like malicious joy pulsing inside her.

“Alina?” Cross asked, and it was only then she realized she hadn’t yet answered him.

“I will,” she promised, setting her sights on the summit.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-ONE

The red-violet sky was unchanging as they walked over the rocky terrain for what seemed like hours. The summit of the mountain was plainly visible and yet not much closer than it had been when they set off, but at least the tremors had ceased and the number of stone columns with the hanging moss were sparser.

They stopped long enough for Lena to check Cross's dressing, and she was thrilled to learn that his stomach continued to heal rapidly. The skin there was still raw and pink but healthy. Bending slightly to get a better look, she ran her fingers over the dips and grooves of his muscled abdomen, marveling at the new skin there. Cross didn't stop her this time. It was only when he growled softly that she noticed the bulge in his pants and stilled her hand. Lena's blood went molten, and it was only the hint of amusement from Runa that made her keep her composure. Cross felt for her shoulders and pulled her up gently, his breaths coming in barely controlled pants.

"You're testing my self-control, Alina," he said, his voice rough and low.

Her full name on his lips made her feel like she was whole again, no longer a shadow of herself.

"I—You look so good, your stomach I mean, the injury, it's mostly healed," she stuttered before clamping her mouth shut.

A smile played on Cross's lips, no doubt having realized how flustered she was. Lena sent a silent curse to the sky. *EverGods damn me.*

Cross wrapped his arms around her, and they stood there together for a long moment, tiny zaps of energy zinging where their bodies touched. Lena reached up and placed her hand over his heart. Slowly, he moved his hand

to her shoulder and then felt for the angle of her jaw, running his fingers up to her chin. She stared up at him, taking in the features of his face. He was so beautiful.

“I’d give anything to be able to see you right now,” he said.

“I’m glad you can’t,” she teased.

“Not being able to see you makes my world feel incomplete. You are my light through the darkness, Alina.” He placed a gentle kiss on her brow, having marked its location with his thumb.

A heaviness settled deep into her gut as Cross slowly released her, her body protesting his absence immediately.

They both had secrets; she’d known that long before now. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever had grown between them would be over once they left this place. Lena glanced to the summit and reached for his outstretched hand.

It was only then that she thought to wonder why Runa was being so quiet.



By the time the mountain started sloping upward, they had stopped again to rest and eat. Cross had somehow managed to salvage his armor, working the belts and straps to ensure it stayed on. The thought of almost having lost the warrior in that creature’s den made her shudder, and she had a sudden urge to place her hand over his heart. Shaking the thought from her mind, she decided to focus on their strategy to reach the temple that was now visible at the top.

She shifted uncomfortably on her feet, working up the nerve to start their ascent. The air felt different, wrong somehow. It had grown noticeably thinner, stinging her lungs with every breath she took. She had some idea Cross could sense it too, having fallen silent some time ago. An echo of concern from Runa seemed to mirror her own.

After describing the terrain to Cross, they’d agreed on a route that would be the safest should the ground begin to tremble again.

“I’ve been thinking about what or who we might find inside the temple, and none of the scenarios I’ve run in my mind make sense,” Cross said.

“Runa said we are *woefully unprepared*. She also warned me about the Goddess,” Lena said.

“What *about* the Goddess?” he asked.

“She said the Goddess is not a maiden intent on helping humans but the source of our very existence. Three planets: ours, the one the wraiths come from, and the blazing one, exist in her embrace,” Lena said.

“Was she implying the Goddess *is* the universe?”

“I think so.” Lena’s stomach flipped at the significance of it all. “I know there are other Gods with the Goddess having the greatest presence here, but I’d never heard we were a creation borne of *her* lifeforce specifically.”

“It seems Runa knows a lot about the Goddess,” he said.

Runa seemed pleased with that. Lena attempted to ease the barrier between her and Runa but was hit with a strong tug on her control. She froze, screwing her eyes shut and clenching her fists.

“What’s wrong?”

But Lena couldn’t answer, not for a long moment. When she was sure Runa had been sealed in, she released Cross’s hand, realizing she’d been crushing it.

“I’m sorry, I thought I’d ask Runa about it. She seemed pleased at your last comment, and I thought . . .” Lena’s voice trailed off as she reworked the barrier in her mind.

Cross nodded once, waiting until she could move again. “I know you came here to free the Goddess because you felt like you didn’t have much time left, but now that you’ve managed to control it, built up your mental walls—”

Lena shook her head, despite knowing Cross couldn’t see her, a sad smile on her lips.

“I can’t live this way. With *her* inside me. It takes so much effort, so much energy. It's unsustainable. I won’t wake up in the middle of the night, only to learn that I’ve killed someone else I care about. Not again. Never again.”

Lena didn’t mention the one detail she feared to be true. There might be something about this realm that allowed her greater control over Runa, but she feared that once she left this place, Runa would have much less trouble wresting control from her.

Cross pulled on her hand, nearly making her lose her balance. “There has to be a way.”

“I can’t guarantee that I won’t hurt someone else. That *she* won’t hurt someone else,” she said.

“Alina, what are you saying?” This time when he said her name it stung. There was intimacy in the way he’d said it, vulnerability and *hurt*.

“I’m saying I don’t know what’s going to happen once we enter the tower,” Lena said.

And she was talking about the Goddess, yes, but also about Cross. She hadn’t taken his warning lightly. There was something he couldn’t tell her, but the wraith had somehow figured out. And it was clearly something Runa felt she could use as leverage. He seemed to grasp her meaning anyway.

“Hope to live, Alina. Hope to find a way. When we get inside, head for the bottle. If there are dangers to face, I will focus my energy there. Use your head, but most of all, be careful,” he said.

“I will,” she said. Then, wondering how he might fair in a fight if he couldn’t see, she added, “You too.”

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-TWO

They climbed for the next several hours, which seemed to drip by. Lena described the mountainous terrain to Cross, and they took turns feeling for each other's hands among loose stones and sand to ensure proper hand and foot placements. Cross had gone quiet, retreating into skill and strategy, while Lena's thoughts drifted from her mother to Henry to Jessa to her grandfather and Wyn.

Sore and exhausted, they finally approached the summit. The tower stood ominously stretching into the darkness like a needle waiting to pierce flesh. Initially, she thought the tower was white, but when she peered at it again, it seemed to be made of onyx. There were no windows or openings on the face of the slim structure.

The stench of sulfur wafted past on a weak breeze as if the air itself struggled to move here. She helped Cross reach the flat slab that made up the path toward the tower. Cross blinked once and then twice.

"I can see," he said, turning to look for her.

Lena pulled herself onto the slab beside him. The desolate backdrop did nothing to dampen his exquisiteness. She straightened, somewhat taken aback by the emotion in his expression. He took her face in his hands, and they stared at each other for a long moment. The stale air seemed to come alive around them. Cross looked down at her lips, his gaze lingering there, and her breath caught in her throat as he moved closer.

And then his soft, full lips met hers.

Every cell of her body stilled and then erupted with an emotion so foreign and yet so beautiful she thought she might laugh or cry. She felt him everywhere, in every dark nook and cranny of her soul, in her fear, her

doubt, her regrets, in every painful moment she'd ever experienced, and then those filled with joy too. She felt simultaneously weightless and rooted to the ground.

When he released her, she was gasping for breath. Gasping for more. They both were. When he finally opened his eyes and lifted his forehead from hers, she realized the golden flecks in his gaze had come alive.

Cross smiled then, a smile so bright, so genuine and lovely, that she couldn't help but smile too.

"Your eyes are glowing," he whispered.

"I think yours are too," she whispered back.

"I wouldn't doubt it. Not after that," he said.

Lena blushed, and this time she couldn't hide in the darkness. And she didn't want to. Cross took her filthy hand in his and placed it over his heart. She felt the steady beat there.

"You know my heart, Alina, and I know yours. Remember that."

After one last look, he released her hand, drew his sword, and started towards the tower.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-THREE

A short, dirt path led them to moss-covered, crumbling stone steps. The stairway led up through an ogival arch and continued to wind upward beyond sight. Wild ferns grew unhindered along the sides like silent sentinels intent on observing any movement beyond that of the feeble wind. On the left side, just past the arch, a mangled tree leaned out of a gaping hole in the fortifying wall that kept the earth from swallowing the desolate passageway. Cross paused to examine the narrow steps before sheathing his sword and opting for a dagger instead.

Lena peered up the stairway past him.

“The moss looks different. Normal, even, but it’s not a risk I’m willing to take,” she said, striking one of the steps partway up the staircase with a small rock she’d found. They watched in silence as the stone clinked its way back down and landed at their feet.

“I’ll go first,” Cross said, testing the first step.

He didn’t look back as he moved up, noting where the stone was solid and where it had disintegrated from disuse. After several steps, he turned and extended his hand but kept his gaze on their surroundings. They slowly made their way up, staying vigilant for any signs of danger, but none came.

They climbed the final few steps and exited the passageway onto a flat stone surface. Lena’s mouth fell open as she took in the rectangular open-air temple set on a podium. Evenly spaced ogival arches lined the perimeter, with one grand arch at the center indicating the main entrance.

“Was the onyx stone temple an illusion?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but something about this feels wrong,” Cross murmured, scanning the area.

Lena couldn’t help but agree. The air surrounding the temple felt dead although there was a lingering scent there too, both familiar and off putting.

Cross hesitated before he held his hand out to Lena. As they walked toward the grand archway, she took in the details of the temple, the ancient stone dull like chalk and similar to the crumbling trail behind them. She couldn’t shake the feeling of unease as they took the steps to the grand archway and paused just before the threshold.

“Wait. I just. I don’t—” she said pulling her hand from his.

“What is it?” Cross asked.

“I—never mind,” she said.

“No. Don’t do that. If you have a gut feeling about something, don’t ignore it,” he said.

“I don’t know how to explain it, but this can’t be the entrance. It feels . . . too obvious.”

Cross nodded slowly.

“Let’s look around,” he said, examining the arches more closely.

They walked around the elevated podium, looking up at the arches until one such arch caught Lena’s attention. The moment she approached, a whirring sound broke through the silence. In one fluid move, Cross wrapped his muscled arm around Lena’s waist and tucked her behind him, but there was no apparent threat.

He let her go and stepped aside, pointing to a spinning orb inside the frame of the structure. She examined it for a moment, catching a glimpse of an object at the center of the orb that ducked back into the stone every second or so.

“What is that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted.

She reached out to touch it when Cross snatched her hand in his before she could. A flit of annoyance echoed in her mind.

“Your blood, human, and not just a prick,” Runa hissed in her mind.

Lena’s eyes widened as she saw the spinning orb for what it was: a tiny blade entombed in rock. When she looked closer, she saw five spots on the circumference of the small chamber that held the spinning orb. A spot for each of her fingers, indicating that she needed to place her hand over the spinning blade.

“Why?” Lena asked.

Cross looked to her, a question forming on his lips before he realized she wasn't speaking to him.

"Ancient magic requires sacrifice," Runa hissed.

Lena nodded and looked to Cross, who held the question in his eyes.

"A sacrifice," she said.

Lena placed her hand over the orb as the markings indicated and had to hold back a cry as the blade sliced through the center of her palm. Jerking her hand back, she cradled her bleeding palm in her other hand. Her blood disappeared from the orb but continued to spin. With Cross's help, she was able to retrieve some bandages to wrap it.

Before she could wonder why the orb continued to spin, Runa hissed, *"His. Now."*

"Yours too," she said quickly.

He placed his hand on the orb, pulling it off after the blade sliced through his palm. His blood was absorbed just as quickly as Lena's, but the orb continued to spin. And then it turned black, and the ground began to shake. They braced for the violent tremors they'd experienced in the previous realms, but the shaking didn't intensify. As if satisfied with their sacrifice, the rumbling stopped, and the orb shifted back to the color of pale stone.

And then the wrongness in the air broke, and the sound of bubbling water reached her ears. Lena exhaled in relief before reaching for Cross's injured hand, but he pulled it away.

"It's all right," he said, giving her a tight-lipped smile.

Lena took a step toward him but stopped. She couldn't help but glance at the blood dripping on the stone at their feet, wondering how Cross could ignore it, but she nodded and turned toward the temple. Hot, humid air wafted past as they walked to the center of the stone temple. There they found a bubbling pool of turquoise water with strange swirls of gold.

It was only a third of the way full, but the reflection from the strangely colored water made it seem full. The water roiled inside, splashing and bubbling with a sickly grey foam floating atop the surface. Lena had just walked past one of the pillars in the chamber to inspect it when Cross dug his fingers into her shoulder and pulled her backward. Lena screwed her eyes shut as the pain from the wraithwound left her gasping for air. She opened her mouth to protest when he clamped his palm over it. The look of panic on his face made the noise die in her throat.

He must have seen the understanding in her eyes because he slowly removed his hand and raised a finger over his lips. Lena nodded fervently, the pain from her wound fading into the background. Cross pointed at a distortion in the air beyond the pool.

Lena saw it then.

Across the pool from where she'd been headed, a swirling portal lay open. When she turned back to Cross, he shook his head and then pointed to the left of it, where a second portal spun. There, just through the portal, she saw a simple, three-tiered fountain, in what might be an ancient city square. And on the edge of the basin, was a small ornate bottle made of green glass.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-FOUR

Lena gaped at the vibrant green bottle. Even with a piece missing from the side, she'd never seen anything else like it. Approximately the size of her hand, it was shaped like an elongated hexagon and twisted near the top. A crystal stopper that resembled a shooting star was inserted at the top. She stared at the bottle but didn't move, a feeling of unease creeping into the gut. When she turned back to Cross, he appeared to be lost in thought, like he was working something out.

"That has to be it," Lena whispered, "but—"

"—where is that and who is guarding it?" he said, completing her thought.

Lena peered around the column once more when a creature she'd seen before crawled past. But this one seemed to be missing a limb, unlike Vince.

Afraid the creature would scent them and enter the temple, Lena reached back to alert Cross, but he had already seen it. It snarled softly, sniffing the air in front of the portal, but did not enter. After a moment, it crawled off. Lena released a sigh of relief and turned her attention back to the portal that led to the bottle. She'd just begun to formulate how she might work to retrieve it when the same exact creature crawled into view through the second portal past the fountain upon which the bottle sat.

Confusion clouded her mind as she worked through what she'd just seen. She was certain the portals led to two different places. The one with the fountain led to a city square of some sort or perhaps an atrium. The architecture and color of the stone was pale and aged just like the temple

they currently stood in. The other led to an outdoor corridor with walls etched from grey stone, snow covering the ground just beyond it.

“Lena,” Cross whispered.

The sound of her shortened name was so foreign to her that she didn’t respond initially, but after a long moment, her brain seemed to flag it. She met Cross’s eyes to see an apology there and . . . some other emotion she couldn’t place.

“I know where that portal leads,” he said, pointing to the one that led to the stone corridor and snow-covered ground.

The expression on his face was hard, the gold flecks in his eyes dim. And she knew then, the man she’d known before this moment was gone. The man who had reached into her soul with that world-stopping kiss had been replaced with the man she’d met near the Drowning Woods.

“I’m guessing that is the Goddess’s temple near Misted Oak. But that one, it’s where soulbounds are created.”

“What do you—” she started.

“Cross, is that you in there?” A lilting voice drifted in from the portal on the left. The one where soulbounds were made. Cross stiffened immediately, his face turning pale.

“Lena, I cannot disobey him,” he said, desperation leaking through his words.

“Cross!” The man’s voice rang through the temple, low and powerful, an edge of warning sharpening his words.

Still hidden from view behind the pillar, Cross silently unbuckled his scabbard and proceeded to disarm. He leaned his sword against the pillar and placed his gauntlet next to it. After ensuring he was fully unarmed, he made a hand motion indicating to Lena that his things should stay where they lay.

“Wait,” Lena whispered, reaching for his hand. “I—Kiara is healed.”

“*What* did you say?”

“Jade was supposed to find you after I entered the gate. Dauen and I—we figured it out. Kiara is okay.”

He searched her face, finding the truth of the words she spoke there.

“Lena, how—” he started, a look of utter disbelief on his face.

“Come out. Now,” the voice demanded.

Cross closed his eyes and shook his head, devastation written on his face. When he opened them again, a picture of ruin stood before her. He

squeezed Lena’s hand once before letting it fall. Then, with one last look at her, he stepped out from behind the pillar.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-FIVE

Lena's heart thrummed wildly in her chest as she made to follow Cross, but a strong pull from Runa halted her mid step.

"Listen, foolish human. Wait and listen," Runa hissed, her anger evident in the echo of emotion Lena felt.

Reluctantly, Lena did as Runa bade, half wondering why she was taking commands from the wraith. At least she knew Runa had a vested interest in making sure Lena lived.

"He was tasked with leading you here. Or did you fail to consider why a soulbound would so readily let an infected human live?"

A familiar verse appeared in her mind although when she'd seen it in Lythara, the words had been incomplete. This time it wasn't.

"YOU SHALL LEAD the light to Eteris's end to save what was and what can be again."

"THAT'S why you told him my name." Lena said to the wraith. "You knew what it meant. And that it would confirm his suspicions."

"You are my light through the darkness, Alina," Cross had said to her.

She couldn't breathe past the pit of betrayal in her stomach. Runa sent a pulse of confirmation although this time it was devoid of pleasure.

"You—you wanted to end up here. That's why you didn't take over sooner."

"*We* needed *to end up here*," Runa hissed. "*Now be silent and listen*."

"Where is she?" the man commanded. "Tell me."

“She’s behind the pillar.”

Each word struck her like a stone to the face. Still, Lena did not move. And they did not come. *They didn’t come.*

“They haven’t come in here,” she whispered to herself, and to Runa.

“They cannot,” Runa answered, something like relief and certainty echoing inside her.

Lena peered down at Cross’s sword. He’d left it, along with the rest of the weapons he carried and his gauntlet.

I cannot disobey him, Cross had said, which meant that if *he*, whoever *he* was, asked Cross to *hurt* Lena, to *kill* her, he would’ve had to do it. Instead—

Approval echoed inside her. Apparently, Runa had reached the same conclusion.

“And the bottle?” she whispered to Runa.

Runa didn’t answer for a long moment and then, *“Did you not see it?”*

Yes. Lena had seen it; she had just been hoping for a different answer. The portals were connected. All three of them. If she attempted to retrieve the bottle, she’d only expose herself to the same danger.

“What’s her name?” the man asked.

Lena held her breath, waiting for Cross to reveal it and expose her vulnerabilities.

“Lena,” he replied quickly, if not a bit forced.

She paused.

“Can he lie?” she whispered to herself and to the wraith.

“Perhaps a partial truth is acceptable,” Runa suggested.

A tiny spark of hope swelled in her heart knowing he was lying to protect her, that was, until Runa sent a more powerful burst of emotion along with a word she didn’t know. Lena didn’t have to speak Runa’s language to understand that it was likely a curse word or some derogatory language aimed at how *weak* she was.

“All right, wraith, point taken,” Lena hissed.

She had to figure out how to free the Goddess; it was her only hope for getting out of this and helping Henry. But Lena didn’t have a chance to debate what to do next because the scream that pierced the air made the blood freeze in her veins.

Despite Runa’s warning to pause, she stepped from behind the pillar to see Taya kneeling in the snow near Riley and Laney. Taya screamed again

as she fought to get to Riley who was bleeding on the ground behind three figures: Cross, the female Aurynn and . . . and *Leonid*?

No. That couldn't be right. The man with the kind eyes from the forest, the man who'd taken her in at The Whispers. He looked younger somehow, more handsome. Or had his appearance been part of a ruse?

The confusion hardly had any time to register because the male Aurynn stepped into view, and Runa went *feral* inside her.

Her vision expanded, the finer details of her surroundings becoming clearer, and she understood that her eyes had shifted, likely turned black. The wraith was clawing at her for control, but she was sloppy and frantic, making it easier for Lena to maintain control. When her field of vision shrank, Lena knew she'd accomplished it. At least for now.

The expression on Leonid's face was one of pure delight. A glance at Cross saw him cycle between fear . . . and then something that looked like pride. But the emotions on his face were quickly concealed and replaced by a cool indifference.

"You are stunning. And terrifying," he said to her as he paced in front of the portal opening. Lena couldn't help but notice his perfect gait. "Tell me, who is it you've brought with you? Wraiths are fascinating creatures. Did you know that no human has yet to lay eyes on their true form?"

"Who are you?" Lena asked, her voice steady despite the fear coursing through her.

"You know who I am," he said.

"*You* are not Leonid," Lena said.

She saw another hint of pride on Cross's face, but that too disappeared before anyone else could register it. Lena tried not to look at him. Instead, she took in the female Aurynn's face and then the male's, all the while anticipating the wraith's attack.

The second time Runa lunged for control; Lena swatted her away like a fly.

"Pity, I was hoping you might see me as him. What gave it away?" A cat's smile unfurled on his face.

Runa clawed at Lena's consciousness with ferocity.

"You haven't answered my question," she said, trying not to react to Runa's ongoing assault.

"Very well. My name is Malnik," he said, ceasing his pacing directly in front of the portal opening, "but you may call me 'Mal.'"

The moment he smiled, Lena's wraithwound prickled so intensely the skin felt like it was burning. She inhaled sharply, doing her best to ignore the pain, and shifted her focus to examining the stranger instead. She hadn't noticed it before, but his eyes were indeed different than Leonid's, a deep brown that appeared almost red in the afternoon light.

"I'm not sure if you've had the pleasure of meeting my son, Kol, or my daughter, Demara. Most people know them as the Aurynn. They've been searching for you for quite a while. You know, just in case Cross failed to deliver you." He glanced over at Cross, and when he didn't react, flicked his gaze back to Lena and said cheerfully, "Your turn."

"You already know my name," she said, fear twisting in her gut.

"Let me out, human," Runa hissed.

Lena continued to ignore her.

"No. Not that," he said waving her off. "How did you know? That I wasn't him, I mean," he said, amused.

Lena stared at him. He was toying with her, and while she wasn't thrilled about it, the questions were buying her time. Lena waited a long moment before giving him a pointed glance.

"What?" he said, raising his arms in question and making a show of looking down at himself.

"Leonid has a limp," she said simply.

"Ah, does he now? My poor brother. He must have acquired it recently," he said plainly.

"What is it you want?" she tried.

"Let's not talk about that just yet. Instead, I thought we'd talk about what *you* want first. What I can give you," Malnik said.

"There's nothi—"

"Cross, what is it she desires most?" he asked, turning to the soldier.

"To help her brother, Henry," Cross answered, the muscles bulging in his neck as he spoke.

Lena's heart sank, and she glared at the warrior. She should have known better than to trust a soulbound soldier. Anger flared brightly in her chest at her own stupidity.

"Not so accepting now, are you? Let me out, so I can kill him!" Runa shouted.

"Where is her brother?" Malnik asked.

"I don't know. I didn't ask," Cross said simply.

Lena’s attention snagged on that. And it was true, he’d never asked.

“Is he alive?” Malnik asked, giving him a sideways glance.

“No,” Cross said.

“But he must not be dead if her biggest desire is to—” Malnik got quiet, his eyes going distant and then lighting up as he lifted his gaze to her. A cruel smile grew on his face, and he began to laugh.

“You consumed his soul, didn’t you! Your own brother? My, you truly are a monster, aren’t you?” He chuckled.

Lena’s face drained of color.

But then the smile disappeared from his face. “I can give you Henry, Lena,” he said curtly. “Ah. You thought he was dead. Is that it? He’s not. His lifeforce is still within you.”

Lena looked down at herself, half expecting to see a sign of Henry’s lifeforce. When she met Malnik’s eyes again, he knew he’d gotten to her.

Her heart sped up, feeling like it was going to burst with exertion and yet, time slowed around her.

“If that is why you set off on this journey, well then I’m happy to tell you, you’ve almost succeeded,” Malnik said.

No. It couldn’t be true. She’d already been fooled once. Unable to help herself, she glanced at Cross.

“Oh, you can’t be too upset with him. He was on a similar journey as you, and he’s just succeeded as well. Once we’re done here, you can bring Kiara up. We’ll perform the binding ceremony, and she’ll live.”

“What?” Cross asked, a violent calm settling onto his features.

“I thought you would have figured out by now that the crystals I provide are synthetic. Coded for the potions you use and some basic healing. Try as I might I could never quite recreate the Goddess’s magic. What I would offer her is an extended life, whilst bound to me. If she survives the binding ceremony that is.”

Lena thought back to the healing crystal Cross had used on her in the plains. It was the second in his possession as he’d also used one after being injured by the ursus. But that one had failed to heal him. The one he’d given her had been real. It had to have been, or else her injuries wouldn’t have healed. Hadn’t Cross known that? It was something she didn’t have time to consider.

White-hot fury poured from the soulbound, but he didn’t answer. Lena’s heart ached for the warrior. He’d bound his soul to the monster before her

and for what? It had all been a lie. At least she and Dauen figured out how to cure Kiara.

“Now, Lena, if you help me, both of you will have accomplished what you set out to do,” Malnik said, looking quite pleased with himself.

The words rose from her consciousness as if in answer: “*We all do what we must for those we love,”* Cross had said.

And he was right, wasn’t he? How could she blame him for working to save Kiara? Might she have done the same thing to save Henry? Hadn’t that been the main reason she’d decided to go to the temple?

“Don’t you dare,” Runa hissed.

“How?” Lena asked.

“Good girl,” Malnik said, another cat’s smile blooming across his face. Cross clenched his fist at his side causing blood to drip onto the snow beneath. “You are going to retrieve the bottle that sits atop the fountain at the Revan Temple and place it inside the Tower where you stand.”

“Can’t you do it? Why do you need me to?” she asked.

It was rather obvious to Lena that he couldn’t, but she hoped the question would draw out his motivations for seeking her out.

“So the bottle can finish its work. The Tower is particular about who is allowed to enter, and while it’s curious that Cross was allowed to accompany you, he wouldn’t be permitted entry again. Unlike you. Everyone here has a role to play in this. *That* is yours.”

It was true then. Malnik had figured out how to trap the Goddess in a bottle.

“And what is yours?” she asked.

“Let me tell you a story, and at the end of it, I’d bet that you’ll *want* to help me. We’ll all get what we want, including your friends there,” he said only half turning toward the three women shivering in the snow.

Lena scanned the scene again, noting that neither Taryk nor Wyn were present. She could only hope that the unlikely pair were okay.

“I’ve only brought them for insurance. I promise you; we do not plan to hurt them,” he said.

It was only then Lena saw the creatures surrounding her friends. They were barely visible against the dark colors of the forest behind the trio when they stood so still.

“Of all the difficult moments I faced, I realized many, if not all of them, could have been resolved with knowledge. You’ve likely just realized that

my twin grew up to believe the same thing. ‘The Collector,’ isn’t that what they call him?” he said, giving Lena a knowing look. “Tell me, what do you know of the EverGods?”

“I—” Lena started, confused with the sudden shift in the conversation.

“Did you know there are five?” He went on, “With Quintessa, the Goddess of Eteris, being the fifth and youngest?”

Lena’s brow furrowed in confusion; she had always heard there were four Gods, not five.

“Everyone has heard of Lunis, Ferah, and Sundis, but they have their own worlds to rule over. Some time ago, I came to learn that there is indeed another God. One who grants more than just the power of healing to his people. He grants them a glimpse of the cosmos and access to divine knowledge. Knowledge the Goddess actively keeps from us.”

When Lena didn’t answer, he continued, “It’s true. I’ve seen it in her memories. His name is Tyr. Despite Quintessa’s attempts to keep him away, Tyr found a way to offer us his gifts by leaving puzzles in Eteris. Puzzles that, if solved, lead to hidden portals that can carry you elsewhere or expose the location of divine artifacts. For example, there is a small dagger that can cut all the way to your essence, thereby allowing the user to splice together different species. Or, free them from each other.”

“Did you make those?” Lena asked, pointing at the creatures that were now inching closer to her friends.

“I made all of them,” he said waving his hand towards Cross, Kol, Demara, and the rest of the monsters. “Tyr’s knife was the first one I found. I started with my children. After my success in making them *more*, I sent them out to liaison with the Commander, and to feed, of course. Right now, it’s being put to good use in Enora,” he said as he beamed at the creatures behind them, “but I would retrieve it for you. And Henry.”

“Why are you doing this?” Lena asked.

“I’ve grown tired of the limits placed on us by a Goddess who cannot appreciate our desire, as a species, to consume. I wish to know more, although I've already learned a great deal. The most important of which is the Goddess had a weakness. When she decided to meddle in the affairs of man, it made her vulnerable. And I plan to exploit that vulnerability and break her hold on Eteris.”

“By becoming a God?” she asked.

“I will either be your savior or your destruction. You get to choose,” he said.

Inside, Runa continued to thrash inside her. *Good*. Let her experience the same helplessness Lena had felt when she’d been locked in her own mind.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she asked, because she still hadn’t figured out what she was going to do.

But it was apparent Malnik had enough of her questions, his features shifting to annoyance.

“That I have schemed, murdered, lied and manipulated those who I needed or saw fit to get in my way. It will be no different with you. Is that what you wanted to hear? You have no power here, no choice. Ever since I *saw* that a woman would be possessed by a powerful wraith, making her ‘of two worlds’ and would be allowed to enter the Goddess’s Untethered Temple, I knew that we would end up here. I saw to it that you would.”

Cross was right; this temple was a place between worlds.

“What will you do to the Goddess?” Lena asked.

She had gotten as close to the portal as she dared to go. Up close, she realized, Malnik didn’t look much like Leonid at all. There was a subtle cruelty to his stark features, and those eyes. There was no kindness in them.

Malnik was silent for a moment, assessing. Just when Lena thought he wouldn’t answer, he did.

“What interest could you possibly have in a Goddess that only saw fit to intervene for some but not for all? That has kept valuable knowledge hidden. Your entire journey up until this point has been a quest for knowledge.”

It was true. Had Lena known there was a divine artifact that could cleave Henry’s soul from her, she would have sought it out. The lives she’d taken could have been spared, and she could have avoided the changes her body had undergone. She could have retained her humanity instead of losing it slowly, painfully. The same could be said for her mother’s disappearance and her grandfather’s murder. Might they have been spared if they’d had access to the knowledge they sought?

At the same time, the Goddess had tried to help those who deserved it. Hadn’t she? The system developed by the Goddess about who could access the healing spring wasn’t perfect but, it had been a gift, even if it had been horribly corrupted by the ways of men.

“Perhaps you’ve just realized I speak the truth,” Malnik said, searching her face.

Aenigma.

The word floated to the surface of her mind. There it was. That word again. Lena tried to shut Runa out; she would not be distracted by the wraith now.

“Human,” Runa hissed. But Lena kept her focus outward, working through what Malnik had said.

“THEY EXPECTED ME TO RETURN!” Runa screamed, a desperate, guttural sound that no longer sounded like the cold, calculated monster she’d come to know.

Lena went still, waiting for the wraith to attack once more. When she didn’t, Lena tuned in, opening their connection slightly.

“What did you say?” she breathed, turning away from Malnik and walking toward the second portal.

“They expected me to return,” Runa repeated. *“I didn’t kill anyone who didn’t deserve it, or who didn’t give their souls willingly. All you have to do is touch him,”* she pleaded.

“Touch him?! Who?” Lena recoiled at the thought of touching Malnik.

“*The male Aurynn! You can absorb darkness, our lifeforce, you can absorb it through your touch. That’s how I was able to bypass Henry’s shield when you touched Laney. Draven is in there. Touch him, and you’ll absorb him. He won’t hurt you, I promise, we can help you survive this*!”

Lena didn’t hear the last half of what Runa said. The world around her froze as she thought back to those she’d killed, the souls she’d consumed *for Runa*.

At this, the wraith pushed a memory towards Lena’s mind. It was a picture of a woman standing next to a splintered tree. She recognized it immediately. It was the hand drawn picture she’d seen in Ada and Eduard’s home; the same one Taya had thrown at her when she arrived in The Whispers.

And then Lena was there, standing out in the forest; hand braced on a splintered tree trunk as she looked toward Ada and Eduard’s house. Lena’s breath caught in her throat. Runa pushed another memory into her mind.

“No,” she breathed.

“Yes,” Runa demanded. *“See it! See it for what it was!”*

Lena was in the forest backtracking toward Ada and Eduard's house, and as she reached their property, there they were, sitting on the porch…

"…waiting, for me," Runa said. *"Look! Look at them! There is no fear, only acceptance. Only sacrifice for YOU. For us. For ALL of us."*

Lena's world threatened to shatter, right then and there.

"I gave them a quick death," she said. When Lena didn't answer, she added, *"List them. Do it."*

The truth of it all speared Lena in a way that made it hard to breathe, hard to think, or even to function. But she did it. Even as her breath trembled, she listed them.

1. Henry: Soul given willingly
2. Member of the militia, Jarek: self defense
3. Ada: given willingly
4. Eduard: given willingly
5. The man in the field: accidental/unplanned

"I DID NOT ATTACK your village. The reason I came to your planet was to find Draven. *The male trapped inside that man, Kol. He is my aenigma, a part of my being. Do you understand? Without him, I will die. I was already dying before I met you. In a desperate attempt to find him I ventured here and followed his scent. That's how I came upon your village and found you. Because Draven's essence was already inside you, I was able to meld with it. Become one with it. Your body allowed me to survive in your world, a place where I otherwise could not. I followed his scent all over your Goddess-forsaken planet and eventually realized it had been tainted, which is why I had such difficulty locating him. Now I know it's because his essence was combined with that abomination,"* Runa said, disgusted. *"I don't have much life left, and neither does he. If I die, that means you will die, and Draven will die. And if you die, so does Henry, because while I originally thought he'd burned out, a small part of his essence indeed continues to reside within you. But beyond that, beyond us, billions of lives will be lost. If we can get to Draven, we'll have other options."*

No. It was too much. There was too much to process. Lena struggled to pull air into her lungs, to organize her thoughts. She thought back to the putrid scent that hung in the air in Virdeen. The time in Enora when she lost

minutes of time as she watched the Aurynn ascend with the maidens. She thought of Runa's interest in the skies above MountTier after Kol had flown away from the field of corpses buried in snow.

It all made sense.

"What will it be, Alina?" Runa asked.

"So, what will it be?" Malnik asked from behind her. "Save Henry and join me, Lena. Aren't you tired of being left in the dark, of being alone?"

It was true. She was so tired. Tired of drowning in grief and shame. Tired of being alone, of having to figure everything out by herself. It wasn't just that her family had kept her in the dark, Jessa—her oldest friend had betrayed her, the Healer's Organization intended to experiment on her, and she had been chased and attacked, all while being infiltrated by a wraith that slowly turned her into a monster as she fought to retain a shred of her humanity. And then there was Cross—

But joining Malnik wasn't an option. Her brother had sacrificed himself so she could free the Goddess. Ada and Eduard had done the same. Even if Malnik could cleave Henry from her being, there was no guarantee he would keep his word, or that his soul would find its way to the after realm. No. He was death, promised. A mad man, clinging to the last vestiges of his sanity by logic that was faulty at best, catastrophic at worst.

She glanced back at the three women still shivering in the snow. Her friends. Because that's what they were—*would* be—if she decided to let them in. *Well, likely not Taya*. But there was also Leonid, Dauen, and Jade. Wyn. *And* Cross. Her heart ached knowing he'd betrayed her, but he'd also tried to warn her. It'd all been there. The time he left his totem out in Lythara, his confession in The Whispers, and even the distance he'd kept between them. He cared about her; it was all there in the details. She couldn't bring herself to hate him knowing he'd done it to save Kiara, especially when she'd done worse for Henry.

She couldn't let Malnik have his way. But what options did she have? If she didn't help him, he would undoubtedly make good on his promise.

Or.

She could accept help from the creature that had wrecked her world. That had taken her brother from her. Murdered her friends and turned her into something *other.* And yet, she knew the offer was genuine. She could sense it.

Not long ago she decided it was okay to accept help. Even from those she might have written off. Runa was a monster. She was ancient, ruthless, and cruel. But she, too, had been trying to save her family. Her partner. She'd been willing to risk it all for him, just as Lena had been willing to risk it all for Henry. And now, Runa was willing to lose it all, to give it all up to do the right thing.

At the end of it all, Lena *was* tired.

But more than anything, she was tired of being afraid. She'd never thought she would make it this far, and while she couldn't trust Malnik to keep his word and free Henry, her brother had made his choice. Now, it was time to make hers.

"Together then, Runa," she whispered.

Approval echoed in her mind.

"If you do this, it cannot be like it was before where you ripped my power, my magic, from me. You must accept me, for what I am. All of me. To do that, you must forfeit yourself. Do you understand? The consequences will be unforetold as nothing like this has ever been attempted before, but our compatibility—the reason I was able to inhabit you, makes it certain that we would succeed," Runa said.

Lena was surprised by how calm she felt. "I can't remember the last time I felt human anyway."

"Do you accept?"

"I accept," Lena said, "Do *you* accept?"

"You have proven to be strong. For a human. I accept," Runa answered. *"You know what you must do."*

Lena closed her eyes and took a deep breath. There in the darkness of her mind, she saw Henry's face, then her mother's, and finally that of her grandfather's, all seeming to smile at her. Then, she opened her heart and let go.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-SIX

Lena was floating in a cloud of glittering black, and when it parted, she saw a beast there. She knew in her bones that this was Runa's true form. She was beautiful, fascinating, and utterly terrifying. There were no words to describe the creature, none in her language anyway. The beast stared back at her with small white eyes that examined her, piercing all the way to her soul before she extended a long black tendril. Lena reached a scarred, blackened hand forward and closed her fingers around it.

The influx of power was absolutely and wholly devastating. Lena died in the onslaught of it, life fleeing her body as it consumed her. And then she was reborn.

As she awoke anew, she saw flashes of a darkened planet, a castle made of glittering black stone perched high atop a mountain range. She saw enormous open-air libraries full of books and beasts. A darkening sky tinged in moody purples and oranges as a backdrop to a blazing black sun. Lena saw images of war: battles fought with claws and teeth and tendrils, as well as battle cries and commands communicated with growls, snarls and roars. Lena felt decades and then centuries fly by; she saw civilizations rise and fall. She felt ugly, shameful things, fury and rage and loss, and then something akin to boredom or stagnation. But then, she felt *love*. An unyielding, territorial, brutal type of love that was also wrapped in the most exquisite tenderness. She felt longing, desire, and arousal like she had never experienced before. Lena gained knowledge and lost some too. And then she opened her eyes.

In truth, she was no longer Lena. No longer human. She was *more* and yet somehow still incomplete, a sort of chasm having yawned open inside

her. She'd always known deep down that she felt that way, but her awareness of it was heightened.

"Runa?" Lena asked.

"I'm here," she said, in a voice that sounded more like a purr than a hiss this time.

"Are you ready?"

"Et Vitri Vitae," the wraith answered.

For victory in life. The meaning came to her in her mind, and Lena knew it must be an expression used on the battlefield. Runa confirmed as much with a push of emotion.

"What did you just do?" Malnik asked, a murderous calm in his voice.

Lena spun to see a curious glint in his eye. Cross stared at her intently, searching her face, while the Aurynn only managed to look bored.

"What do you mean?" Lena asked him, wondering what he'd seen.

"Your form shifted. Humans cannot see our true forms for they would go mad. As a defense, the air around us distorts. It is likely when you shifted, he lost sight of you for a moment," Runa answered.

"But do I look normal now?" she asked Runa in her mind, their communication now effortless.

"Yes, I enforced your illusion," she replied.

Lena wasn't quite sure what that meant, but now wasn't the time to ask.

"Kol. Let the beasts play," Malnik said as he turned to walk away.

"Wait, no, please!" Lena said.

"I've grown tired of your stalling. You can come out or watch them die," he said.

"All right. I'll come out," Lena said, holding her hands up.

Panic broke free in Cross's features as Malnik stepped back from the opening to allow her to pass.

"Stay," he said to Cross.

Lena glanced at the distance between her and Kol, which had increased as he moved closer to the beasts. She would have to find a way to get near to him.

Lena braced herself and stepped through the portal, the swirling air pulling at her as she did. She had just cleared it, stepping into the freezing winter air when Malnik's arm flew out and wrapped around Lena's neck. Cross tried to lunge for her but couldn't move.

"Len—" Cross tried, but Malnik silenced him with one word.

“I do not like being kept in the dark,” he seethed.

Malnik flung Lena out into the snow before she could react. But she barely registered the pain from the impact because around them were several other portals that led to other lands. One of the swirling vortices led to a place she recognized in her own world, but the others led to places so beautiful or bizarre she could never have imagined them. One portal lay open to a darkened sea, waves crashing into a towering slab of stone with what appeared to be stacked caves carved into it.

Dragging her gaze away from the foreign worlds that lay beyond the portals, she scanned the area for Kol and found him standing several feet away. He seemed completely uninterested in the scene unfurling before him, but then his hand twitched, and he cocked his head, something like recognition flickering in his gaze.

“I’m going to ask you one more time. What did you do? Did the Goddess shield you or did you summon the wraith?” Malnik asked, stalking toward her as she scrambled backward on hands and knees.

But Malnik was faster. Reaching down, he hauled Lena up by her clothes. He was so strong. Cross still struggled where he stood, eyes bulging, the veins in his neck straining as he fought to disobey his creator.

Dangling before him, Lena extended her claws and drove her hand toward his chest. Toward the beating heart there. But her hand went straight through him, grasping nothing but air. Malnik disappeared, dropping Lena in the snow.

“The wraith then,” he said, his voice coming from somewhere behind her as he answered his own question. “I have foreseen this, Lena. You do not survive it.”

Lena managed to get to her feet, ignoring the new awkwardness in her body and the additional chamber that had yawned open in her mind.

This time, the command sounded from her left.

“You may eat,” Malnik said.

The resounding roars and snarls sent terror flooding into her veins and rage through Runa. The creatures leapt toward the women who now shielded Riley.

“*Get to Draven, now!*” Runa pushed some of her power to Lena, giving it over freely.

Lena summoned the energy, gathering it not just around her hand, but around her body as Runa had intended. It erupted from her, the familiar

black cloud bursting forth on a reflex she hadn't known she had. The creatures that had been closest to her friends were blasted into the forest while others were merely driven back. At least it gave the women some time to run or hide. Lena panted with the effort, feeling a drain on her lifeforce, or was it Runa's?

She whirled, searching for Kol. Had he been blasted away with the other creatures, or worse, into another portal? She scanned the area, hoping to catch a glimpse of him when Malnik appeared before her, arm pulled back, ready to strike.

But then, she was tackled to the ground, sharp nails digging into her face. Kol appeared behind Taya, but his movements were jerky, stiff. Lena tried to push her off, but Taya dug her thumb into Lena's cheek and three fingers above her brow.

"See!" Taya commanded, a wild look on her face.

And the world melted away.

Lena was in someone else's body. She looked down to see young, uncalloused hands and a lean body in a nightdress. Lena was standing in a darkened hallway in a familiar cottage.

"Tell me about it, sola," Eduard said, his voice soft.

"He— I don't know, it's impossible," Ada said.

"What did you see?" Eduard said gently.

"He can project himself. Or will? His body appears. It's there, somehow, but it's an illusion. His actual essence is stored elsewhere. But how is that possible?" Ada asked incredulously. "He draws from the strength of others, uses them. Ruins them."

After a beat of silence, she heard soft sobs and gentle hushing before she was ripped away and found herself back in the snow.

Lena blinked at the scene before her; she wanted to go back to the cottage, to ask them who they were talking about, but she never got the chance. Kol pulled Taya off her, and began dragging her back toward Riley, crimson staining the snow where the spy sat, when a rage-filled screech filled the air. Lena's head snapped up just in time to see a small animal diving at him from above. Teeth exposed and trailing shadow, Wyn dove from the sky.

The roar of flames coming to life from somewhere nearby sparked hope inside her, and she turned to see a flaming green sword appear from between the trees, just as a fresh wave of monsters crept in from the forest.

Lena was about to lunge for Kol when a hand fisted itself in her hair and dragged her backwards. She grabbed wildly for it, hoping her nails would slash through flesh, but it was only empty air.

Malnik had somehow developed the ability to project his body, and use force, while remaining impervious to attacks. Lena had never been more grateful for the coarse, wiry hair on the left side of her head, because the pain from his grasp rode a numbed edge.

“Lena!” Cross roared from somewhere nearby, and she blinked in surprise.

Hadn’t Malnik silenced him? She struggled to turn her head, all the while trying to dig her claws into the frozen earth, but she found no purchase.

He was dragging her toward the Revan Temple.

“You are going to retrieve that bottle for me, or I will turn everyone who has ever had the misfortune of gazing upon your face into one of those beasts. After that, I will set them loose on every single man, woman, and child in every village, city, and stronghold until they all resemble the funeral field in Virdeen,” he snarled.

“You?” Lena asked, her heart breaking all over again for those whose lives had ended in that field.

“I told you; you all have roles to play. I ensured you’d end up here, monitored your movements to ensure you would. To ensure *he* would. Have you asked him about Cederic?” he said, malice clear in his voice as he dragged her past the soulbound. “Ah. I see Taryk has arrived.”

The air disappeared in her lungs as understanding settled within her, and she turned just enough to catch a glimpse of Cross’s face. He’d gone completely still as he seemed to process what Malnik had said.

Lena tried to reach for him as Malnik dragged her past, but he yanked her out of his reach.

Beyond them, Taryk took on Kol, his blazing green sword arcing through the air as he deflected the monster’s claws. Taya fought too, slicing through the beasts that tried to get past her like wind made flesh. Wyn aided Taya, ripping through muscle and sinew with claws and teeth.

Panic speared through her—*Runa’s* panic.

“WE HAVE TO GET TO DRAVEN!” she roared.

But there was no fighting Malnik. How was she to deliver any sort of strike or blow to him? He was a projection, feeding off the lifeforce of

others, while his essence remained safely hidden elsewhere. It'd be useless . . . unless they could identify the source of his power. But who—? Lena scanned the scene before her, desperately hoping she could— and then, she realized she hadn't seen Demara.

"Yes," Runa hissed in confirmation. His source had to be Demara.

A roar of defiance had Lena twisting in Malnik's grip to see Cross take a step away from where he'd been standing. Lena's eyes grew round as she watched the soulbound struggle with the invisible command he'd been given. When he roared again, it was filled with pain, but he managed another step, and then another.

Lena was stunned, unsure of how he could have gotten free and also terrified at what it meant for him. Cross launched into a run, heading not towards Lena but to a hidden alcove in the wall down the snow-covered walkway. He reached in and pulled Demara from the shadows. Face wan, body limp, Cross dragged her out and slammed her into the pillar behind them.

Malnik's grip loosened. With another blow, Demara crumpled unconscious to the ground. Malnik vanished. Lena scrambled away from the portal that led to the fountain inside the Revan Temple and ran towards Kol before sliding to a halt in the snow. Malnik appeared directly in front of the Aurynn. Kol went slack, eyes going vacant, as Taryk prepared to deliver the killing blow.

"Taryk! No!" she screamed, holding her hand up.

The soldier halted, confusion flitting across his face, but the move cost her. The blow Malnik landed was so powerful that her surroundings lost all color and the sound hollowed out around her as she was knocked backward.

"Get up!" Runa commanded.

Lena could hardly think past the pain. She was certain every bone in her face had been broken, but hesitating would likely mean the end of her life, Runa's, and Henry's, so she gritted her teeth and opened her eyes. Kol lay in a heap several yards in front of her. Taryk had heeded her request to spare the Aurynn, but that hadn't stopped him from knocking Kol unconscious before turning his attention back to the other creatures.

Lena groaned as she pushed herself up. Her arms felt leaden, her body weak, as the events from the past several days caught up with her. She wiped blood from her face, confirming the blow had split her skin.

"Lena!" Cross shouted, running towards her.

“Draven!” Runa hissed.

Lena opened her mouth to answer him, to tell him she had to reach Kol, when his face went blank and he halted. Cross’s arms went slack at his sides, and his face turned pale. Malnik materialized in front of him.

No.

Lena backed up slowly, putting her hands up. Malnik’s features were completely distorted now, evil incarnate.

“Stop pretending like you care about anyone other than yourself!” he roared, each word punctuated by the promise of death. “Do you have any idea how many people you’ve killed in your apathy? Because you’ve been killing people long before that wraith showed up in your village. Women, children, the elderly. Nothing and no one could trouble you to get out of bed to help them. Not even your precious Henry. You let them all die and why? Because you were sad? Or was it because you thought there was someone else to do it for you? *Every time* you failed to show, people died.”

“Stop,” Lena said, shaking her head, but she managed another step back.

Malnik laughed, a cruel, ugly sound that drowned out the snarling monsters behind her.

“Be honest with yourself, *for once*. A part of you was relieved when you were scratched by the wraith. That you would no longer have to be responsible for your own choices. That you could eventually disappear and go quietly into the dark. You’re selfish Lena, willing to hurt others. Be it with action or inaction, it doesn’t matter to you, as long as you get to disappear into your own pain. But you will learn true pain today.”

“You don’t know me,” Lena said.

“The moment I touched you, I glimpsed your spirit. Turns out it’s as ugly and rotten as my own,” he said smiling.

“You’re right. I’ve done horrible things. I’ve let so many people down. I was lost inside of myself for a long time, drowning in my own pain,” she admitted, taking another step. “But I’m not that person anymore.”

The back of Lena’s boot thudded on something firm, but she didn’t dare glance over her shoulder. Malnik advanced, stalking toward her, but then he went still. Lena’s eyes went round as she saw what Malnik must have sensed before he halted.

An enormous portal appeared behind Cross. Rolling sand dunes stretched out, reflecting the heat of twin suns blazing in the sky. All around

them more portals opened, revealing strange landscapes and horrifying creatures. A few merely stared at them through the portals, likely confused by the disturbance, but others approached, sniffing the air curiously or snarling at them.

Some resembled arachnids, others were winged beasts or creatures with horns, while others lacked faces or any distinguishable feature except for needle-like teeth. Even in his slackened state, Cross seemed aware of this. Those muted blue eyes lifted to Lena's. Sensing the disruption in his power, Malnik turned.

Lena didn't hesitate; she dove for the only part of Kol's skin that was exposed. His face.

The moment the bare skin of her hand connected with his face, she knew complete and utter ruin. If Runa's depleted power felt devastating, adding Draven's to it unmade her entire existence. Lena was ripped apart, down to every cell in her body, and then pieced back together. Draven's power rushed inside of her, filling every nook and cranny that was Runa, and then expanded to consume her. Lena screamed, unable to keep it in as the power speared into the deepest part of her soul. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists hoping she would survive it, until at last, the power settled within her, and she found room to exist within herself.

When she opened her eyes once more, time slowed.

Now heightened to a degree of pain, her senses warned of the danger approaching, but before she could turn to see what would undoubtably be Malnik lunging for her, she caught sight of the battle beyond.

A scream tore from Laney's mouth, the note suspended in the air as claws from one of the creatures raked down her back. Riley was somehow on her feet too, feebly waving a short sword at the creatures that had the two women surrounded. Taryk was covered in gore, and the green flames of his sword were close to winking out. Taya fought beside him, her moves restricted as blood dripped from her abdomen. One glance at the darkening grey skies above, and Lena spotted Wyn, locked in battle with some sort of winged monster three times her size.

Lena felt the air flow through her eyelashes as she blinked once, twice. She felt the individual beats of her heart pounding beneath her ribcage as she processed tactical details about the battle raging before her. The seconds dripped by, which gave her an eternity to consider what might happen to her friends and complete the calculations about the odds they faced given the

threats surrounding them. All due, no doubt, to the two battle-tested beasts that resided within her.

Then, the distortion in time snapped, an elastic band having reached its capacity to stretch. Lena whipped her head around to see Malnik stalking toward her while murmuring something under his breath. In his clasped hands, a void was forming. *Magic*. Cross had warned Lena that Malnik had access to it. By the looks of it, he was getting ready to cast some sort of spell, and it would likely be the end of them all.

Runa and Draven rallied their power in response, filling her up with two different kinds of energy that seemed to both repel and strengthen the other. Hers, the familiar glittering black, was more permeable than his, which felt solid, energy that shone a matte black in her consciousness.

Lena understood then that the amount of power they had amassed was meant to kill everyone and everything around them. The only way to ensure her survival, their survival, was to kill them all, humans and creatures alike. It wasn't an emotional decision. It was the practical one. Malnik would only cease to exist if he didn't have anyone to draw energy from. Because according to knowledge that drifted in from Draven, Malnik could only pull from those he'd created. Those who had crystals embedded in their skin.

Only two realities were possible now. One where Malnik lived, and they all died, or one where Lena lived, but everyone else died.

Lena glanced over Malnik's shoulder at Cross, at the devastation on his handsome face. She couldn't hide her sorrow as she locked eyes with him and saw the same emotion reflected in his. But then a small smile ghosted his lips, and he mouthed four words.

"*Hope to live, Alina.*" And then he took a step back toward the open portal behind him.

Lena's heart stopped dead in her chest, a scream building in her throat as she prepared to see him burn alive. But then, the energy inside of her rearranged and instead of black power erupting from her body, a beam of golden light speared from her chest hitting Cross just before he tumbled backward, and the portal winked shut. Malnik's projected image disappearing with it.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-SEVEN

"NOOO!" Lena screamed.

"He's alive," the voices inside her had melded into one, Runa's combining with Draven's to produce a multilayered tone.

"We don't have any more time. You must free the Goddess to close the portals. Now!" Runa commanded.

Monsters poured from the portals, likely having smelled the blood and fear. Malnik's creatures now fought other monsters, and her friends were still trapped in the melee. At least they had retreated closer to where she stood.

"I won't leave them out there!" she shouted back at them.

"*We don't have much left to give you; we used the majority of our power to save him,"* they said.

Runa's annoyance accompanied the statement, no doubt thinking human lives were hardly worth saving, but Lena let her know it was not up for debate with a push of emotion.

"Is there *anything* left?" she pleaded.

Lena didn't have to say any more before a ball of black energy gathered in her palm. It was smaller than the ones she'd wielded before, but she didn't care. She found she didn't need to direct it with her hand any longer. The new hollow part in her mind pulled up details for muscle memory that didn't belong to her. Instead, her will was sufficient in knowing where to direct the power.

She blasted a smaller creature that had crept up on Riley and Laney. It had a long snout and a red, forked tongue that slithered on the ground toward them. It was a weak blast but helpful, nonetheless.

A few more blasts cleared the way for the women to reach her. Taryk and Taya were further out, surrounded by so many different beasts Lena only managed to locate them by the glow of green flames, which she suspected was the only thing keeping the creatures at bay. She whistled for the eleuth, who'd finished clawing the eyes out of another beast. Wyn's head snapped in her direction, and she flew toward them, claws and teeth dripping black blood as she joined Laney and Riley under the covered walkway away from the danger. None of the monsters approached the walkway, and Lena suspected it was due to the strangeness of the portal that opened to the Tower of Two Worlds: the Goddess's Untethered Temple.

Lena ran for Taryk and Taya, dodging beast and portals alike. She screamed for them hoping to get their attention, but before she could reach them, a set of jaws clamped around her thigh.

Lena went down but before the animal could rip the flesh off her bones, Runa and Draven sent a blast of onyx power that disintegrated everything within a six-foot radius. But the blast came with a warning: it was the last of their power.

Taryk and Taya fought their way over to the scorched circle. Taryk was nearly carrying Taya as her leg dragged uselessly behind her. The wound in Lena's own leg burned fiercely, but it wasn't life threatening. She'd been bitten by one of the monsters with the needle-like teeth, but it'd been smaller than the rest. They fled from the monsters who ate each other, roaring, snarling and clicking behind them, and some were even swallowed by portals that blinked open for a second and then shut. When they finally reached the others, Riley was on the ground, unmoving, and Laney hung suspended by her throat, gasping for air as Demara held her a foot above the ground.

"Let her go!" Taryk bellowed as he deposited Taya on the floor near Riley before stalking toward them.

"Come any closer and I'll snap her neck," Demara told him, her voice full of malice. But the Aurynn looked pale and weak.

Lena checked in with Runa and Draven, but the answering disappointment from within let her know they truly had nothing else to give. Lena took a step toward the Aurynn, if she could only get close enough— but Demara's head snapped to her.

"I'm not going back," she said, although her voice sounded different than it had been a moment ago when she'd addressed Taryk. It was full of

warning and something like familiarity. But Lena didn’t have time to consider what it meant. A glint of steel shone from between the two women and then the Aurynn roared.

Laney’s feet hit the floor, and she bolted toward Taryk, a small dagger clutched in her hand. Taryk tucked her behind him before twirling the sword in his hand and stalking toward the creature. Demara backed up, clenching the stump of what used to be her hand, black blood spurting from the wound. Nearby some of the creatures snarled while others turned to sniff the air in her direction. Demara unhooked her black, leathery wings and ran for the clearing, avoiding the beasts that chased after her.

With one last look at her friends, Lena turned toward the Revan Temple and made a run for the bottle. She cleared the portal with a leap and winced as she landed on her injured leg.

Inside, the air was stale. The Revan Temple had been abandoned since the Goddess disappeared and the healing spring that originated there dried up. Lena reached out with sodden hands and picked up the delicate bottle, observing the missing piece in the side. She sent a question inward to Runa and Draven, who seemed to be just as stumped about what to do. She pulled the stopper off the top.

Nothing happened.

Lena inspected the bottle, turning it slightly to get a better look at the details when the hole on its side caught her attention. She had seen that shape before and the same shade of vibrant green . . . except she’d been told it was an emerald. Putting the stopper in the bottle, she limped toward the portal that would lead her into the Tower of Two Worlds, hoping her guess was correct.

Once she passed through the invisible barrier, her body seized. White hot pain lanced through her so intensely it stole the air from her lungs. Runa and Draven roared inside her. Unable to stay upright, she collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain as the Tower’s ancient power assailed her, leaching the life from her body.

It occurred to her then that the tower no longer recognized her. Malnik had told her that it was particular about who it allowed to enter. Since taking Draven in, she was no longer the same being. Lena sobbed as the pain cut deeper, past her bones and flesh and into her soul. Her very essence. There was no escaping it. They were going to die. Runa and Draven’s roars melded together, sounding like a keening wail that

threatened to split her mind. She thought of Cross's face, the sorrow there. She'd felt it too. The regret of how things had ended and sadness for what could have been. They were just two people who'd set out to save those they loved. In the end, he'd chosen to save her. To give her one last shot at life.

Hope to live, Cross had told her.

And she decided she would.

Clutching the bottle to her body, she dragged herself across the uneven stones. She only had to make it to the pillar where she'd left her cloak and then the darkness could take her. Every excruciating inch left her gasping for breath as she braced on her forearms and pulled, her injured leg pulsing in pain as she dragged herself forward until at last, Lena reached her pack.

The searing pain was unrelenting, and she bit her cheek to keep from screaming as she worked to pull the cloak out of her bag. And there, pinned into the thick fabric of her mother's cloak, was the broach. Lena didn't hesitate; she used her nails to pry the large stone from the metal. Holding it between her thumb and index finger with a trembling hand, she held it up to the side of the bottle. The emerald-shaped piece of glass was ripped from her fingers and sucked into the side, completing the viridescent bottle. As her vision grew black, she reached out one last time and pulled the stopper from the bottle. At first, nothing happened, and hope evaporated in her chest, but then a thunderous roar erupted from the narrow opening, and Lena's world went white.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Lena died. *Again*. Runa and Draven too. At least the pain was gone. She could only hope that now that the Goddess had been freed, the danger to her planet and the others would end. Malnik had fled. After pulling in Draven's essence and being exposed to his knowledge, she understood Demara had been too weak to pull energy from, and Malnik was left with no other option. Perhaps the others would be able to track him down. That or the Goddess would intervene once more. *But Cross.* She'd been assured by the wraiths that he was alive although she couldn't comprehend how it would be possible in the scorching landscape that had burned Vince to ash. She hadn't had time to ask. Even so, she knew they spoke the truth. It would have to be enough.

Lena drifted along for a while, and then, tiny lights blinked into existence. At first, it was just one, then two, then three. Slowly, the lights blinked into view, and then, there were many. So many, there must have been millions of them. The blue-white lights twinkling brightly against the darkness. It brought her comfort, reminding her of the night Cross had taken her "star gazing." She'd wanted to honor Cross's request; she really had. But it was too late.

Lena let go. If this was death, then—

"You are not dead. But will be soon," a voice said.

Were the stars *speaking* to her? Lena closed her eyes. She wanted to ignore the voice, fade into the memory of her and Cross at the cavern. A tug from inside seemed to pull her from the comforting dark.

"Where am I?" Lena asked.

“You are where all creatures reside. In my embrace,” the voice whispered from all corners of the darkness.

Quintessa. Lena was speaking to the Goddess herself. A gasp got caught in her throat as the reality of it dragged her consciousness forth.

“My brother, Henry, please—” Lena started.

“Your brother is where he belongs,” she replied, finality in her voice.

Lena’s heart sank, and she squeezed her eyes shut against the darkness.

“Will I go back?” Lena heard herself ask.

“No. There will be nothing to go back to. You will all cease to exist once I am restored.”

“Everything will cease to exist?” Lena asked.

“Yes,” she replied simply.

Suddenly, the darkness around Lena felt like less of a comfort and more like an all-consuming abyss. The truth of Quintessa speared into her then, and she knew it was only because the Goddess allowed it. She was life and death, hope and despair; she was wonder and joy. She wasn’t merely a Goddess, although she wore that form sometimes. For Eteris, Oscurra, and SecaTerr, Quintessa was creation and destruction. Just as easily as she could create, she could destroy.

And she would.

Lena knew this to be true and saw it plainly. The only reason Malnik had been able to capture her was because she’d been in her Goddess form, and he’d only been able to do it with her own power. *A vessel of her own making.* Even so, she’d used the majority of her remaining magic to keep the planets from collapsing into themselves and poured the last of her power into Reimar to protect the lands, the most obvious being what became known as the OverGrown Forest. Despite what everyone believed, Quintessa had never abandoned them. But no one would ever learn the truth.

Lena thought of those who’d sacrificed so much to help her. Her friends, even Jessa who must have been so desperate for a cure that she betrayed Lena thinking she wasn’t likely to live long before she turned. She thought of the elders who had defended Reimar from the darkness using ancestral magic, and the group of healers who’d worked to protect them. She thought about Henry. Her mother and grandfather. She thought of Ada and Eduard and the sacrifice they’d made for their daughter and help they’d offered Lena. She thought about Runa and Draven and the bond they

shared, something so deep and sacred that it had shattered her understanding of love when she'd learned of it.

And she thought of Cross.

The man who had seen through her façade, who had sat by her as she worked through her grief and clung to hope. The man who had helped her make peace with her past and encouraged her to dream of a future. The man who had believed in her.

A deep sorrow burrowed into her chest, but Lena pushed it out. There were so many good people in Reimar. Despite the corruption and rot that had settled into the land, there was still so much good. She suspected the same of SecaTerr and Oscurra.

"You would kill them all for the actions of one man?" Lena challenged.

A few stars in her periphery winked out, and the rest quickly followed. Lena plummeted through the dark until she arrived back in the Tower of Two Worlds suspended only mere inches from the stone floor. The force keeping her from smashing into the stone gave out, and she dropped the rest of the way, landing on her side. Lena blinked, taking stock of her body before she pushed herself up.

The stones of the temple no longer appeared aged. Instead, gleaming white stone and a full pool of calm, turquoise-gold water reflected the light inside. Upon a throne on a dais sat the most beautiful being she had ever seen. A tall, slender woman twice her height stared down at her. She looked to be made of white porcelain with stars winking in and out of her skin. Her hair flowed unnaturally, as if caught on a phantom wind. Lena could see the universe—no, *universes* through her hair. Planets of all shapes and sizes, billions of stars, and swirling galaxies shone through the celestial strands. It was her eyes, though, like twin black holes that unsettled her the most. So black, in fact, that they ate up the light.

She seemed to gaze right through Lena, seeing the shame of her darkest moments and the joy in her brightest ones. From the mornings she'd spent in her mother's lap listening to old stories or gazing wide-eyed at the God's Eye flower her grandfather had brought, to her and Henry sharing wildberry pastries as children. She paused at Lena's decision to become a healer and noted the losses she experienced and then skipped to the grief and hopelessness Lena fell into, which was followed by acts of selfishness and disregard for others. The Goddess witnessed the moments on her journey that broke her and the ones that slowly put her back together, including the

kiss she shared with Cross. But her gaze lingered most on the final transformation where she'd chosen to become *something else.*

Lena bowed her head, unable to gaze upon the Goddess any longer.

"One man?" Quintessa asked.

The Goddess's voice slashed through her, no longer the echoing whispers of before.

Lena braced her hands on the floor and coughed. The pristine white floors splattered with black-red blood.

"Please," Lena begged. "It's true there is evil here. Corruption, depravity, and wickedness. But there is also goodness. Kindness and love. You intervened once. You sought to right a wrong. Please, let us try to fix this."

The air around her stilled. Wyn's bite mark on her arm flared, soft white light illuminating the lines and dots present on her flesh. Lena felt the Goddess's gaze linger on Wyn's mark; eternity held in those twin black holes.

Then, the Goddess spoke, her voice devoid of that cutting wrath. Instead, she sounded curious. "*If* you live, Alina Morwen Elisande, you'll have only as long as it takes me to restore my power. If you haven't cleansed this world of darkness by then, you will know my wrath. None will be spared, not on this planet or the next. This universe will cease to exist."

Relief pulsed only in the periphery as the magnitude of what Lena promised the Goddess settled on her shoulders. But she would focus on that later. Lena nodded once, making sure to keep her head bowed and eyes trained on the floor. A pulse of power rippled through the temple as if locking in their agreement.

"Thank you," Lena choked out, the words a wet rasp in her lungs.

"*If you live*..." The words echoed around her and then the Goddess and the Tower disappeared.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTY-NINE

Lena couldn’t escape the pain. She knew she was dying and yet, her knowledge as a healer failed her. What could she do against the powers of the temple that wrecked her so thoroughly. The Goddess hadn’t seemed to care what became of her, and Lena couldn’t blame her. A small weight settled on her chest. When she opened her eyes, she saw a pair of bright orange eyes blinking at her from above. Wyn nuzzled her arm, right where the pale tattoo was inked. Overwhelming sadness settled deep in her gut. The Goddess had been right; she likely wouldn’t survive.

Was that the reason she’d agreed to Lena’s proposal? To appease the human who’d set her free?

Two more sets of eyes appeared behind the eleuth. Taryk’s and Laney’s. She wanted to ask about Taya and Riley, but her voice wouldn’t come. She hoped Cross was safe like Runa and Draven promised. She could feel them, intertwined within her, small and weak.

And then Taya’s face came into view, contorted with grief. She yanked Lena upwards onto her lap, displacing Wyn.

“You don’t get to die today,” Taya said. An order. “Riley is sitting over there; she is dying from a wraithwound. You healed Laney, and you will heal her! Get up!”

Lena wanted to get up; she wanted to help Riley, the others. She wanted to keep her word to the Goddess, but her body was no longer responding to her commands.

“It’s the least you can do. Please!” Taya’s voice broke.

Tears gathered at the corners of Lena’s eyes and spilled out. No doubt carving paths through the filth that clung to her skin.

“Taya,” Laney said softly from where she stood next to Taryk.

“No. She has to get up!”

Lena’s heart ached so fiercely. For all she had lost and for all she had almost gained. She wished more than anything she’d lived her life differently. Lena always thought she’d die of grief, but she’d never been more certain of it than in this moment. The pain she felt was agonizing, but nothing hurt worse than her heart.

It was there that she felt a warm sensation begin to build, and the pain eased a little. Lena did her best to hold onto consciousness as the pressure grew, wondering if these were her final moments. But then her hand was lifting. To Lena’s surprise, it came to rest on Taya’s face. Taya looked bewildered, but to her credit, she didn’t balk. Lena could only assume she wore a similar expression.

But then, two faces materialized in front of her. They were familiar, full of love and warmth, and she found she was sitting inside a cottage. Ada smiled at her, and Lena’s mouth fell open.

“Sweet girl, we made our choice long before you ever thought to come our way,” Ada said, helping her sit up and reaching to wipe Lena’s tears. Lena let out a choked sob.

And then Ada was reaching to her left, and Lena turned to see Taya there, wide-eyed, looking between her parents.

“One last gift for you, our little bloom. We love you more than the suns,” Eduard said.

Ada and Eduard pulled their daughter in for an embrace. From their embrace, a golden orb began to shine, and it expanded until she too was inside of it, watching as the three of them held onto each other. The orb pulsed around them, once, twice, before exploding in a wave of golden light.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTY

Lena blinked. She felt different, like something inside her was missing but she couldn't—Lena gasped. There, hovering just above the ground before them was a cloud of glittering black, one she'd seen many times before. But this time there was also a separate ribbon of shadow that slithered around within it. Lena scrambled to her feet, distantly recognizing the absence of pain in her body. Taryk pulled Laney behind him and drew his sword.

But Lena recognized the swirling mass; she knew it intrinsically. Lena slowly reached out a hand and a glittering black tendril extended to greet her. But this time, it felt . . . solid. Lena closed her grip around it and pulled.

The creature that stepped out was one she'd seen before. Runa's thin, elegant face seemed paler than before. Standing outside in the grey light, Lena could see her better. She wore her long black hair half up; the top half twisted into a braid. Her full lips were painted a deep purple that was almost black, and she wore a solemn expression on her face. Dressed in intricate leather armor with a golden chest plate and matching vambraces, she reached into the cloud and pulled out a ruggedly handsome male. Taller than Runa, he towered over them. Long black hair framed his rugged features and stubbled jaw. He too was pale, his face drawn. He had a broad chest and muscled arms evident through his worn leather armor. The metal headpiece he wore was different than Runa's. While hers came to a point between her brows with two long thin spikes jutting out like horns above her head, his had delicate spikes interspersed evenly throughout. Lena understood then that they were crowns. The realization made her breath catch.

“Hello, Lena,” Runa said, giving her a wicked smile that drew a gasp from Laney behind them. “This is Draven.”

Draven gave her a curt nod from where he stood behind Runa, his body almost touching hers. Lena couldn’t help but stare at the male. She felt drawn to him although she didn’t know why. Looking at them standing there together, she realized they’d done their best to appear as close to human as they could, but she knew their wholly white eyes were likely still unsettling to the others.

“The woman, where is she?” Draven asked, stepping from behind Runa.

“Don’t touch her!” Taya said when she realized he was headed toward Riley.

Draven cocked his head to the side and a muscle feathered in his jaw. Pure predator. “It is *my* magic that made her sick. If you want her to live, it must be extracted.”

Taya looked at Runa, eyeing her warily, and then shifted her gaze to Lena. Lena nodded, and a moment later, Taya stepped aside. Riley sat against the stone wall. She was covered in a sheen of sweat, her face drained of color. Draven knelt in front of her and looked up at Taya, who had followed him over.

“May I?” he said, motioning to the cloak that had been placed over the barely conscious spy.

Taya knelt on Riley’s other side and removed the cloak to reveal a gruesome wound. Black veins spiderwebbed from a wound that was identical to Lena’s.

“The human, Kol, liked to use the same strike when he killed.” Draven extended his pale hand over the wound but then halted, turning to face Taya once more.

“This will be painful, but you cannot touch her, nor I. If you do, it will not be this form you’ll have to contend with. If you cause me to shift, I will have no control over my beast. Neither of you would survive it. Do you understand?” he said.

Taya’s breath caught in her throat as she seemed to realize what Draven had implied.

Laney walked over and gently pulled Taya back to where Lena stood with Runa and Taryk. Lena couldn’t tear her gaze away from Draven as he closed his eyes and held his hand over Riley’s wound. When his claws extended, Taya flinched, and Laney’s grip tightened on the General’s arm.

One arm braced on the wall above Riley, Draven inhaled through his nose and then slowly flipped his hand over, closing it into a fist above Riley's shoulder. Riley groaned as she regained consciousness, but then the muscles of her jaw flexed, her body stiffened, and she began to scream. Taya whimpered and then began to sob as Riley screamed and writhed in pain beneath Draven's suspended fist. A hand slipped into Lena's, and she was shocked to see that it was Taya's. Lena squeezed her hand gently and stepped closer to the general. They watched in suspense as the black veins began to retreat. As they did, black tendrils poured from her wound and into Draven's closed fist. Gradually, the tendrils became lighter and eventually disappeared. Riley's screams lessened and then stopped. The color slowly returned to her face, her breathing eased, and her eyes fluttered open.

Draven stood, still using the wall to brace himself. Runa walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder. He straightened, seeming to react to her touch. Lena could sense that pulling his magic back had affected him. She was still struggling to keep her eyes off him when Runa turned to look at her. Draven waved Taya over as he and Runa stepped away, leading Lena away from the group.

"Come," Runa said, walking a short distance away from the others. "We leave for Oscurra."

"But what about the Goddess's threat?" Lena asked.

Runa and Draven looked at each other before speaking, as if agreeing on what to say. "There will be nothing left to save on our planet if we don't go back, now," she said.

Lena nodded, sadness growing in her chest.

"Now that the Goddess has been freed," Draven said, even his voice was captivating, "we believe the tears between worlds will heal with time as she gets stronger, but we'll see to it that no other creatures from our world make their way into yours in the meantime. It will be up to you and the humans to cleanse your world of what remains."

A knowing smile grew on Runa's face, and Lena turned to her.

"You feel drawn to him," Runa said, more of a statement than a question.

Lena's words got tangled on her tongue, "I—"

"You've taken a part of me, and I, a part of you. Once you retrieve your aenigma and mate, you'll no longer feel drawn to Draven. Your connection with Cross will push that part of me out."

Lena could feel the blush creeping up her neck, and she could only hope the filth from the mountain made it less obvious, but then her brain caught up with everything Runa said.

“Retrieve my—wait. Mate with Cross?” she asked.

Runa’s smile grew wider. “Humans are so easily flustered,” she said, but then her smile faded slightly, and Lena was reminded of the choices they’d made, and what it meant.

“What do you mean retrieve Cross?” Lena asked, returning to herself.

It was Draven who responded: “When we fused our power, we had just enough to take out Malnik. Once Cross chose to enter the portal, he cut off Malnik’s source of power . . .”

“. . . and we decided to use our power to push Henry out instead,” Runa finished.

Lena blinked at the pair standing before her, hands joined discreetly at their sides.

When Lena didn’t reply, Runa continued, “Henry can shield Cross on SecaTerr. He told us as much, but you must go get him. He cannot remain there for long.”

Henry was *alive*, and he was shielding Cross on SecaTerr, just as he’d shielded her heart from Runa. And they were waiting for her. Lena couldn’t stop the tears from falling, and she covered her face with her hands. Wyn squawked from above and came to rest on her shoulder, nuzzling into her neck. Lena carefully lowered her hands as to avoid touching the animal who chittered softly beside her.

“There is more, Lena,” Runa said solemnly.

Lena wiped her tears on her filthy sleeves and met Runa’s eyes.

“You are now part wraith; there is no undoing that.”

“I know,” Lena said.

“Yes, you do know, but what you don’t know is that we need to consume to live,” she said.

A pregnant pause filled the air. Lena couldn’t bring herself to ask the question and was grateful that Runa seemed to pick up on it.

“We feed on energy, not souls. Although in the direst of circumstances you could consume the energy or *lifeforce* of another, but you don’t have to.”

“It is important to note that you are different,” Draven said, “and we’re not entirely sure how your transformation will impact you. What we do

know is that you can metabolize darkness—our *magic*, somehow. Regardless, you will have to consume to survive."

Lena's mind was reeling. "But how?"

"The same way you did with the realm walker," Runa said.

"Who?" Lena asked.

"The one you call Laney," Runa said, giving her an exasperated look.

Lena turned to see that her friends stood behind her now, waiting. Riley stood among them, tucked into Taya's side.

When Lena turned back to Runa and Draven, she was surprised to see a black cloud had begun to form behind them. Runa started towards it but then turned, examining Lena. She followed Runa's gaze to her partially exposed shoulder. Lena hadn't noticed her vest had been torn, exposing the awful scar and the sensitive skin there. Runa lifted a hand and sent a small burst of magic towards Lena's shoulder. The onyx orb disappeared into her skin and then reappeared. Black wisps broke into small symmetrical shapes before shifting into hard, smooth plates that attached themselves to her skin. Lena pulled her head back, straining to see. Glimmering scales with gem-like tones shone from her shoulder, the colors soft but brilliant. Stunned, Lena gently ran her fingers over them. They were as hard as glass but flexible, moving with her skin. Lena looked up at Runa.

"That would have been a weak spot," she said.

And Lena realized what it meant. Wraiths were a ruthless and brutal species, but she'd given Lena a gift. Armor. Exactly what she could expect from a warrior.

"You would be welcome in Oscurra any time, Lena," Draven said, reaching for Runa.

And she didn't know why, but her heart lit up a little when he said that. Despite everything, she knew she'd like to see them again someday.

"Call me 'Alina,'" she said.

With that, Runa nodded and disappeared into the cloud with Draven.

When the black cloud had drifted down the mountain out of sight, Lena turned to look at her friends who were all staring past her. She registered the looks on their faces—horror, surprise, and curiosity—before turning to follow their gaze.

"Wha—" Lena started, but then she located several portals that had opened in the area around them.

She didn’t recognize most of them, but one stood out instantly. The city square in Enora. Just inside was a large crowd of people who had gathered and were gaping at Lena. Likely due to what they’d witnessed. But before she could do or say anything, the portal disappeared.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTY-ONE

Lena learned they were in a remote part of the Slate Mountains. Not as high up as Laney's village, but an area still cold enough to make their bones shiver and teeth chatter. On the trek down, Lena had fared better than the others although the reason for it still managed to unsettle her. She'd let Riley and Taya share her cloak, the two women holding each other close as they walked.

Taryk had fussed around Laney, trying to ensure she was warm. But Lena could have sworn it was Laney who was keeping Taryk warm when they stopped to rest, having been born in the bitter cold herself. She overheard the soulbound telling Laney about his cat and how Wyn reminded him of it. Laney laughed as he shared a story of how Mica once set a mouse on his chest while he'd been asleep. Apparently, Taryk was not a fan of mice.

Lena remembered how he'd seemed hopeful when she told him the eleuth liked him well enough, and her heart squeezed a little at the absurdity of it all.



AFTER HOURS OF WALKING, they'd been aided by a tear that opened about a half a day's trek down the mountain and led to a spot only several miles from the entry gate to the Tower of Two Worlds.

Taryk dragged a barely breathing Kol behind them after having found the Aurynn half buried beneath a pack of mutilated monsters. Without

Draven inside of him, he more closely resembled a human although some of his features remained distorted. Taya was adamant about getting him back to The Whispers, suggesting he likely had important information about Malnik and where he might have retreated to.

While that was likely true, Lena suspected the General would enjoy extracting that information, especially after what he had done to Riley. And to so many others.

None of them spoke about what had happened on the mountain, but she knew the time for that would come.

The ride back to The Whispers was a watercolor of sickly grey light that drenched the familiar terrain. Bright stars and planets were still visible in the sky, although from what Lena could tell, they'd stopped growing closer. She suspected Runa and Draven had been correct when they theorized the strange phenomenon would abate as the Goddess's power returned. Lena had tried to find Kharon, but Taryk told her the beast took off the moment Cross was pushed through the portal.

By the time they made it back to The Whispers, Lena had lost track of time. Dauen tended to their wounds with the help of apprentices he'd been training. She thought about Cross and Henry every day, unable to get Cross's stricken face out of her mind, even knowing that Runa and Draven sent Henry after him. Henry was alive and free, back on his home planet where he belonged. When she thought about it, she realized the Goddess had said as much. She longed to see them both again.

Riley had come to her room after several days to see how she was doing. The spy's wounds had healed nicely although she still looked exhausted, her eyes haunted. Today, she and Jade had come to inform Lena about the rumors that had spread all throughout Reimar.

Apparently, Vince told anyone who was willing to listen about a woman who could command infected beasts, "a demon who wore the skin of a young woman." What the citizens of Enora had witnessed through the portal only served to fuel those rumors. But while there were reports of fear and suspicion about her throughout the land, the rumors had also served an unintended purpose. A growing number of people had set out to look for Lena, in hopes she could provide information about their missing loved ones.

"They're calling you the Lady of Monsters," Jade said, a hint of laughter in her eyes.

“Well, I guess that’s better than demon bitch,” Lena joked.

She had yet to visit the underground cells to see if she could cure any of the others who were being held there, but she secretly hoped she could. She’d decided the first person she would visit after she fought off the exhaustion that had settled over her would be Lily, the little girl she’d met on her first day there.

Taryk had also come to her room after several days. Initially, he and Wyn had glared at each other, but then he knelt and tentatively extended a hand. Lena’s eyebrows shot up and she gave him a look, as if to say, “Your funeral if she doesn’t accept.”

To Lena’s surprise, Wyn inched forward and bumped her nose into his open palm. The look of surprise on Taryk’s face was enough to make her laugh.

But the heartwarming moment freed a memory in her mind. Something Draven told her: *You can metabolize darkness—our magic, the way you did with Laney.* And she remembered the odd comment Riley had made about Wyn liking the feel of leather. Lena held her hands out before her, her mouth falling open. Understanding struck her like a lightning bolt descending from the sky. Wyn had known Lena could extract wraith magic. If Wyn allowed Lena to touch her with bare hands, she would take away Wyn’s ability to shift, something the creature had accepted as part of herself. Lena looked up at the eleuth, who dropped her gaze to Lena’s hands and then back to Lena before she squawked and ran out of the room.



TARYK HAD AVOIDED any major injuries during the confrontation with Kol and instead spent his time in The Whispers helping in the kitchens. Apparently, he loved to cook. Lena couldn’t imagine the large warrior taking instruction well, but then Laney brought her a flakey wildberry pastry from that morning’s prep, and she decided the soldier had missed his calling.

She found out later he’d also dispatched letters to the other soulbounds informing them of Malnik’s intentions and warning them about his powers and abilities, although it was unlikely they could do much as they were still bound to him.

Taryk told Lena of the secret tasks required of them and what he'd come to learn about Malnik after the fact. Apparently, Taryk been tasked with leading Cross into an ambush with the infected beast in the forest. His totem had read: *At the junction of man and ursid beast, the role you've taken will be released.*

He'd known immediately it referred to Cross and figured it would set Cross up to complete his own task, but after he was injured, he became suspicious. Seeing as how Malnik's castle had been on the way, he'd followed Cross for a while but lost his trail in the forest west of Enora, only to run into them on MountTier as Lena was turning.

He hadn't known whether Lena was a threat to the soldier, so he attacked, only to be stunned by Cross. A favor he returned when Lena approached him on the plains. After learning she was his dutybound in Lythara, he let it go. But then he spoke to Malnik in Row's shop; Taryk explained there was a communication platform made of solid crystal embedded into the stone floor and learned Malnik never intended to provide his uncle with a healing crystal. Instead, Malnik offered to bind his uncle's soul to his.

Taryk declined. Instead, he went home to Eydon to tell his uncle. There he had the crystal shards removed from his back and, at his uncle's behest, rode out to find Cross. It took him days to track him to The Whispers, and then he couldn't figure out how to gain entry.

It turned out he'd also tried to warn Cross the night he found Wyn biting Lena's arm, but they ended up getting into a fight instead. Taryk was determined to let Cross know, and by then he'd figured out something ominous was happening in Eteris so he continued to follow them.

After Lena and Cross went through the gate, they were attacked by the Aurynn. Taryk had ridden up the mountain with Wyn leading the way, and they'd hidden in the trees until Lena exited the temple and Wyn decided she'd had enough. Taryk told her he'd overhead everything Malnik said which confirmed his suspicions about his former master.

"I think Malnik was trying to track you via Cross. He ultimately knew you and Cross would meet in a forest, so he had me set him up to put all of that in motion. Then, I followed Cross and unknowingly gave Malnik the means to keep extra eyes on him. There was one morning, after I tracked Cross through the woods past Enora, that I had strange dreams, glimpses of him through the forest. When I woke up, I was drained and could barely

move. But I'd bet that between Cross's injury, the drain of Malnik's pull on his lifeforce, and the cursed land of the Drowning Woods, Malnik lost contact with him after that."

Lena thought back to Cross's meeting with Row in Lythara and how she'd mentioned that he hadn't checked in for a while. She hoped what Taryk suggested was true. Lena's face heated at the thought that Malnik might have been privy to some of the moments with Cross she'd thought were private.

The answer to that came a few days later when Leonid revealed the blue-white crystals native to Reimar served as a natural ward against Malnik's abilities and the synthetic crystals embedded in Cross's back, and he also pointed out that Malnik's presence would have been evident with the drain on Cross's lifeforce. Lena couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief knowing those moments belonged only to them.

Lena asked to see Taryk's back, the healer inside her too curious to let it go. He showed her the scars there, and she realized they must have still been healing when he fought in the Slate Mountains. She learned it was why Malnik hadn't pulled from Taryk's lifeforce after Cross went through the portal, instead choosing to flee as Demara was too weak to use. It was also likely the reason Cross had been able to defy his master, as a number of his crystals had been ripped off his back when he faced the flying, horned creature in the white realm. Lena's eyes threatened to give her away as gratitude grew in her chest for the warrior.

"They don't look that bad, do they?" Taryk asked, brows furrowed, after turning around to see tears lining her eyes.

He told her he was going with her to SecaTerr, and she couldn't help it then. She flung her arms around his neck and embraced him. Taryk held his arms out awkwardly until Wyn squawked at him, and he patted her back stiffly, returning her embrace. Lena hadn't even seen the animal come back into the room.

After a couple of weeks, she met with the group when Leonid called them together to discuss the future of their efforts. Lena promised him she would visit the cells below to see if she could cure those who had been infected. After a glance from Dauen, she promised the healer he could come along to observe the process and record his findings.

In response to the rumors, it was decided they would start their own, shifting the narrative to suit their needs. She would relocate to Dovia, and

they would spread the word that she went there—

". . . to be with your monsters," Taya told her.

Jade had been sneaking into the city for years, helping Leonid collect information and old artifacts and map out any dangers. That was who he'd been there to meet when Lena found him in the basement of the manor. Jade had been delayed after she found the girl alone in the woods and tried to help her.

Since the Goddess had been freed, Dovia had gone eerily quiet. It was likely there were still monsters and other strange creatures squatting in the city, especially since many had come through the portals in the Slate Mountains and were drawn to the energy there, but she and Taryk would work together with Taya and her men to clear the city of any danger.



LENA PLAYED with the small medallion now fastened around neck and stared at Cross's sword absentmindedly. It had appeared on the ground next to her along with his gauntlet and Eduard's dagger after the Tower disappeared. She'd never gotten the opportunity to ask Cross why he, too, wore one similar to Henry's, but she would ask him when she found him.

Where she'd once been reluctant to ask questions for fear answers would be required in return, she decided, for Cross, she could move past it. He'd helped her overcome her fear of being vulnerable, of being known. She had a lot of questions for the warrior, one that burned inside her brighter than the others. But more than anything she wanted to know Cross, her aenigma, deeply.

A knock sounded at the door. Taryk stood there waiting for her, and then he was playfully shoved aside to reveal Laney.

"Are you ready, Lady Lena?" Taryk asked with a smirk. Laney elbowed him in the ribs, but she too was trying to hide her smirk.

"Stop that!" Lena said, looking to Wyn who scampered out the door past them. "Call me 'Alina.'"

"Yes, Lady," Taryk said.

Lena rolled her eyes, and yet, she had learned to accept who she was. *What* she was. She would accept this new chapter of her life the same way.

She was Alina Morwen Elisande, Lady of Monsters, a monster in her own right, and she would see to it that all manner of darkness was cleansed from Eteris. But only after she retrieved Cross, her aenigma, from SecaTerr and shared a wildberry pastry with her brother, Henry.



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To you, my dear readers, thank you so much for taking a chance on this story. I hope you saw that Lena’s transformation was representative of so much more than the physical. We all experience transformation in life, and this story was borne of my greatest transformation yet. Whatever transformation or transition you are currently going through, I hope you become stronger for it.

Keep going.

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About the Author

Sienna is a romantic fantasy writer focused on crafting emotionally driven stories where magic and longing intertwine. Her work explores love as a transformative force in immersive worlds and fierce female characters. Living in the Sonoran Desert, she draws inspiration from the vast, cloudless skies, ancient landscapes and the quiet beauty of star-filled nights. When she's not writing, she can often be found wandering desert trails, chasing her toddlers with the help of her husband or playing with her 10-year-old labradoodle, Clifford.

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