

Internationally
Bestselling Author of
THE PRIORY OF THE
ORANGE TREE

A
DAY
OF
FALLEN
NIGHT

SAMANTHA
SHANNON

BLOOMSBURY

SAMANTHA SHANNON is the *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestselling author of The Bone Season series. Her work has been translated into twenty-six languages. Her fourth novel, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, was her first outside of The Bone Season series and was an international bestseller. *A Day of Fallen Night* was an instant *Sunday Times* number one bestseller and an instant *New York Times* bestseller. She lives in London.

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For my mother, Amanda

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NIGHT

SAMANTHA SHANNON

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
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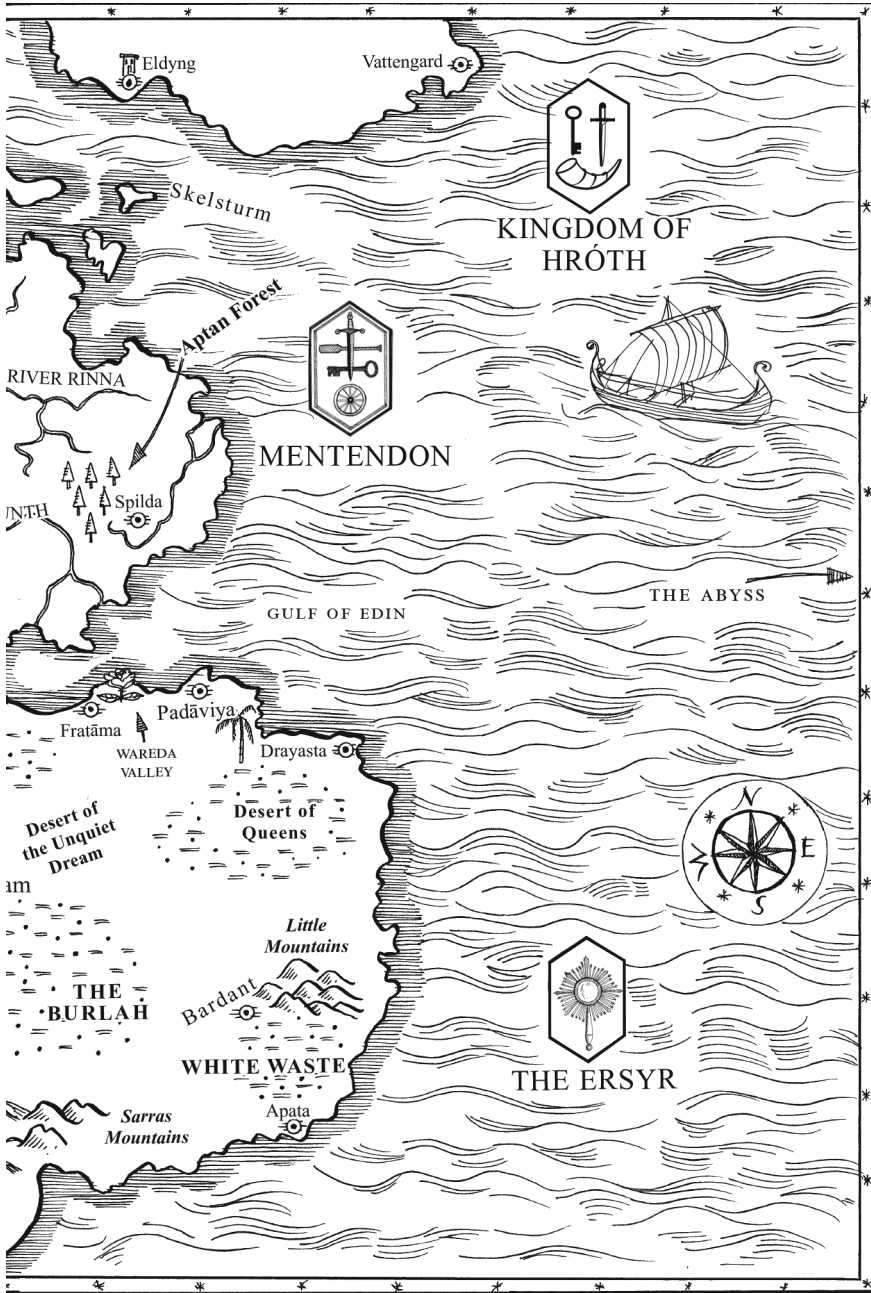
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QUEENDOM OF INYS
HOUSE OF BEREThNET







Prologue

Unora

Her name was Dumai, from an ancient word for a dream that ends too soon. She was born in the last glow of the Sunset Years, when every day poured soft as honey in the city of Antuma.

One spring, a young woman stepped through its gate, brought there by a forbidden wish.

She claimed to remember nothing of her past – only that she was called Unora. No one could have guessed, from her dusty clothes and callused hands, that her father had once held the power to set the whole court fluttering in his wake.

No one could have guessed what she was in the capital to do.

In those years, it was hard to farm the dry interior of Seiiki. Since the gods' retiral, long droughts had afflicted the island. Away from its shrivelled rivers, the ground thirsted.

Had the Governor of Afa been like other men, he would have lamented his post in a dust province. Instead, he laboured every day to channel water to its fields. Each time he returned to court, Empress Manai deemed him more inventive and hardworking. She gave him a mansion in the capital, where he placed his daughter, Unora, under the care of a nursemaid.

But Empress Manai had long been unwell, and her ailment did not ease. She renounced the throne before her time and retired to Mount Ipyeda, leaving her only child to be enthroned.

Though Prince Jorodu was still young, he had learned from his mother. In his first act, he summoned the Governor of Afa and made him River Lord of Seiiki, overlooking all others in his favour. For a year, he was the most trusted and beloved of the boy emperor.

So it shocked no one when he was suddenly banished, accused of having roused a god to make his province thrive. One family surrounded the emperor, and they allowed no one else close. Not for long.

Their servants found Unora and flung her into the dark street. At nine, she was left a destitute orphan. Her nursemaid stole her back to Afa, and for ten long years the world forgot them.

Unora worked the fields once more. She learned to bear the sun. Without her father, water no longer flowed. She planted millet and barley and wheat, folding seed into dry earth. She lived with a burning throat and a dull ache in her bones. Each night, she walked to the shrine on the hill, the shrine for the dragon Pajati, and clapped.

One day, Pajati would wake. One day, he would hear their prayers and bring rain to the province.

Over time, she forgot her days in the capital. She forgot what it was like to hear a river, or to bathe in a cool pond – but she never forgot her father. And she never forgot who had destroyed them both.

The Kuposa, she thought. The Kuposa undid us.

In her twentieth year, death came to the settlement.

The drought lasted for months that year. The fieldworkers pinned their hopes on their well, but something had tainted the water. As her old nursemaid vomited, Unora stayed at her side, telling her stories – stories of Pajati, the god they all willed to return.

The villagers took the body away. They were next to die. By the sixth day, only Unora was left. She lay in the stubble of the crop, too thirsty to fight, and waited for the end.

And then the sky opened. Rain touched the ground that had long been a deathbed – a patter that became a downpour, turning the dry earth dark and sweet.

Unora blinked away droplets. She sat up and cupped the rain in her hands, and as she drank, she laughed for joy.

The storm left as suddenly as it had come. Unora stumbled towards the Creaking Forest, soaked in mud from head to foot. For days, she sipped from leaves and puddles, finding little she could eat. Though her legs shook and an old bear stalked her, she kept on following the stars.

At last, she came to the right place. Behind the trickling remains of a waterfall, the white dragon Pajati slumbered – Pajati, guardian of Afa, who had once granted wishes to those who paid a price. Unora sought the bell that would wake him, faint with hunger and thirst.

Now she would leave her fate to the gods.

Deep was their slumber in those years. Most had withdrawn into undersea caverns, beyond human reach, but some had gone to sleep on land. Though Seiiki grieved their absence, disturbing them was the highest of crimes. Only the imperial family had that right.

Unora found she had no fear, for she had nothing left to lose.

The bell was taller than she was – the bell that would wake the guardian, not to be touched on pain of death, green staining the bronze. Unora approached it. If she did this, she could be killed. If she failed to do this, there was only sickness and starvation.

I deserve to live.

The thought came like a thunderclap. She had known her worth since the day she was born. Exile had beaten her into the dust, but she would not stay there. Not one day more.

She struck the bell. After centuries of silence, it tolled the night in two.

Pajati answered its call.

As Unora watched, the god emerged from the cave, all the many coils of him. He was white all over, from his pearly teeth to the gleaming pallor of his scales. She let her knees give way and pressed her forehead to the ground.

‘The star has not yet come.’ His voice rushed like wind. ‘Why do you rouse me, child of earth?’

Unora could not sign her words. No one could. When Pajati offered his tail, she grasped it with shivering hands. His scales were like wet ice.

It was not for her to ask gifts of the gods. That was the privilege of empresses, of kings.

‘Great one, I am a woman of your province. I come from a village stricken by drought.’ She clung to her courage. ‘I beg you for rain, king of the waters. Please, send us more.’

‘I cannot grant that wish. It is not time.’

Unora dared not ask him when the time would come. It had already been too long. ‘Then I ask for a way to enter the shining court of Antuma, so I might beg the emperor to save my father from exile,’ she said. ‘Help me move the Son of the Rainbow to mercy.’

Pajati showed his teeth. He was the brilliance of the moon, his scales the milk and tears of night.

‘There is a price.’

It was no small price to pay, where water and salt were so precious and rare. Unora closed her eyes. She thought of her father, the dead in her village, her solitude – and even though her lips were cracked, her temples light from thirst, a drop seeped down her cheek.

Snow Maiden wept for the great Kwiriki, and he understood humans had goodness in them, her nursemaid had told her. Only when she wept for him could he know that she had the sea in her, too.

The warning from her childhood beat within her. It urged her to accept the death that waited in her wake. But the god of her province had already spoken:

‘One turn of the sun it will last, and no more.’

He gave her a tear in return, dropping it into her palm like a coin. She lifted the silver glow to her lips.

It was like biting into the blade of a sickle. That drop swept a decade of thirst from her throat, utterly quenching her. Pajati took her tear with the tip of his tongue, and before he could tell her the whole of the bargain, Unora fell to the ground in a faint.

The next day, a messenger found her still there. A messenger from the shining court.

The women of the palace looked nothing like her. Their hair trailed almost to the floor, the fishtails of their robes some way behind them. Unora shrank from their stares. Her own hair was cropped to sit on her shoulders, her hands roughened by a decade of toil. Whispers chased her to the Moon Pavilion, where the Empress of Seiiki waited in a wide, dark room.

‘I dreamed there was a butterfly asleep beside those falls,’ she said. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘I don’t remember, Your Majesty.’

‘Do you know your name?’

‘Yes.’ Her name was all she had left in the world, and she meant to keep it. ‘I am called Unora.’

‘Look at me.’

Unora obeyed, and saw a pale woman about her own age, with eyes that put her in mind of a crow, curious and shrewd beneath a crown of whelks and cockles. Two crests adorned her outer robe. One was the golden fish of the imperial house, her family by marriage.

The other was the silver bell of Clan Kuposa.

‘You are very thin,’ the Empress of Seiiki observed. ‘You have no memory of your past?’

‘No.’

‘Then you must be a butterfly spirit. A servant of the great Kwiriki. They say his spirits fade if they are not always close to water. Your home must be here, in Antuma Palace.’

‘Your Majesty, my presence would shame you. I have nothing but the clothes I stand in.’

‘Fine garments, I can have made. Food and drink, I can provide. What I cannot give is the wit and talent of a courtier,’ the empress said with a wry smile. ‘Those things must be learned with time, but that I can give, too. In return, perhaps you will bring my family luck.’

Unora bowed to her, relieved. This Kuposa empress had no inkling of who she was. If she was to reach the emperor, she would have to ensure that none of them did.

Unora bided her time. Time had been a rare gift in Afa. The courtiers spent theirs on poetry and hunting, feasts and music and love affairs. These arts were unknown to Unora.

But now she had all the food she could eat, and all the water she could drink. As she healed from the long chew of poverty, she grieved for those left in the dust, while the nobles soaked in private baths, helped themselves to water from deep wells, and rode in pleasure boats along the River Tikara.

She meant to make things better. Once she reached her father, they would find a way.

Everyone at court believed Unora was a spirit. Even when the handmaidens ate together on the porch, when it was impossible not to discuss the beauty of Mount Ipyeda, only one of them – a kind poet, round with child – ever spoke directly to her. The others just watched, waiting for evidence of powers.

The loneliness ached most on summer nights. Sitting in the corridor, the handmaidens combed their hair and spoke in low voices, skin kilned by the heat. Empress Sipwo would often beckon Unora, but she always shied away.

She could not ask a Kuposa for succour. Only Emperor Jorodu could help.

Summerfall came and went. As autumn reddened and gilded the leaves, Unora waited for the emperor, who seldom emerged from his quarters in the Inner Palace. She needed to speak to him, but only once had she caught a glimpse, when he came to visit his consort – a flash of collar against black hair, the dignified set of his shoulders.

Unora kept biding her time.

Empress Sipwo soon grew bored of her. Unora could not sew with cloud or spin a handsome prince from sea foam. Pajati had given her no power she could touch. She was sent to the other side of the Inner Palace, to a cramped room with a leak. Though a servant kept her brazier full, she could not shake the cold.

In Afa, people had danced to keep warm in the winter, even when their bodies protested. It was time to start again. The next day, she rose before dawn and walked to the roofed balcony that enclosed the Inner Palace. The north side faced Mount Ipyeda.

Unora stood before it, and she danced.

The Grand Empress had gone to that mountain. Unora craved the same escape. If she failed to reach the emperor, she would have to find some other way to save her father – but she had no idea where to begin. For the time being, she would escape into this, her winter dance.

Now change had come, it would not stop. One night, a note slid under her door with two white leaves from a season tree, both impossibly perfect.

*Sleepless, I wandered before sunrise
hopeless and forlorn, before I saw
a maiden spun from moonlight, dancing.*

*Entranced, I dream and walk past nightfall
waiting for first light, when I still hope
to glimpse her as she dances, laughing.*

Someone had seen her. It should have been embarrassing, but she was so lonely, and so cold. She told the messenger to return, asking for an inkstone, a brush, a water dropper.

Water could not be squandered on ink in the provinces. It still filled her with guilt to use it, but her father had taught her to write, scratching characters into the earth. Her brush mirrored the ebb and flow of the first poem, and she found that it was effortless.

*Restless, I dance before each sunrise,
cold within my skin. I never saw
my witness in the shadows, writing.*

*Haunted, I shy away from morning
wondering who sees, yet I must still
go dancing in the snowfall, smiling.*

When it was done, she tucked her poem under the door, and the messenger took it away.

At first there was no answer. Unora resolved not to think of it, but the longing, once woken, was hard to press down – longing for someone to see her. A second poem rewarded her patience, the evening before the Day of the Sleepless. Unora held it to her lips.

Snow fell over the city. More poems arrived, often paired with gifts: fine brushes, a gold comb adorned with a seashell, fragrant wood for her brazier. When two of the handmaidens passed her new lodgings, smiling at her apparent misfortune, Unora smiled back without bitterness, for she knew that love papered the floor of her room.

When he came to her, she invited him in. From the way he was dressed, he could have been anyone. She led him across the room, to

where moonlight fell across the floor. His slender hands, untouched by toil, made short work of her sash. When he felt her eternal chill, he tried to warm her fingers with his breath. She smiled, and he smiled back.

That was the first of many times. For weeks, he came to her at night, tracing verses on her skin. She showed him how to foretell the weather. He read her tales and travellers' writings, an oil lamp wavering between them. She taught him how to stitch and weave, sang him work songs from her village. They lived in shadow and by firelight, never seeing each other in full.

He kept his name a secret. She called him her Dancing Prince, and he called her his Snow Maiden. He whispered to her that it must be a dream, for only in dreams could such joy exist.

He was right. In the story, Dancing Prince had dissolved after a year, leaving Snow Maiden alone.

The morning before Winterfall, the servant set a meal before Unora. She lifted the bowl of hot soup to her lips, tensing before it could touch them. The steam carried the scent of the black wing, a leaf that grew wild in her province. She had tasted it before, by choice.

It stopped a child from taking root, or hollowed out the womb.

Unora held her stomach. She had been exhausted and tender of late, and retched over her chamber box. Someone else had guessed the truth before she had known it herself.

There was only one man whose children could pose a threat to the way of things. Now understanding dawned on her, he was away from court. It was too late to ask him to pardon her father. It was too late for anything. All she could do was protect their child – the child she decided, in that bittersweet moment, that she was going to keep.

She poured the soup quietly into the garden and smiled at the servant who came for the bowl.

That night, Unora of Afa left court. She walked towards the sacred mountain, taking nothing but a gold comb and her secret. If anyone had seen her, they would have said she was a water ghost, grieving something she had lost.

Sabran

She was named Glorian to strengthen her dynasty, in Ascalun, Crown of the West. That had once been the eke name of the city – until the Century of Discontent, when Inys suffered three weak queens.

First came Sabran the Fifth. Queen since the day she was cut from her mother, she loved that her existence kept the Nameless One from rising. In her eyes, it was only fair that she spent her life rewarding herself for that service.

The Virtues of Knighthood had no hold on Sabran. There was no temperance in her greed, no generosity in her hoarding, no justice in her want of mercy. She doubled taxes, her treasury bled, and within a decade, her queendom was a shadow of itself. Those who dared question her were pulled apart by horses, their heads set on the castle gates. Her subjects called her the Malkin Queen, for she was to her enemies as the grimalkin to the mouse.

There was no revolt. Only whispers and fear. After all, the Inysh knew her bloodline was the great chain on the Nameless One. Only the Berethnets kept the wyrm at bay.

Still, with only foulness to inspire them, the people lost all pride in their capital. Hounds and rats and swine ran wild. Filth choked and slowed the river, so the people renamed it the Lumber.

In her fortieth year, the queen remembered to fulfil her duty to the realm. She wed a noble of Yscalin, whose heart gave out not long after the ceremony. Her councillors prayed she might die in childbed, but she strode triumphant from the birthing chamber, a plump baby girl

squalling in her wake – a new link in the chain, binding the beast for the next generation.

The queen made a sport of mocking the child, seeing in her daughter a feeble imitation of herself, and Jillian, in turn, grew hard and bitter, and then cruel. Whatever her mother gave, she returned, and the two pecked at each other like a pair of crows. Sabran married her to a drunken fool, and soon Jillian had a girl of her own.

Marian was a fragile soul, afraid to raise her voice above a whisper. Her relatives ignored her, and she thanked the Saint for it. She lived quietly, and wed quietly, and quietly got with child.

Into this decaying house, a third princess was born.

Sabran was her name, to please the tyrant. No sound escaped her, but a crease ruffled her tiny brow, and her bottom lip poked out.

‘Saint, poor lamb,’ the midwife said. ‘How stern she looks.’ Marian was too weary to care.

Not long after the birth, the Malkin Queen deigned to visit, shadowed by the crown princess. Marian shrank away from them both.

‘Named after me, is she?’ The white-haired queen laughed at her. ‘How you flatter me, little mouse. But let us see if your bantling amounts to more than you, before we draw comparisons.’

Not for the first time in her life, Marian Berethnet wished the earth would crack open and swallow her.

Like every other woman of her house, Lady Sabran grew to be tall and striking. It was a well-known fact that each Berethnet queen gave birth to one girl, who came to look just like her. Always the same black hair. Always the same eyes, green as southern apples. Always the same pale skin and red lips. Before old age changed them, it could often be hard to tell them apart.

But the younger Sabran did not have her mother’s fear, her grandmother’s spite, or the tyrant’s cruelty. She carried herself with purpose and dignity, never rising to a taunt.

She kept her own company as much as she could, and the company of her ladies, who she trusted above anyone. Her tutors educated her in the history of Virtudom, and when she excelled in those lessons, they taught her to paint and sing and dance. They did this in secret, for the queen hated to see other Berethnets happy – and to see them learn to rule.

For ten years, the entire court watched the youngest of the four.

Her ladies were the first to hope that she might be their saviour. They saw the line that never left its seat between her brows. They walked with her to the castle gates, where she took stock of the rotten heads, her jaw clenched in disgust. They were there when the Malkin Queen tried to break her, the day she first woke to blood on her sheets.

‘I was told you are ready to make a green-eyed bairn of your own,’ the old queen said. ‘Fear not, child . . . I shall not let your beauty wither on the vine.’ Her face was like the skin on milk, powder sunk into its creases. ‘Do you dream of being queen, my lamb?’

Lady Sabran stood at the heart of the throne room, in sight of two hundred courtiers.

‘I dare not, Your Grace,’ she said, her voice quiet yet clear. ‘After all, I could only be queen if you were no longer on the throne. Or, Saint forbid . . . if you were dead.’

The court rippled.

It was treason to imagine the death of the sovereign, let alone speak of it. The queen knew this. She also knew she could not kill her granddaughter, for it would mean the end of the bloodline and her power. Before she could reply, the child left, followed by her ladies.

By that time, the Malkin Queen had held the throne for over a century. For too long, no one had been able to imagine a world free of her, but from that day on, hope was reborn. From that day on, the servants referred to Lady Sabran – always in whispers – as the Little Queen.

The tyrant died, aged one hundred and six, in her bed of finest Erysi silk, Lasian gold on every finger. Jillian the Third was next to sit the marble throne, but few rejoiced in earnest. They knew Jillian would take all that her mother had denied her.

Not a year after her coronation, a man slipped into the hall where Queen Jillian was dining. The late queen had ordered him tortured to madness. He stabbed her daughter in the heart, thinking she was his tormentor. She was laid beside the tyrant in the Sanctuary of Queens.

Marian the Third wore the crown as if it were a poisonous snake. She refused to see petitioners who sought help from their sovereign. She feared even her councillors. Sabran pressed her mother to demonstrate more strength, but Marian was too afraid of Inys to control it. Not for the first time, there were rumblings – not just of discontent, but rebellion.

Blood averted blood, for war awoke in Hróth.

The snowbound North had ever been strange to the Inysh. Some years Hróth had offered trade, while in others, raiders had come in their boar ships to burn and ransack Inysh towns.

Now, across ice cascades and deep forests, the clans took up arms and marched to the slaughter.

It began with Verthing Bloodblade, who lusted after Askrdal, largest of the twelve domains. When its chieftain refused an alliance, he killed her, taking her land for his own clan. Those who had loved Skiri Longstride sought vengeance, and soon the feud had all Hróth in its grip.

By midwinter of that same year, as blood continued to soak the snow red, violence flared again, to the south, in the peaceful land of Mentendon. A devastating flood had struck its coast, sinking entire settlements, and Heryon Vattenvarg, the Sea King, hardest of all Hróthi raiders, attacked in its wake. With Hróth still at war, he had gone seeking greener lands and found one floundering. This time, he meant not to sack, but to settle.

In Inys, Sabran Berethnet listened to the Virtues Council bicker over what to do. At the head of the table, her mother was gaunt and silent, hunched beneath her crown.

‘I agree we should not interfere with the war in the North,’ Sabran told her in private, ‘but let us help the Ments oust this Vattenvarg in exchange for their conversion. Yscalin could lend them arms. Imagine how the Saint would smile – a third realm sworn to him.’

‘No. We must not provoke the Sea King,’ Marian said. ‘His salt warriors slaughter without pity, even as the Ments reel from this dreadful flood. I have never heard of such wanton cruelty.’

‘If we don’t assist the Ments now, Vattenvarg will crush them. This is no ordinary raider, Mother,’ Sabran said, losing her patience. ‘Vattenvarg means to usurp the Queen of Mentendon. If victory emboldens him, he will come for Inys next. Do you not see?’

‘Enough, Sabran.’ Marian pressed her temples. ‘Please, child, leave me. I can’t think.’

Sabran obeyed, but bridled inside. She was sixteen and still had no sway.

By summer, Heryon Vattenvarg had most of Mentendon, ruling from a new capital, Brygstad. He claimed the land for Clan Vatten.

Weakened by flooding, famine and cold, the Ments ceased their fight and knelt. For the first time in history, a raider had taken a realm.

Two years after the conquest of Mentendon, the war in Hróth came to an end. The chieftains had pledged to a young warrior of Bringard, who had won their loyalty with his sharp mind and tremendous strength. It was he who had slain Verthing Bloodblade, avenging Skiri Longstride, and united the clans, as none ever had. Soon Inys heard the news that Bardholt Hraustr – bastard son of a boneworker – would rule as the first King of Hróth.

He would also sail to meet the Inysh queen.

‘This is a fine state of affairs,’ Sabran said curtly, reading the letter. ‘Now two nearby countries are ruled by heathen butchers. If we had aided the Ments, it would only be one.’

‘By the Saint. We are doomed.’ Marian wrung her hands. ‘What does he want from us?’

Sabran could guess. Like the wolves that stalked their forests, the Hróthi could smell wounded things, and Inys was a realm still bleeding.

‘King Bardholt fought long for his crown. I am sure he wants no further hostilities,’ she said, if only to soothe her mother. ‘If not, Yscalin is with us.’ She rose. ‘I have faith in the Saint. Let the bastard come.’

Bardholt Battlebold – one of his many names in Hróth – came to Inys on a black ship named the *Helm of Morning*. Queen Marian sent her consort to meet him. All day, she paced the throne room, plaits swaying. She wore a deep green overgown on ivory, which swamped her. Sabran countered her with absolute stillness.

When the King of Hróth appeared, shadowed by his retainers, the whole court turned to ice around him.

The Northerners wore heavy furs and goatskin boots. Their king dressed like the rest. Sabran was tall, but if she had stood on her toes, she doubted her head would have reached his chin. Thick golden hair coursed to his waist. His arms strained with muscle, and his shoulders seemed as wide and sturdy as a dowry chest. She thought he was in his early twenties, but he could also have been her age, weathered by the toll of war.

That war was etched into his tanned and well-boned face. A scar carved from his left temple to the corner of his mouth; another marked his right cheekbone.

‘Marian Queen.’ He raised a giant fist to his heart. ‘I am Bardholt Hraustr, King of Hróth.’

His voice was low and somewhat coarse. It drove a chill through Sabran, as did his crown. Even at a distance, she could see that it was pieced together from splinters of bone.

‘Bardholt King,’ Marian said. ‘You are welcome to Inys.’ She cleared her throat. ‘We congratulate you on your victory in the Nurthernold. It brings us joy to know the war is over.’

‘Not as much joy as it brings me.’

Marian twisted her rings. ‘This is my daughter,’ she said. ‘Lady Sabran.’

Sabran straightened. King Bardholt gave her a fleeting glance, then looked again, his gaze nailed to her face.

‘Lady,’ he said.

Without breaking his gaze, Sabran curtsied, the pale sleeves of her gown caressing the floor. ‘Sire,’ she said, ‘this queendom offers its esteem. Fire for your hearth, and joy for your hall.’

She spoke in perfect Hróthi. He raised his eyebrows. ‘You know my tongue.’

‘A little. And you know mine.’

‘A little. My late grandmother was Inysh, from Cruckby. I learned as much as felt needful.’

Sabran inclined her head. *It would not be needful if this king had no interest in Inys.*

King Bardholt returned his attention to her mother, but throughout their exchange of courtesies, it drifted back to Sabran. Beneath her sleeves, her wrists and fingers warmed.

‘Be at ease,’ he said. ‘The violence in my land will spill no farther, now Bloodblade is dead. I have all of Hróth – and I will have Mentendon, once Heryon Vattenvarg swears his allegiance to me, which he must, as a man of Hróth.’ He smiled with a full set of teeth. Sabran thought that must be a fine rare thing after a war. ‘I only wish for a friend in Inys.’

‘And we accept your friendship,’ Marian said, her relief so potent that Sabran could almost smell it. ‘Let our realms live in perfect peace, now and always.’ Since the danger seemed to have passed, she was steadier. ‘Our castellan has prepared the gatehouse for your retinue. I am sure you must

return to Hróth very soon – though if you wish to stay to celebrate the Feast of Fellowship, which falls a week from now, it would be our honour.’

‘The honour would be mine, Your Grace. My sister and chieftains will manage in my absence.’

He bowed and strode from the throne room.

‘Saint. He was not supposed to accept the invitation.’ Marian looked sick. ‘It was a courtesy.’

‘Your courtesies are hollow, then, Mother?’ Sabran said coolly. ‘The Saint would not approve.’

‘Nay, the sooner he leaves, the better. He will see the treasures of our sanctuaries and want them for himself.’ When the queen rose, one of her ladies took her by the arm. ‘Guard yourself well in the days to come, daughter. I could not bear you to be taken for ransom.’

‘I should like to see them hold me,’ Sabran said, and left.

That night, after her ladies had finished the long task of washing her hair, Sabran sat beside the fire and pondered what the King of Hróth had said. The words that had betrayed the truth.

There has been enough bloodshed for now.

‘Florell, you know all secrets.’ She glanced up at her closest friend. ‘Is King Bardholt promised?’

‘Not as far as I’ve heard.’ Florell combed her hair. ‘I’ve no doubt he’s taken lovers, looking the way he does. They don’t follow the Knight of Fellowship there.’

‘No,’ Sabran said. ‘They do not.’ A log in the fire crumbled. ‘Is he a man of faith?’

‘I’ve heard the Hróthi worship spirits of the ice, and faceless gods that dwell in the forests.’

‘But you have heard nothing of *his* faith.’

Florell slowed as she worked on a stubborn knot. ‘No,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Not a whisper.’

Sabran reflected on that. As the idea formed, she said, ‘I need a private audience with him.’

In the corner of the room, Liuma lowered her needlework. ‘Sabran, he has taken many lives,’ she said in Yscali. ‘He has no place in Halgalant. Why would you want to speak with him?’

‘To make him a proposal.’

Only the crackle of the fire broke the stillness. When Liuma realised, she drew a sharp breath.

‘Why?’ Florell said, after a silence. ‘Why him?’

‘It would bring another realm under the holy shield – two, if Heryon Vattenvarg kneels to him,’ Sabran said softly. ‘The Sea King would have to submit if Bardholt stood with us.’

Florell sank into a chair. ‘Saint,’ she said. ‘He would. Sabran, you’re right.’

‘Your mother would never agree,’ Liuma whispered. ‘You would plot this behind her back?’

‘For Inys. Mother fears her own shadow,’ Sabran said darkly. ‘You must see what will happen next. Either Bardholt or Heryon will claim this queendom, to show his strength over the other.’

‘Bardholt said he would not attack us,’ Florell reminded her. ‘I hear the Hróthi take oaths seriously.’

‘Bardholt Hraustr is not cut from the same ice as his ancestors. But I can make sure he poses no threat.’ Sabran turned to them. ‘It has been over a century since the Malkin Queen sowed the rot in Inys. That rot has set too deep for us to win a war against the heathens. I will be a peaceweaver. I will save the House of Berethnet, and make sure it rises stronger than ever – the head of four realms sworn to the Saint and the Damsel. We will rule the Ashen Sea.’

Florell and Liuma held a wordless conversation. At last, Florell knelt before Sabran and kissed her hand.

‘We will see to it,’ she said, her voice resolute. ‘My lady. My queen.’

Just before dawn, Sabran slipped from her bedchamber, dressed for riding, leaving Florell and Liuma to conceal her absence. She stole into the castle grounds, through the wildflowers and oaks. Never, in her eighteen years, had she gone this far without her guards.

It might be folly. So might her idea – her dangerous and wild idea, curled within her like an adder, ready to sink its teeth into a king. If she could convince him, she would change the world.

Saint, give me strength. Open his ears.

The sun had almost risen by the time Sabran beheld the lake, and the heathen who bathed in its shallows. When he saw her, the king scraped

his hair from his eyes and waded towards her, stripped to the waist. Loaves of muscle shifted under his many scars.

When he reached the shore, her nerve almost failed. He kept just enough of a distance for her to face him without craning her neck.

‘Lady Sabran,’ he said, ‘forgive my undress. I always swim at dawn, to spur my blood.’

‘If you will forgive me,’ Sabran said, ‘for inviting you here as I did, without ceremony.’

‘Boldness is admirable in a warrior.’

‘I am no warrior.’

‘Yet I see you came armed.’ He nodded to the blade at her waist. ‘You must fear me.’

‘I heard some call you Bearhand. Foolish to face a bear with no blade.’

For a tense moment, he only looked at her, still as a beast before the pounce. Then he chuckled low in his throat. ‘Come then,’ he said, folding his huge arms. ‘Speak your mind.’

Water glistened on his chest. His voice polished her senses. She smelled the sweetness of bedstraw and grass, felt the hammered gold of her bracelet where her wrist had warmed it.

‘I have a proposal,’ she said. ‘One I must make in confidence.’ She took a step towards him. ‘I am told the snowseers have not yet declared a religion for the new Kingdom of Hróth.’

‘They have not.’

‘I would know why.’

His gaze held steady. This close, she saw his eyes were hazel, more gold than green.

‘My brother,’ he said, ‘was murdered during the war.’

Sabran had not grieved for her grandmother, and she doubted she would mourn her parents for too long. Still, she imagined the loss of a loved one would hurt like an arrowhead lodged in the body. Life would grow and twine around it, but it would remain, always hurting.

‘When I found him, crows were feasting on his eyes,’ King Bardholt said. ‘Verthing Bloodblade had slit his throat and cast him off like an old pelt. My young nephew only escaped the same fate by cutting off his own hand.’ His jaw worked. ‘My brother was a child. An innocent. No god or spirit worth my praise would have allowed his death.’

The only sound between them was the fizzle of the nearby trees. If Sabran had been born a heathen, she might have thought that something in those oaks had heard his treachery.

I must strike now, with force, or not at all.

‘In Inys, we no longer answer to such things. We honour the memory of a man – my own ancestor – and live according to his Six Virtues,’ she said. ‘Like you, the Saint was a warrior in a land of small and feuding kingdoms. Like you, he united them all beneath one crown.’

‘And how did he do this, your Saint?’

‘He slew a vicious wyrm, and so won the heart of Princess Cleolind of Lasia. She forsook her old gods to stand at his side.’ The wind spun long strands of hair from her circlet. ‘Inys and Yscalin are united in praise of him. Join us. Swear Hróth to his Virtues of Knighthood. With two ancient monarchies at your side, you will leave the Sea King no choice but to kneel.’

‘Heryon will kneel regardless,’ was all he said.

‘Winning his loyalty by force would mean another war. Many would die. Even children.’

‘You appeal to my heart.’

‘More than you think.’ Sabran raised her eyebrows. ‘You cannot have me unless you convert.’

That made him smile. It was a baleful thing, that smile, and yet it did hold warmth.

‘What makes you think I would have you, Lady Sabran?’ Her name was a dark thrum in his throat. ‘How do you know I don’t already have a consort in my own kingdom?’

‘Because I saw how you looked at me in the throne room.’ (He had not said *no*.) ‘And how often.’

King Bardholt offered no reply. Sabran stood tall before him, for she was not her mother.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘that you are a man familiar with having what you want. This time, you need not seize it with blood and force. I offer it all to you. Be my consort.’

‘Your religion began with a love story. Am I the heathen in this tale, or the great slayer?’

Sabran only held his gaze. She imagined herself as a hook in water, still enough to lure a circling fish.

‘I have heard the Berethnet queens bear only one child. Always, as far back as the songs go,’ he finally said. ‘I will need an heir for Hróth, to consolidate the House of Hraustr.’

‘You have a sister. And she has a son,’ Sabran said. ‘With Virtudom behind you, your new house will be unassailable.’ She lifted her chin. ‘I know you will need to convince the snowseers to embrace the Saint. I know the Six Virtues are yet strange to you – but your realm is weeping, Battlebold. So is mine. Marry me, so all wounds may be knit.’

It was some time before he moved, reaching for her waist. Her heart beat thick and heavy as he slid her small blade from its sheath.

He could stab her where she stood, and Inys would be his to conquer.

‘I will consult the snowseers,’ he said. ‘If we choose your way, I will swear it with your blade, in my blood.’

He walked back to the castle with her knife. As Sabran watched him disappear, she knew she had already won.

On the first day of midsummer, the Issýn, highest of the snowseers of Hróth, emerged from her cave to share a vision. She had dreamed of a chainmail that covered the world, and a sword of polished silver, passed from a long-dead Inysh knight to the new King of Hróth.

In the new capital of Eldyng, King Bardholt declared that Hróth, like Cleolind of Lasia, would abandon the ancient ways and follow the everlasting light of Ascalun, the True Sword.

In Inys, Sabran Berethnet received a letter, smeared with the blood of a king, saying only one word: *yes*.

In the weeks after they announced their betrothal, Heryon Vattenvarg made an announcement of his own, declaring loyalty to the King of Hróth, who named him Steward of Mentendon. Heryon converted. So did his subjects. Within a year, the King of Hróth wed the Princess of Inys, and across the realms pledged to the Saint, there was revelry and song.

Inys, Hróth, Yscalin and Mentendon – the unbreakable Chainmail of Virtudom.

Queen Marian yielded the throne before long. Having had more than her fill of court, she retired to the coast with her companion. The

day Sabran the Sixth was crowned before her subjects, her Northern king was at her side, grinning as if his face would crack.

An heir did not arrive at once. Bardholt spent most summers in Inys to escape the midnight sun, while Sabran sailed across the water in the spring, but duty always stole between them. Their lands were still too fragile to abandon in the darker, harder months.

On her island, Sabran ruled alone. There was time for an heir, and she wanted as much of it as possible alone with her court, and with her consort, whose passion for her was ever strong.

One year, a few months after Bardholt had left Inys, Liuma afa Dáura found she could no longer lace the queen into her gown.

The next year, as the woodruff bloomed, Sabran bore a daughter, who screamed loud enough to bring down the Great Table. The attendants threw the shutters open for the first time in a month. As Florell sponged the sweat from her brow and Liuma nursed the baby, Sabran felt as if she was taking the first easy breath of her life. It was done, all of it.

She had made the world new.

When he heard the news, King Bardholt left Eldyng and boarded a ship with a handful of retainers, disguised as a seafarer. Five days later, he reached Ascalun Castle, fear gripping him harder than it ever had during the war. It faded when he found Sabran waiting for him, alive and well. He took her in his arms and thanked the Saint.

‘Where is she?’ he asked her hoarsely.

Sabran smiled at his excitement, placing a kiss on his cheek. Liuma brought the child.

‘Glorian,’ Sabran told him. ‘Her name is Glorian.’

Bardholt gazed in wonder at their child as Sabran was dressed for the day. When she emerged on to the royal balcony at Ascalun Castle, with her consort beside her and their black-haired daughter in her arms, a hundred thousand people roared in welcome.

Glorian.

Esbar

A princess for the West. One lost in the East. In the South, a third girl was born, between the other two.

This girl was not destined to wear a crown. Her birth did not stitch the wounds in a queendom, or gift her with any right to a throne. This birth took place deep in the Lasian Basin, out of sight of the eyes of the world – because this girl, like her birthplace, was a secret.

Her many sisters waited as she crowned, some calling their encouragement, the room lit by their flames. Among them, Esbar du Apaya uq-Nāra panted in the last throes of delivery.

The day before, she had felt the first twinge while she bathed in the river, two weeks early. Now it was almost sunrise, and she was hunkered on the birthing bricks, wishing slow death on Imsurin for causing this, even though she had been the one to invite the man to lie with her.

‘Almost there, Esbar,’ Denag told her from the floor. ‘Come, sister – just once more.’

Esbar reached for the two women who flanked her. On her right, her birthmother prayed aloud, soft and calming. On her other side, Tunuva Melim kept both arms around her shoulders.

‘Courage, my love,’ Tunuva whispered. ‘We are with you.’

Esbar landed a shaky kiss on her temple. She had said the same words over a year before, when it was Tunuva who laboured.

When their eyes met, Tunuva smiled for her, even if her lips shook. Esbar tried to reply – only for another shooting cramp to rip the words away. *Let it be now*, she thought, through the fog of pain. *Let it be done*.

Gathering what remained of her courage, she fixed her gaze on the statue of Gedali and willed herself to be as strong as the divinity.

She bore down on the bricks, as if she meant to bestride the world. Her throat scorched with her scream. Her insides roiled. In a slippery rush, the child slid free, straight into the waiting arms of Denag, and Esbar slackened, as if she had pushed her bones out as well.

Denag turned the child, clearing a tiny nose. There was silence – a deep shared breath, unspoken prayer – before a thin wail shivered into the chamber.

‘The Mother is with us,’ the Prioress declared, to cheers. ‘Esbar has given her a warrior!’

Apaya let go of her breath as if it had been caged for hours. ‘Well done, Esbar.’

Esbar could only laugh in relief. Tunuva held on to her, keeping her from slumping off the bricks. ‘You did it,’ she said, laughing with her. ‘Ez, you did it. Thank the Mother.’

Shuddering, Esbar pressed their foreheads together. Sweat trickled down both their faces.

Gentle chatter filled the chamber. Esbar lay on the daybed, and Denag placed the newborn on her chest – slathered in birthing wax, soft as a petal. She fidgeted, cracking her crusted eyes open.

‘Hello, strong one.’ Esbar stroked her brow. ‘You were in a hurry to see the world, weren’t you?’

The afterpains would begin soon. For now, there were prayers and smiles and good wishes, and more love than her heart could hold. Esbar brought the child to her breast. All she wanted now was to be still, and to savour what it was to only house one life within her.

Apaya brought a basin of boiled water and a cold poultice. ‘Watch over Tunuva,’ Esbar said to her quietly, while their sisters milled around. ‘Promise me you will do this, Apaya.’

‘For as long as it takes.’ Apaya unsheathed a knife. ‘Rest now, Esbar. Recover your strength.’

Esbar was only too glad to oblige. Her birthmother severed the cord, and at last, the child passed from the womb to the world.

Once the afterbirth had come, Apaya took her to her sunroom, still with the child against her heart. They stayed that way until Imsurin arrived.

‘I told you we’d make a fine match,’ Esbar reminded him. ‘Ready to lose sleep for a while?’

‘More than ready.’ He leaned in to place a chaste kiss on her forehead. ‘You honoured the Mother for both of us, Esbar. I can never repay you for bearing this gift to her.’

‘I’m sure I’ll think of something. For now, just keep her safe and happy while I sleep.’

And sleep she did. As soon as Imsurin had tucked their birthdaughter in his arms, Esbar fell into a blissful drowse, and Apaya was there to tend her.

It was almost noon by the time the Prioress came, accompanied by Tunuva and Denag. As they entered, Esbar woke in a spill of warm sunlight. Apaya helped her sit up with the child.

‘Beloved daughter,’ the Prioress said, touching Esbar on the top of her head, ‘this day, you have made an offering to the Mother. You have given her a warrior, to guard against the Nameless One. As a descendant of Siyāti du Verda uq-Nāra, you may bless her with two names, in the way of the northern Ersyr – one for herself, and one to guide her.’

The child nosed at her breast, snuffling for milk again. Esbar placed a kiss on her scalp.

‘Prioress,’ she said, ‘I name this child Siyu du Tunuva uq-Nāra, and entrust her, now and always, to the Mother.’

Tunuva grew very still. The Prioress gave a grave nod.

‘Siyu du Tunuva uq-Nāra,’ she said, anointing her head with the sap of the tree. ‘The Priory bids you welcome, little sister.’

I

The Twilight Year

CE 509

This world exists
as a sheen of dew on flowers.

– Izumi Shikibu



I

East

First, the waking in the dark. It had taken her years to become her own rooster, but now she was an instrument of gods. More than any change of light, it was their will that roused her.

Second, immersion in the ice pool. Fortified, she returned to her room and dressed in six layers of clothing, each made to withstand the cold. She tied back her hair and pressed down every strand with wax, to keep it from blinding her in the wind. That could be deadly on the mountain.

She had caught a chill from the pool the first time – shivered in her room for hours, runny-nosed and red of cheek. That was when she was a child, too fragile for the tests of worship.

Now Dumai could endure it, as she endured the elevation of the temple. Mountain sickness had never touched her, for she was born into these lofty halls, higher than most birds were hatched. Kanifa had once joked that if she ever went down to the city, she would keel over, breathless and faint, as climbers did when they ventured this high.

Earth sickness, her mother had agreed. *Best stay up here, my kite, where you belong.*

Third, writing down the dreams she remembered. Fourth, a meal to give her strength. Fifth, stepping into her boots on the porch, and from there to the courtyard, still mantled in night, where her mother waited to lead the procession.

Next, the lighting of the woodfall, sweet bark from logs that had lain on the seabed. It burned with smoke as clean as fog, and a scent like the world in the wake of a storm.

In the gloom, wide awake, the bridge that crossed the gap between the middle and third peaks. Then the long climb up the slopes, chanting in the ancient tongue.

Onward to the shrine that stood at the summit, and then, at the first glow of dawn, the ritual itself. Ringing the chimes before Kwiriki, dancing around his iron statue – calling out to the gods to return, as Snow Maiden once had. Salt and song and praise. Voices raised together, the song of welcome golden in their throats and on their tongues.

That was how her day began.

Snow glared under a clear sky. Dumai of Ipyeda narrowed her eyes against the dazzle as she picked her way down to the hot spring, taking a long drink from her flask. The other godsingers trailed far behind.

She rinsed herself before she slid into the steaming pool. Eyes closed, she sank up to her throat, savouring the heat and quiet.

Even for her, the climb was hard. Most visitors failed to summit Mount Ipyeda, and they paid for the privilege of trying. Sometimes they became headsick or blind and had to admit defeat; sometimes their hearts gave out. Few could breathe its thin air for long.

Dumai could. She had breathed nothing but this air since the evening she was born.

‘Mai.’

She glanced over her shoulder. Her closest friend had appeared, carrying her clothes from the shelter. ‘Kan,’ she said. It was not one of his climbing days. ‘Are you joining me?’

‘No. A message came from the village,’ Kanifa said. ‘We’ll have guests by nightfall.’

Strange news indeed. There was a window of opportunity in early autumn for climbers, but this late in the season, when deep snow filled the lower pass and the wind blew strong enough to kill, the High Temple of Kwiriki did not expect guests. ‘How many?’

‘One climber and four attendants.’ Kanifa laid her clothes beside the pool. ‘She is from Clan Kuposa.’

There was a name to banish exhaustion – the name of the most influential clan in Seiiki. Dumai rose from the water.

‘Remember, no special treatment,’ she said, drying herself with a length of cloth. ‘On this mountain, the Kuposa stand at the same height as others.’

‘A good thought,’ he said mildly, ‘for a different world. They hold the power to close temples.’

‘And why should they use it?’

‘Let’s not give them a reason.’

‘You’re growing as nervous of court as my mother.’ Dumai picked up the first of her layers. ‘All right. Let’s prepare.’

Kanifa waited for her to dress. She tied fur warmers over her sleeves and trousers, pulled on her heavy black coat, secured her hood under her chin, snugly wrapped her feet and covered them with her deerskin boots, fastening her ice spikes to the soles. Last came her gloves, sewn to fit her. On her right hand, only the forefinger and thumb were whole, the others shortened with hot steel. She slung on her pelt and followed Kanifa.

They walked down to the sky platform, Kanifa with a small frown. At thirty, he was only three years older than Dumai, but the deep lines carved around his eyes made him seem older.

The platform creaked underfoot. Ahead lay Antuma, capital of Seiiki, built at the fork of the River Tikara. It was not the first capital; likely it would not be the last. Sunlight daubed its rooftops and sparkled on the frosted trees that stood between it and the mountain.

The House of Noziken had once ruled from the harbour city of Ginura. Only when the gods had withdrawn into the Long Slumber – two hundred and sixty years ago – had the court had moved inland, to the Rayonti Basin. Now its home was Antuma Palace, an impressive complex at the eastern end of the Avenue of the Dawn. If Antuma was a fan, that avenue was its central rib, a clean line from the palace to the main gate of the city.

Often, Dumai would look out and imagine what Antuma had been like when dragons roamed. She wished she had been alive in that time, to see them watching over Seiiki.

‘Here they come.’ Kanifa eyed the slope. ‘Not yet frozen.’

Dumai followed his gaze. Far below, she made out a line of figures, specks of ash on the blinding white. ‘I’ll prepare the Inner Hall,’ she said. ‘Will you instruct the refectory?’

‘I will.’

‘And tell my mother. You know she hates to be surprised.’

‘Yes, Maiden Officiant,’ he said solemnly. Dumai grinned and gave him a push towards the temple.

He knew she had only two dreams. The first was to set eyes on a dragon; the second was to one day succeed her mother as Maiden Officiant.

Inside, she parted ways with Kanifa. He made for the refectory, she for the Inner Hall, where she built five screened enclosures for the climber and her servants, each with its own stove and bedding. By the time she was finished, hunger had rubbed her stomach raw.

She fetched a meal from the refectory: yolks steamed and beaten into a smooth yellow cream, poured over slices of skinned chicken and mushroom and speckled with dark salty oil. As she ate on one of the roofs, she watched for the sorrowers that nested in the crags above the temple. Soon their young would hatch and fill the evening air with song.

When she had cleaned her bowl, she joined the others for the midday prayer. After, she chopped firewood while Kanifa scraped ice from the eaves and gathered snow to melt for drinking.

It was dusk by the time the party appeared. They had survived the treacherous steps that led from the first peak to the second. First came their armed guards, hired to drive off the bears and bandits that stalked the wooded foothills of the mountain. They followed a guide from the nameless village on the lower slopes, the last waystop before the temple.

The climber came next, wrapped in so many layers that her head looked too small for her body. Her attendants huddled around her, heads bowed against the screaming wind.

On the porch, Dumai exchanged a look with Kanifa, who glanced over his shoulder. The Maiden Officiant was supposed to receive visitors, but Unora was nowhere to be seen.

‘I will greet them,’ Dumai finally said.

The snow was thick and swift, so heavy she could hardly see for the flakes on her lashes. Her hood kept most of her hair in place, but loose strands whipped free and caught on her lips.

She had barely reached the steps when a hand grasped her wrist. Expecting Kanifa, she turned – only to find her mother beside her, wearing her headdress of silver butterflies.

‘I’m here now, Dumai,’ she said. ‘Is everything ready?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘I knew I could rely on you.’ Unora touched her shoulder. ‘Rest. You’ve worked hard today.’

She retreated, knowing better than to stay. Her mother was different when courtiers visited, especially the Kuposa – tense and distant in a way she never was elsewhen.

Dumai had never fully understood it. Though Clan Kuposa had enormous influence at court, they had only ever supported the High Temple of Kwiriki. They had financed crucial renovations, sent beautiful gifts, even paid for a distinguished artist to paint the Inner Hall. Still, it might be wise to tread with care around a family with such power.

On her way to bed, she cracked open a door. In the highest quarters of the temple, Osipa of Antuma was peering at a scroll through a water stone, feet perched on a hot brick.

‘Osipa,’ Dumai said, ‘can I bring you anything?’

Osipa squinted at her. ‘Dumai.’ Her voice was clotted. ‘Thoughtful of you to offer, but no.’ She raised her grey eyebrows, still groomed in the old court style. ‘I saw you working cracks into your hands again. Have you tried the balm I gave you for Summerfall?’

‘I need them tough for climbing,’ Dumai reminded her. Osipa shook her head, then coughed into her sleeve. ‘Are you not well?’

‘A chill.’ Osipa dabbed her nose. ‘I envy you, child. You weather the cold as well as the mountain.’

‘Let me get you some ginger. It will help.’

‘I know by now that nothing will.’ She hunched over her scroll again. ‘May your dreams be clear, Dumai.’

‘And yours.’

Osipa had always hated the dark months. A loyal handmaiden to the Grand Empress, she alone had followed her mistress to Mount Ipyeda. Decades later, she had yet to settle.

Night plunged the temple into darkness. Dumai made her way to her room, finding a meal waiting on a tray, and the shutters locked against the wind. Once she had sanded her calluses, she undressed and slotted her legs under her blanketed table, where a box of coals smouldered.

As the wind moaned, she ate, warm as a nestling. Only when every dish was spotless did she open her prayer box, taking out a strip of paper, her brush, and a jar of cuttlefish ink. She wrote her wish – always the

same – and dropped the paper into her dream bowl. It thinned as it floated, the water absorbing her words, drinking them into the gods' realm.

Tiredness came rushing over her, like the sea she had never seen. She moved the coals next to her bedding, blew out the lamps, and laid her head on her pillow, falling asleep in a heartbeat.

First, the waking in the dark. Parched mouth, fingers slurred. They slid out from the bedding, finding the floor too soft, too cold.

Dumai swam up from the sea of dreaming. Shivering, her nose like ice, she tried to think why her face was damp, why there was snow under her fingers. Nearby, sounds fought to be heard over the wind. A squeak, a rattle – then a dreadful *crack* that jolted her upright.

One of her shutters had blown open. Left to clatter, it would wake the whole temple.

Her legs were slow to move. She groped her way to the window and reached out, fingertips hooking into the shutter.

Something gave her pause. She looked straight ahead, into the black roar of night, towards the lantern at the top of the stepway, protected from the wind. By its light, she could make out a shadow. Kanifa had always said she had sharper eyes than a bird of prey.

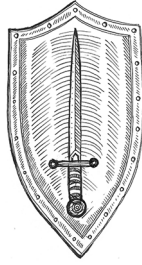
A bandit. Or a sleepless ghost. Something that did not belong. She remembered tales of teeth like arrowheads, of flesh rotting on bone, and suddenly she was a fearful child again.

She was also a godsinger, ordained before the great Kwiriki. Resolve hardened her spine.

The floor creaked as she carried a lamp from her room, down the stairs, past the softly lit doors of the Inner Hall. She had learned to walk in these corridors, knew them just as well in darkness as she did by day. On the porch, she put on the first boots she found.

The figure was still beside the lantern, so hunched against the wind it looked as if it had no head. Dumai walked towards it, grasping one of her ice sickles. She had never used it as a weapon, but she would try if necessary. When the figure turned, a face came into relief.

Not a bandit. This man wore the muddled garb of a saltwalker. He looked at Dumai with watering eyes, then coughed out a fine spray of blood and collapsed into the snow.



2

West

The first time Glorian saw her own blood, she was twelve years old. It was Julain who had spotted the smear, stark on her ivory shift. So splendid were the stories of Berethnet blood, Glorian had almost expected it be molten gold, for her blood kept a great wyrm shackled in darkness. Instead, it had been a dull, rusty brown.

It is less than I thought, she had remarked, and *less* had carried a few meanings. Julain had left to fetch a clout and tell the queen.

The second time Glorian saw her own blood, she was fifteen and a half, and the end of a bone had knifed through her skin, between the shoulder and the elbow.

This time, Julain Crest was less composed.

‘Fetch the Royal Surgeon,’ she shouted at the guards. Two went running. ‘Quickly, quickly!’

Glorian stared down at her bone. It was a small piece that poked through, not much longer than a tooth – and yet it was somehow lewd, naked when it ought to be covered.

The night before, while the fire burned low, Helisent had shared a tale from the north. People there believed that oak galls – growths like apples on those trees, used in the making of ink – could hold signs of the future. If a bumblebee had nudged inside, the next year would be joyful. If a gallfly was there, caught in a thing of its own making, the

year would be stagnant or riddled with blunders. Whatever was inside, there was some fate attached.

Heathen talk, Adela had muttered. Such tales stemmed from the days before the Saint, but Glorian had found it both charming and harmless. At sunrise, she and her ladies had ridden out in search of fallen galls, only for her horse to take a sudden fright and throw her.

A rush of pain snatched her back to the present. She must have fainted, for suddenly there was a flock of people, and the Royal Surgeon was staring at the chip of bone, and the horse, Óvarr, gave a terrified whinny. A groom was trying in vain to calm her.

‘Lady Glorian, can you hear me?’ the Royal Surgeon asked her. She nodded, dizzy. ‘Tell me, now, do you feel your legs?’

‘Yes, Doctor Forthard.’ Glorian blew out a breath. ‘Though I . . . feel one of my arms more keenly.’

Grave faces crowded around her. She was strapped on to a length of wood and lifted by four guards.

Strong hands kept her head in line with her backbone as they marched her through the queenswood, past the lake, towards Drouthwick Castle. Above the south gate, the Berethnet standard proclaimed that Queen Sabran was in residence. Pain struck Glorian like an axe on a shield. When she tried to look at the wound, she found her head still trapped.

As soon as they entered the gloom of the keep, a familiar voice called her by name, and then Lady Florell Glade was at her side, flaxen curls tumbling from their net.

‘Glorian,’ she said, aghast. ‘By the Saint, Doctor Forthard, what is this?’

‘Her Highness fell from her horse, my lady,’ Sir Bramel Stathworth said.

‘The heir to Inys,’ Florell said hotly as she kept up with the board. ‘You are duty-bound to protect her, Sir Bramel.’

‘The palfrey was calm all morning. Forgive me, but we could never have stopped it.’

‘Please,’ Doctor Forthard said, ‘don’t touch the princess, Lady Florell. You could sully the wound.’

Florell had seen it by now. She stared down at the place where the bone peeked through, her face ashen. ‘Sweet child,’ she said hoarsely, ‘do not fear. The Saint is with you.’

The flagstones swallowed the sound of her flight. Glorian let her eyes close again, and all was shadow for a time, the tilt and sway of the board like a cradle.

Next she woke, she was in her own bed, and her left sleeve had been cut away to show the mess of her arm – white skin, red blood, that fang of bone. Doctor Forthard was soaping her hands in a basin of hot water, accompanied by two strangers: one in the brown herigald of an apprentice sanctarian, the other in a red tabard, a white tunic beneath.

A bonesetter. Her father paid a small army of them to crack his neck and back. This one stood with their hands tucked into their sleeves, as if to avert the imagination from the agony they were about to inflict.

‘Lady Glorian.’ The apprentice came to her. ‘Drink this. It will dull the pain.’

He held a wineskin to her lips, and Glorian drank as much as she could. The wine left a meaty aftertaste of sage. ‘Doctor Forthard,’ she said, ‘what must you do?’

‘We must draw the two halves of the bone together, Highness,’ Doctor Forthard said, ‘so they may knit back into one. This is Mastress Kell Bourn, a member of the Company of Bones.’

‘Your Highness,’ the bonesetter said, low and calm. ‘Please, stay as still as you can.’

Sir Bramel prayed under his breath. Glorian tensed as the strangers moved towards the bed. The apprentice sanctarian stood by her feet, while the bonesetter appraised her arm. ‘I want banewort,’ Glorian said. ‘Doctor Forthard, please, I want to sleep.’

‘No,’ Dame Erda Lindley said firmly. ‘None of your herbs or potions, Forthard. Queen Sabran forbids it.’

Doctor Forthard ignored the guard. ‘Highness, even a spoonful of banewort can kill the drinker. It is a gentle poison,’ she said, ‘but poison, nonetheless.’ She turned back to the bed. ‘And you are the great chain upon the Nameless One.’

Glorian did not feel like a chain, great or otherwise. She felt like a child with a broken arm.

‘Please,’ she forced out, ‘be quick, if you cannot be kind.’

Without replying, Doctor Forthard held Glorian by the shoulders. The apprentice sanctarian pinned her ankles to the bed. The bonesetter exhaled like an archer before they grasped her arm, brown hands big and firm as stirrups. The last thing Glorian heard was her own shriek.

When she woke, her flesh was ablaze, a heat so strong it stoppered her throat. Her upper arm was enveloped in plaster and fixed to her side with a leather strap.

Glorian had not often had to endure pain. Thimbles protected her for needlework, bracers when she drew a bow. Pain had been rare headaches, a bruised knee, her courses. All she could do now was escape into sleep.

‘Glorian.’

Her eyes snapped open. ‘Florell?’

Florell Glade had served Queen Sabran since their childhood, and was now her First Lady of the Great Chamber, tall and lovely as a sunflower. Hearing her voice was such a salve that Glorian almost wept.

‘Hush, hush. It’s all right.’ Florell kissed her forehead and smiled at her, but shadows underlined her blue eyes. ‘Doctor Forthard sewed the wound. The Saint is good.’

Glorian wished he could have been good enough to stop her mount unseating her in the first place. She knew better than to express this out loud.

‘May I have a drink?’ she said instead.

Florell brought a cup of ale. ‘I feared you might take fever,’ she said. ‘Not long before your birth, my father put his kneepan out of joint. He never woke when they tried to right it.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you, sweeting. Queen Sabran was generous enough to pay for his entombing.’

‘Has she come to see me?’

‘Her Grace asked me to watch you in her stead. She is in council.’

Though Glorian tightened her jaw and swallowed, fresh tears clouded her eyes. She had hoped her mother would make her excuses to the Virtues Council, just this once.

‘She knows you aren’t in danger,’ Florell said in soft tones, seeing her face. ‘It is urgent business.’

In answer, Glorian could only nod. There was always business more urgent and important than her.

Florell guided her back to the bolsters and stroked her damp hair. Queen Sabran had sometimes done the same, when Glorian was still young enough to lose her teeth. Those memories glinted, bright and distant – coins spent in a well, sunk too deep to pluck back out.

She took a closer look at her arm, sheathed in a cast from shoulder to just below her elbow. Beneath it, her skin itched. ‘How long must I wear this?’

‘Until your arm heals. However long that may be,’ Florell said gently. ‘Doctor Forthard made sure to purge the wound well, and the air is sweeter this far north. You are already mending.’

‘I won’t be able to ride.’

‘No.’ When Glorian sighed, Florell took her by the chin. ‘We must always be careful with you, Glorian. Of all the people in this queen-dom, you are the most precious.’

Glorian fidgeted. Florell smoothed her hair once more before she went to stoke the fire.

‘Lady Florell,’ Glorian said, ‘where is Julain?’

‘With her mother.’

‘Did they not let her stay with me?’

‘I think she would have been permitted.’ Florell looked at her. ‘She blames herself, Glorian.’

‘That’s silly. It was the palfrey, not Julain.’

‘Lady Julain is mindful of her duty. One day, she will be to you what I am to Her Grace – not just your friend, but your sister in all but blood, your protector. She will always fear for you, as I feared for your mother when she stood before the Malkin Queen.’

Glorian turned her cheek into the pillow. ‘Send her to me in the morning.’ She glanced back at Florell. ‘Will you fetch my poppet, the one Father sent for my birthday?’

‘Of course.’

Florell took it from the chest in the corner and folded it into her hand. Glorian held it close – a tiny figurine of a warrior girl, whittled from bone. She pressed it to her heart and slept.

The next day, Doctor Forthard brought her a dish of chopped fruit and insisted she drink a pungent tonic. ‘To cool and fortify you, Highness,’ the physician said. ‘Apple vinegar, garlic, cropleek, other goodness.’

Glorian suspected it was her visitors who would need fortification. At dusk, after prayers, Florell came with a comb and a jug of lavender water.

‘I asked for Julain,’ Glorian said, while Florell coaxed the knots from her hair. ‘Will she not see me?’

‘She must if you command it, Glorian.’

After a moment to consider, Glorian said, ‘I do command it.’

Florell smiled faintly at that. When she had finished combing, she left, and Glorian sat up in bed, wincing at the pain. At least now she smelled of lavender as well as vinegar and garlic.

After a time, the door cracked open. ‘Lady Julain Crest,’ her usher said, and in stepped her friend, garbed in a russet gown with a green bodice. Her dark hair hung in a single plait.

The door shut behind her, leaving them alone. Julain looked at Glorian, at her bound arm.

‘Why did you not come earlier?’ Glorian asked, a little hurt. Julain clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head. ‘Jules, Óvarr threw me suddenly. What could you have done?’

‘I don’t know,’ Julain said thickly. ‘It scared me that I didn’t know.’ When she looked up again, Glorian saw with surprise that her face was tearstained. ‘You could have died. I thought you would. What if you were in danger again, and I couldn’t save you?’

‘I don’t need anyone to save me. All I ever ask is that you not abandon me.’

Julain sniffed. ‘I swear it.’ She dabbed her face once more, then drew back her shoulders. ‘I swear it, Glorian.’

‘Very well.’

There was a pause before they both broke into relieved giggles, and Julain brushed her cheeks.

‘Talk to me a while, before I fall asleep again.’ Glorian patted the bed. ‘I reek of garlic, so that can be your punishment for blaming yourself for my arm, and not a foolish horse.’

Julain used her stepstool to reach the bed, while Glorian moved a bolster to make room. ‘Goodness, you do smell of garlic.’ Julain wrinkled her nose. ‘And . . . cropleek, I think.’

‘And lavender,’ Glorian insisted. Julain wafted a hand. ‘Oh, you’re right. I can’t drink any more of this before my commendation, lest I knock Mother from her throne with my breath.’

That made Julain stop smiling. ‘Has Her Grace come to see you?’

Glorian looked away. ‘No.’

Julain nestled up to her. It was a wordless and familiar comfort. Glorian clasped the hand she offered, trying to ignore the hollow, gnawing ache of envy. If Julain had taken such a grave fall, her parents would have sat with her all night, just to make her feel better.

Glorian wanted that from her mother. She also feared her coming, for she knew exactly what Sabran would say: that it was time for the larks of her childhood to end.

It was time for Glorian to learn what it meant to be the future Queen of Inys.



3

South

‘Siyu, get down from there!’

The orange tree sighed in the breeze. Its gnarled trunk was always warm to the touch, as if there was sunlight trapped in its sapwood. Every leaf was polished and fragrant, and even deep in autumn, it bore fruit.

Not once, for however long it had stood here – since the dawn of time, perhaps – had anyone defiled its branches. Now a young woman crouched among them, barefoot and out of reach.

‘Tuva,’ she called down, her voice spiced with laughter, ‘it’s wonderful. I swear I could see all the way to Yikala!’

Tunuva stared up in dismay. Siyu had always been headstrong, but this could not be dismissed as youthful folly. This was sacrilege. The Prioress would be outraged when she heard.

‘What is it, Tunuva?’ Imsurin came to stand beside her, following her line of sight. ‘Mother save us,’ he said under his breath. He glanced back down at her. ‘Where is Esbar?’

She barely heard him, for Siyu was climbing again. With a last flash of sole, she ventured into the higher branches, and Tunuva started forward, a strangled sound escaping her.

‘You mustn’t—’ Imsurin began.

‘How do you suppose I would?’ Tunuva snapped. ‘I have no inkling of how *she* got up there.’ Imsurin raised his hands, and she turned back to the tree. ‘Siyu, please, enough of this!’

The only answer was a sparkling laugh. A green leaf fluttered to the ground.

By now, a small crowd had gathered in the valley: sisters, brothers, three of the ichneumons. Murmurs spiked behind Tunuva, like the hum from a nest of spindle wasps. She gazed up at the orange tree and prayed with all her might: *Keep her safe, guide her to me, do not let her fall.*

There was no way to conceal what had happened. A place kept secret for centuries could not afford secrets within its own walls.

‘We should find Esbar. Siyu listens to her,’ Imsurin said, with certainty. ‘And to you,’ he added, a clear afterthought. Tunuva pursed her lips. ‘You must get her down, before—’

‘She will not hear any of us now. We must wait for her to come to us.’ Tunuva pulled her shawl around her shoulders and folded her arms. ‘And it’s too late. Everyone has seen.’

By the time Siyu reappeared, the sky had flushed to apricot, and Tunuva was both rigid and atremble, like a plucked harpstring.

‘Siyu du Tunuva uq-Nāra, come down at once,’ she shouted. ‘The Prioress will hear of this!’

It was a craven thing, to invoke the Prioress. Esbar would never have been so weak. Still, her anger must have found its mark, for Siyu looked down from the branch, smile fading.

‘Coming,’ she said.

Tunuva had assumed she would come down the same way she had climbed up, whatever that had been. Instead, Siyu stood and found her balance. She was light and small, and the bough was strong, yet Tunuva watched in dread, thinking it would crack beneath her.

Not once had she feared the tree before this day. It had been guardian and giver and friend – never an enemy, never a threat. Not until Siyu ran along the bough and leapt into open air.

In unison, Tunuva and Imsurin rushed forward, as if they had any hope of catching her. Siyu plummeted with a shriek, arms wheeling, and disappeared into the crashing waters of the Minara. Tunuva cast herself down at the riverbank.

‘Siyu!’

Her chest was so tight she could scarcely breathe. She flung off her shawl, and would have dived in – had Siyu not surfaced, black hair slicked across her face, and let out a laugh of pure delight. Fanning her strong arms, she kicked against the flow of water.

‘Siyu,’ Imsurin said, his voice hard and strained, ‘do not tempt Abaso’s rage.’ He reached for her. ‘Climb out, please.’

‘You always said I swam beautifully, Imin,’ came the overjoyed reply. ‘The water is bracing. Try it!’

Tunuva looked to Imsurin. Decades of knowing him, and never once had she seen fear on that raw-boned face. Now his jaw shook. When Tunuva lowered her gaze, she found her hands were quaking.

It’s all right. She’s all right.

Siyu grasped one of the roots and used it to drag herself from the river. Tunuva released her breath, the tension pulled from her at once. She wrenched Siyu into her arms and kissed her sodden hair.

‘Reckless, foolish child.’ Tunuva clasped the back of her head. ‘What were you thinking, Siyu?’

‘Do you mean to tell me no one has ever done it?’ Siyu said, breathless with exhilaration. ‘Hundreds of years with such a tree, and no one ever climbed it? I am the very first?’

‘Let us hope you are the last.’

Tunuva retrieved her shawl and draped it around Siyu. Autumns were mild in the Lasian Basin, but the River Minara stemmed from the northeastern mountains, far beyond the natural heat that warmed the land around the tree.

When they stood, Siyu nudged her, smiling. Tunuva alone saw their sisters’ flinty gazes. She curled an arm around Siyu and walked her across the cool grass of the vale, to the thousand steps that would take them to the Priory.

More than five hundred years had passed since its founding – since Cleolind Onjenyu, Princess of Lasia, had defeated the Nameless One.

The orange tree had decided that battle. When Cleolind had eaten its fruit, she had become a living ember, a vessel of the sacred flame, giving her the strength to defeat the beast. The tree had saved her from his fire and graced her with its own.

One day, he would return. Cleolind had been sure of that.

The Priory was her legacy. A house of women, raised as warriors, sworn to defend the world from the offspring of the Dreadmount. To listen for any whisper of his wings.

The first sisters had discovered a honeycomb of caves in the steep red cliffs that walled the Vale of Blood. In the decades that followed, they had dug further and deeper, and their descendants had continued their work, until there was a hidden stronghold in the rock.

It was only in the last century that beauty had been kindled there. Shale and pearl mantle inlaid the columns, and the ceilings were mirrored or painted in styles from across the whole of the South. The first hollows scraped out for lamps had been shaped into elegant arches, each lined with gold leaf to heighten the candlelight. Fresh air whispered into the caves from above, flowing through carven latticework doors, laced with the scents of the flowers the men grew. A strong wind might add the fragrance of oranges.

There was still a great deal of work to be done. When Esbar was Prioress, she meant to oversee the construction of a skygazing pool, with stove-heated water and pipes, and to use a clever arrangement of mirrors to bend daylight into the deepest caves. Esbar meant to do many things when the red cloak fell upon her shoulders.

Every day, Tunuva thanked the Mother for their home. This place had sheltered them from the avaricious eyes of the world. Here, there were no monarchs to force them to their knees, no coin to make them rich or poor, no tolls on their waters or tax on their crops. Cleolind had renounced her own crown to build a place where there was no need of them.

Siyu spoke first. ‘Will the Prioress punish me?’

‘I imagine so.’

Tunuva kept her tone flat. Siyu bristled. ‘There was no harm in it,’ she said, thorns in her voice. ‘I’ve always wanted to climb the tree. I don’t see why everyone must be so—’

‘It is not my place to teach you right from wrong, Siyu uq-Nāra. You ought to know it well by now.’ Tunuva looked sidelong at her. ‘How did you reach the branches?’

‘I threw up a length of rope. It took a month to knot one long enough.’ Siyu gave her a coy smile. ‘Why, Tuva – would you like to try it?’

‘You have been enough of a fool today, Siyu. I am in no mood for jests,’ Tunuva said. ‘Where is this rope now?’

‘I left it on the branch.’

‘Then someone will have to recover it, and the tree will be defiled a second time.’

After a pause, Siyu said, ‘Yes, sister.’

She had the sense to hold her tongue for the rest of the long walk.

At the age of ten, Siyu had been moved from where the infants and young children slept. Now she was seventeen and lived on the level below the initiates. Though she was old enough to join them, the Prioress had not yet deemed her worthy of the flame.

Tunuva opened the door to the right chamber. The lamps had all been lit, herbs left on the pillow. The men took special care to freshen the inner chambers, where sunlight never reached.

She conjured a small flame and let it drift away from her palm. Siyu drew the shawl closer as she watched it flicker above them, her long dark eyes reflecting its light. It sank towards the stove and caught the tinder. Bright flames leapt and burned without smoke.

Siyu peeled off her drape and knelt on the rug by the fire, rubbing her arms. Only when she ate of the fruit would she know how it felt to be warm all the way through. Tunuva had hoped that day would come soon. Now it seemed farther away than ever.

‘Where is Lalhar?’ she asked Siyu shortly.

‘I thought she might bark if she saw me climb. Yeleni said she could sleep in her room.’

‘Your ichneumon is your responsibility.’ Tunuva stripped a layer from the bed. ‘Yeleni knew your plans, then.’

Siyu snorted. ‘No.’ She raked her fingers through the ends of her hair. ‘I knew she would stop me.’

‘One of you has sense, at least.’

‘Are you very angry, Tuva?’ When Tunuva only wrapped the heavy woven mantle around her, Siyu watched her face. ‘I frightened you. Did you think I would fall?’

‘Did you think you would not?’ Tunuva straightened. ‘Arrogance does not become a future slayer.’

Siyu stared at the stove. A ripple of dark hair clung to her cheek.

‘You could speak to the Prioress,’ she said. ‘She might not be so hard on me if you—’

‘I will not defend what you have done, Siyu. You are not a child any longer.’ Tunuva picked up her damp shawl. ‘Allow me to offer you a piece of advice, as one whose name you carry. Reflect on what you have done, and when the Prioress summons you, accept your punishment with grace.’

Siyu clenched her jaw. Tunuva turned to leave.

‘Tuva,’ Siyu said suddenly, ‘I’m sorry I scared you. I will apologise to Imin, too.’

Tunuva glanced back at her, softening. ‘I will ... ask him to bring you some buttermilk,’ she said, feeling a stab of frustration at herself. She left the room and walked back down the corridor.

Half a century she had served the Mother. By now, she should be folded steel, each year making her stronger, harder – yet when it came to Siyu, she bent like sweetgrass in the wind. She took the stairs to the open side of the Priory, where torches fluttered in a breeze.

Before she knew it, she was in the highest corridor, tapping on the highest door. A hoarse voice bade her enter, and then she was standing before the woman who presided over the Priory.

Saghul Yedanya had been elected Prioress when she was only thirty. Her head of black curls had long since turned white, and where she had once been among the tallest and sturdiest women in the Priory, her chair of polished wood now seemed too large for her.

Still she sat upon it proudly, hands clasped on her stomach. Her face, mostly brown, was dappled with pallor, which also flecked her fingertips and formed a tilted crescent on her throat. Deep lines were carved across her brow. Tunuva envied such discernible wisdom – when every year could be read on the skin, laid out like the rings of growth in a tree.

Esbar sat opposite, pouring from a gold-rimmed jar. Seeing Tunuva, she arched an eyebrow.

‘Who comes at this hour?’ Saghul asked in her deep, slow voice. ‘Is that you, Tunuva Melim?’

‘Yes,’ Tunuva said. Clearly they had not heard what had happened. ‘Prioress, I came from the vale. One of our younger sisters has ... climbed upon the tree.’

Saghul tilted her head. ‘Who?’ Esbar asked, perilously soft. ‘Tuva, who has done this?’

Tunuva braced herself. ‘Siyu.’

At once, Esbar was on her feet, expression thunderous. Tunuva moved to block her, or try, but Saghul spoke first: 'Esbar, remember your place.' Esbar stopped. 'If you wish to serve me as munguna, calm and comfort your sisters. This sight must have disturbed them.'

Esbar collected her breath, pouring sand on the fires within. 'Yes, Prioress,' she said curtly. 'Of course.'

She touched Tunuva on the arm and was gone. Tunuva knew she would still make her wrath known to Siyu.

'Wine,' Saghul said. Tunuva took the empty seat and finished serving it. 'Tell me what happened.'

Tunuva did. Better that it came from her. Saghul never touched the wine as she listened, gazing towards the opposite wall. Her pupils were grey instead of black, a condition that clouded her sight.

'Did she disturb the fruit?' she finally asked. 'Did she eat when it was not given?'

'No.'

There was silence for a time. Somewhere above, a bay owl called out.

'Siyu is spirited and adventurous. A hard thing in a world as small as ours,' Tunuva said. Saghul conceded with a grunt. 'I know she must be reprimanded for this desecration, but she is still young.'

'Does she regret it?'

It was a moment before Tunuva said, 'I believe she will. Once she has reflected.'

'If she does not regret it now, she never will. We impress a deep respect for the tree on our children, Tunuva. They learn it before they learn to write or read or fight,' Saghul pointed out. 'There are two-year-olds among us who know they cannot climb upon its branches.'

Tunuva was at a loss for a counterstroke. Saghul walked her fingertips towards the cup of wine, finding its base.

'I fear this is only the beginning,' she muttered. 'There is a rot at the heart of the Priory.'

'Rot?'

'More than five centuries since the Mother vanquished the Nameless One in this valley,' Saghul reminded her, 'and there has been no sign that he will ever return. It was inevitable that some among us would begin to question the need for the Priory.'

Tunuva drank a small measure of wine. It did nothing to solve the drought in her mouth.

‘What Siyu did, profane though it is, is only a sign of the decay. She does not respect the tree any longer, because she does not fear the beast from which it shielded Cleolind Onjenyu,’ Saghul said grimly. ‘The Nameless One is a fable to her. To all of us. Even you, Tunuva, who are so loyal to our house, must have asked yourself why we remain.’

Tunuva lowered her gaze.

‘When I first left,’ she confessed, ‘I walked in the Crimson Desert, the sun beating down on my skin, and I understood how wide and glorious the world must be; how many marvels it must hold. I did question, then, why we choose to hide in a small corner of it.’

She remembered it so clearly. Her very first journey beyond the Vale of Blood, Esbar riding at her side. Saghul had sent them to harvest a rare moss that grew on Mount Enunsa – a task that would take them away from their home, but not to any settlements.

Growing up, Tunuva had always found Esbar intimidating, with her sharp tongue and her indestructible confidence. Esbar had thought Tunuva prim and joyless. Still, they had always known they would take their first steps beyond the Priory together, given their closeness in age.

The year before the journey, all had changed when Tunuva was chosen to duel Gashan Janudin. Since they were children, Esbar and Gashan had been rivals, each determined to one day be Prioress. So intense was their competition, their certainty that no one else could match them, that Gashan had not concealed her disdain when Tunuva approached.

Before then, Tunuva had always underplayed her skill with a spear, seeing no need to show off to her sisters – but suddenly, she had felt weary of Gashan and Esbar, two suns overlooking the bright stars around them. She had slammed all her years of dutiful study into her weapon, and before Gashan had quite seen the danger, Tunuva had disarmed her.

That night, Esbar had found her on a balcony, stretching to keep her body limber. *You*, Esbar had said, sitting down uninvited, *have finally caught my attention*. She had come bearing wine, and poured two cups. *When did the quiet conformist nurture such a talent with a spear?*

You call it conforming; I call it surrender to the Mother. Tunuva had joined her on the steps. *And you might find me less quiet if you had ever paused to speak to me.*

Esbar had taken her point. They had spent that night getting to know one another, finding an unexpected warmth. By the time they went their separate ways, the sun had risen.

After that, they were far more aware of each other. Esbar would catch her eye in corridors, find reasons to pass her room, stop to talk when their paths crossed. And then they were both twenty, and the day had come for their first steps outside.

For a moment, Tunuva was lost in the past. The cruel beauty of the desert. How small her existence had seemed in the face of it. How the sand had sparkled like shattered ruby. They had left their ichneumons by a panhole and continued the approach on foot. She had never seen so much dazzling blue sky, unbounded by trees or the slopes of their valley. They were without their sisters, alone in a sea of sand, and yet anyone could find them.

She and Esbar had looked at each other in wonder. Later, they realised they had both felt it: a sense not just that the world had changed, but that they, too, were new. It must have been that feeling that had made Esbar kiss her. Breathless with laughter, they had embraced on the soft warmth of the dune, the sky almost too blue to bear, sand running like silk beneath their bodies, breath catching fire.

Thirty years had passed, and still Tunuva trembled at that memory. She was suddenly conscious of her drape against her breasts, and a richening ache in the base of her belly.

‘Why did you return?’ Saghul asked, drawing her back. ‘Why not stay in the wide and glorious world for ever, Tunuva?’

Esbar had asked the same question that day, when they lay in the shade of a rock. They had both looked as if they were freckled with blood, covered in those glistening red grains.

‘Because it made me understand my duty,’ Tunuva said. ‘It was laying eyes upon the world, being part of it, that made me appreciate the importance of protecting it. If the Nameless One does return, we may be the only ones who can – so I will remember. I will remain.’

Saghul smiled. A warm, true smile that creased the corners of her eyes and served to deepen her beauty.

‘I know you still think Siyu too callow to eat of the fruit,’ Tunuva said. ‘I know the grave risk in making her an initiate before the time is right. I also know this ... error of judgement, this foolish violation, cannot have convinced you of her maturity, Saghul.’

‘Hm.’

‘But Siyu may need to fall in love with the outside, as I did. Let her ride to the golden court of Lasia and guard Princess Jenyedi. Let her taste of the wonders of the world, so she may understand the importance of the Priory. Let her never think of this place as her cage.’

Silence stretched wide between them. Saghul took a long drink from her cup.

‘Sun wine,’ she said, ‘is among the wonders of the ancient world.’

Tunuva waited. When the Prioress of the Orange Tree told a story, it always had meaning.

‘It costs a great deal to bring it here from Kumenga,’ Saghul went on. ‘I ought not to risk it, but if I have no supply on hand, I find it seeps into my dreams, and I wake with the taste of it on my tongue. To me, nothing but the sacred fruit is sweeter. And yet . . . I leave half in the cup.’

She placed it between them. The sound of ceramic on wood rang loud in the still room.

‘Some have the restraint to taste of worldly pleasure,’ she said. ‘You and I are among them, Tunuva. When I found you with Esbar the first time, I feared you would lose yourselves to your passion. You proved me wrong. You knew how much of the wine to taste. You knew to leave some in the cup.’ This time, when she smiled, there was no warmth in it. ‘But some, Tunuva – some would drink of the sweet wine until they drowned.’

With one knotted finger, she tipped the cup. Sun wine spilled across the table and dripped like watered honey to the floor.



4

East

The stranger had been asleep for two days. By the time Dumai towed him from the snowstorm, blisters had bubbled up on his fingers, and the cold had bruised his nose and cheeks.

Unora had gone straight to work. After so many years on the mountain, she knew how to save any part of the body that had not yet died. She had redressed the stranger and slowly warmed his frosted skin.

The cough was mountain sickness. In the summer, he would have been taken back down, but until the snow passed, he would have to endure. So would their Kuposa guest, who Dumai had glimpsed only twice, from a distance. Unable to attempt the summit, she kept to the Inner Hall.

Dumai wished she could welcome her, but her mother had taught her to never approach visitors from court. *The palace is a twisted net, snaring even the littlest fish. Best you stay free of its tangles,* Unora had warned her. *Keep your mind pure and cast your thoughts high, and one day, you will stand in my place.*

There was sense in that. Court was all gossip and artifice, according to everyone who had been there.

After her chores, she decided to check on Unora, who had been with the sick traveller ever since his arrival. Dumai had led the procession in her stead. On the porch, she took off her boots and replaced them with slippers, then went to the room where the stranger lay.

Kanifa was on his way out, carrying a cauldron. 'How is our guest?' Dumai asked him.

'He stirs now and then. I think he'll wake soon.'

'Then why do you look worried?'

The line between his eyebrows was deeper than usual. He glanced down the corridor. 'Our guest from court,' he said in a low voice. 'Apparently she's been asking questions about the Grand Empress. How she finds life at the temple. Whether she ever plans to return.'

'She did rule Seiiki. Climbers are always curious about her.'

'This one is an ambitious Kuposa. She may be trying to curry favour with the Grand Empress, or involve her in some intrigue,' Kanifa said. 'I mean to keep an eye on her.'

'Yes, I'm sure you would be happy to keep a close watch on a beautiful woman.'

Kanifa cocked a heavy eyebrow, a faint smile on his lips. 'Go to your mother, Dumai of Ipyeda.' He continued down the corridor. 'She will cleanse you of such earthly thoughts.'

Dumai screened her grin behind her hair as she stepped into the room. She teased him, but in truth, Kanifa had never expressed interest in anyone. The mountain was his only love.

The traveller lay on a mat, covered to his chin with bedding, feet snug in a heat trap. He was about sixty, grey woven through his thick hair, which framed a brown and solemn face.

Unora was nearby, watching a kettle. While there were guests in the temple, she was obliged to wear the grey veil of the Maiden Officiant, even outside the rituals she led.

The Maiden Officiant acted as the understudy and representative of the Supreme Officiant. While the latter was always a member of the imperial family, the former was usually not of noble birth. Her veil symbolised the waterline between the earthly and celestial realms.

'There you are.' Unora patted the floor. 'Come.'

Dumai knelt beside her. 'Have you found out who he is?'

'A saltwalker, from his collection.' Her mother motioned to a dish, full of shells of rare beauty. 'He woke for long enough to ask me where he was.'

For a saltwalker, he was curiously unweathered. They were wanderers who tended to the ancient shrines – only ever washing in the sea, dressing in what they found on its shore.

‘And the climber?’ Dumai said. ‘Did you learn why she came so late in the year?’

‘Yes.’ Unora took the steaming kettle from the pothook. ‘You know I can’t share her secrets, but she made a choice she fears may cause a scandal at court. She needed to clear her mind.’

‘Perhaps I could talk to her, give her some comfort. I think I am about her age.’

‘A kind offer, but it was my counsel she sought.’ Unora tipped the boiled water into a cup. ‘Don’t concern yourself, my kite. Your life is on this mountain, and it needs your full devotion.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

Dumai glanced at the saltwalker. A chill grazed her spine. Not only was he now awake, but his gaze was hard and stunned on her face. He looked as if he had seen a water ghost.

Unora noticed, stiffening.

‘Honourable stranger.’ She moved between them, the cup between her hands. ‘Welcome. You have come to the High Temple of Kwiriki. I am its Maiden Officiant.’ The man did not utter a word. ‘Mountain sickness . . . can shadow the sight. Can you see?’

Dumai was starting to feel nervous. Finally, the man said, ‘I have a thirst.’

His voice came deep and rough. Unora held the cup to his lips. ‘Your head may be very light for a time,’ she told him as he drank, ‘and your stomach may feel smaller than usual.’

‘Thank you.’ He wiped his mouth. ‘I dreamed the gods called to me from this mountain, but it seems I was too weak to answer.’

‘It is the mountain’s will, not your weakness, that prevents you climbing any higher.’

‘You are kind.’ As Unora took the cup away, he looked back towards Dumai. ‘Who is this?’

‘One of our godsingers.’

Dumai waited for her to be more specific. Unora only served more of the steeped ginger.

‘I apologise,’ the saltwalker said to Dumai. ‘I thought you resembled someone I knew.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘You are right, Maiden Officiant. It must be the mountain sickness.’

A creak sounded in the corridor. ‘Ah, here is Kanifa,’ Unora said brightly. ‘He has dressings for you.’ Her face turned back towards Dumai. ‘Will you help Tirotu cut some more ice?’

Slowly, Dumai rose, meeting Kanifa on her way out. She brushed straight past him, making him look after her.

‘What did you dream?’

Dumai kept her eyes closed. She was kneeling on a mat, hands resting on her thighs. ‘I dreamed I flew again,’ she said. ‘Above the clouds. I was waiting for the night to fall.’

‘For the sun to set, and the moon to rise?’

‘No. It was already night, though moonless.’ Dumai reworded it: ‘I was waiting for the stars to descend from the sky. Somehow I knew they were supposed to come to me.’

‘And did they?’

‘No. They never do.’

The Grand Empress nodded. She rested on the kneeling stool she often used in the cold months.

Once, she had been the shrewd and beloved Empress Manai – until some unknown malady had left her frail and confused, baffling her physicians. When she could no longer work around her decline, she had seen no choice but to abdicate in favour of her son and withdraw to Mount Ipyeda, to take the vacant post of Supreme Officiant of Seiiki.

Her illness had mysteriously faded on the mountain, but by then, her ordainment had precluded her from returning to court. It was she who had welcomed a destitute and friendless Unora when she came to the temple, swollen with Dumai, and asked for sanctuary.

Since her abdication, the boy left on the throne had grown into a man. Emperor Jorodu had never once visited the temple, though he did occasionally write to his mother.

The Grand Empress watched the woodfall breathe in the brazier. White streaked her short grey hair, as if she had combed snow through it. Dumai longed for hers to be the same.

‘Did you have a sense of what would happen,’ the Grand Empress said, ‘if the stars did *not* fall?’

Dumai pressed her hands flat, remembering. In the shapeless place between sleep and waking, she had dreamed her sweat was silver.

‘Something terrible,’ she said. ‘Far below, there was black water, and in it, there was doom.’

The Grand Empress tucked in her lips, her face creasing. 'I have thought long on these dreams,' she said. 'Kwiriki is calling you, Dumai.'

'Am I called to be Maiden Officiant?' Dumai asked her. 'You know this is my only wish.'

'I do know it.' The Grand Empress laid a hand on her head. 'Thank you for sharing your dream. I will continue to dwell on them all, in the hope I can unravel the message.'

'I wonder if . . . I might ask for your guidance on another matter. It has to do with my mother.'

'What of her?'

Dumai wrestled with herself. It was not for a child to question a parent. 'It is a very small thing,' she finally said, 'but earlier, she chose not to tell a stranger that I was her daughter. She referred to me simply as a godsinger. I know it is uncommon for a Maiden Officiant to have children, but . . . there is no shame in it.'

'You speak of the man who arrived in the night.'

'Yes.'

The Grand Empress seemed to consider.

'Unora brought you into this world. Our parents' love can take strange forms, Dumai,' she said. 'See how the sorrower pricks her own breast, feeding her young with drops of her blood.'

Dumai had already seen. It was why she held such affection for sorrowers.

'As my representative, Unora must guide and comfort the climbers. You are not yet prepared for her role,' the Grand Empress said, 'but if they knew you were her daughter, they would likely see you as a way to her. Unora wants to keep your mind free of the ground . . . until you have spent long enough on the mountain that you can resist the allure of the earth.'

'I have been on this mountain for almost as many years as my mother. I have never stepped from it. How can I be tempted by something I have never seen?'

'Precisely.'

Dumai digested this. Like stones on a board, pieces shifted in her mind, forming a clear line, unbroken by doubt.

'Thank you, Grand Empress,' she said, rising. 'Your wisdom clears my eyes.'

'Hm. Sleep well, Dumai.'

Dumai slid the doors shut behind her. A visit to these quarters always eased her mind.

The Grand Empress was right, of course. Unora had lived away from the mountain, before Dumai was born; she knew the distractions and hardships below. It made perfect sense that she would want to separate Dumai from all of that, to protect her.

Dumai turned to leave the corridor. When she saw the woman in the gloom, she startled.

‘Forgive me.’ A soft voice. ‘Did I scare you?’

The guest stood as still as the walls, wearing the dark robe the temple offered to all guests. Its plainness only served to call attention to her face, pale and fine-boned against her black hair, which was drawn into a scallop tuck, the simplest of the courtly styles.

‘My lady,’ Dumai said, recovering. ‘I’m sorry, but guests are not permitted on this floor.’

‘I apologise.’ Her eyes were large, a bright brown that reminded Dumai of copper. ‘I was looking for the refectory, but I must have taken a wrong turn. How thoughtless of me.’

‘Not at all. The temple can be confusing.’

The woman regarded her with clear interest. Dumai lowered her chin, so her hair moved to conceal some of her face. The people of the ground shared a habit of looking too hard.

‘I take it you are a godsinger,’ the woman said. ‘What a fulfilling life that must be.’

‘I find it so, my lady.’

‘I wish I could see the summit myself, but it seems the snow has trapped me here.’

‘I hope that does not disappoint you too much, and that you will still find some peace among us.’

‘Thank you. It has been some time since I last had peace.’ The woman gave her a radiant smile. ‘Do you have a name?’

Dumai had never seen a face like hers, one side precisely the same as the other. Kanifa said that was how you told a butterfly spirit from an ordinary woman.

She was about to answer truthfully when she paused. Perhaps it was the way the saltwalker had stared at her, but a sudden, unnerving sense of danger prickled at her nape.

‘Unora,’ she said, trusting it. ‘And you, my lady?’

‘Nikeya.’

‘Please, follow me. I was going to the refectory myself.’

‘Thank you, Unora.’ Nikeya cut her gaze towards the doors. ‘You are too kind to this poor guest.’

They walked to the bottom of the stairs and along the corridor, the old floorboards creaking under their slippers. Nikeya took in her surroundings with open curiosity. Dumai had expected her to be withdrawn, given her troubles at court, but she was the picture of ease.

‘I hear the ordained who serve in this temple never eat of the sea,’ Nikeya said. ‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. We believe the sea belongs to dragonkind, and we should not eat what is theirs.’

‘Even salt?’ She laughed a little. ‘How can a person live without salt?’

‘There are Lacustrine merchants who send it to us from Ginura. Theirs comes from salt wells on the mainland.’

‘What of pearls and shells?’

‘Shells can be found on the shore,’ Dumai pointed out. ‘Climbers often leave pearls at the summit for the great Kwiriki.’

‘So you believe the emperor and all his courtiers – myself included – to be thieves, since we *do* eat of the sea?’

Dumai dropped her gaze. Already her foot was caught in the fishnet. ‘That was not what I meant, my lady,’ she said. ‘We all serve the gods in whatever manner we think best.’

Nikeya laughed again, light and misty. ‘Very good. You would make a fine courtier yourself.’ Her smile waned. ‘You were with the Grand Empress just now. Do you attend on her?’

‘No.’ Dumai governed her expression. ‘Her Majesty has just one attendant, who came with her from court.’

‘Tajorin pa Osipa.’

‘Yes. Do you know Lady Osipa?’

‘I know of her, as I know of many people. Including you now, Unora.’

They soon reached the refectory. At this time of night, it was always thick with templefolk, their voices drowsy after a long day of work and prayer. Nikeya turned to Dumai.

‘It was a pleasure, Unora,’ she said. ‘In a short time, you have taught me a great deal.’

Dumai inclined her head. ‘I wish you a pleasant stay, my lady.’

‘Thank you.’

With another charming smile, Nikeya went to join one of her attendants, who had already finished her meal.

Across the refectory, Kanifa was serving bowls of buckwheat, the sleeves of his tunic fastened at his elbows, baring his lean brown forearms. Dumai caught his eye. He followed her gaze to the two women, then gave her the smallest nod.

Nikeya should not have been anywhere near the Grand Empress. Kanifa could yet be right in his suspicions. He would make sure she was escorted straight back to the Inner Hall.

Dumai decided to check on the saltwalker. In his room, she found the shutters flung wide, letting in thick flurries of snow. Hurrying to the window, she stared into the night.

A trail of footprints led away from the temple.

‘Come back,’ she cried. ‘It’s too dangerous!’

Only the wind answered, burning her cheeks. Little by little, Dumai made out a shape, a darkness on the snow. No sooner had she realised what it was than she was running.

She rushed through the temple, down the stairs and along the corridors. Tirotu was quenching the lamps.

‘Leave them,’ Dumai called as she ran past. ‘I need the light!’

Tirotu stopped at once and came after her.

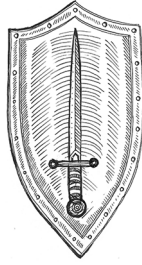
On the porch, Dumai flung a pelt over her shoulders. Her boots ripped into the deep snow outside. She trudged away from the temple, holding up a naked hand to shield her eyes.

Do not goad the mountain, Dumai.

A gale whistled in her ears, making them ache. She was still within reach of the lamps, still on snow painted with light, and she knew this ground well. Going much farther would be a risk, but it might also save a life.

When she reached the crumpled form, she went to her knees and cleared the snow from their head, expecting to find the saltwalker. Instead, she saw a face she had not seen in days.

‘Mother,’ she croaked. Unora was cold and ashen, her lashes frosted, breath weak. ‘Mother, no. Why did you follow him?’ She turned her neck and screamed towards the temple, ‘Help me!’



5

West

The sea crashed into Inys like a fist, spelks of white spray flying where it struck ancient rock. Beneath a clean blue sky, gulls filled the air with brabbling, striped sails billowed and snapped in the wind, and Wulfert Glenn watched golden sunlight flit between the waves.

Ahead, Inys waited.

The bowsprit pointed at the firth that would take the *Longstride* inland. Wulf drank in the cliffs that flanked it. Looming in both directions as far as the eye could see, they stood straight and black as iron swords, rusted with lichen, proud custodians of the queendom.

A humpback breached close to the ship. Most of the crew were hardened to the sight of whales, but it still made Wulf smile to see its fin rise, as if in welcome. He clasped his hands on the side and kept watching. Pine tar was bedded under his nails and the tang of sweat clung to his undershirt, but every housecarl could thole such discomforts.

Soon, for the first time in three years, he would be home.

Boots thumped across the deck. Regny came to stand beside him, smelling of damp wool, like everyone on the ship.

‘Home at last,’ she said. ‘Ready?’

‘Aye.’ Wulf glanced at her. ‘You’re not.’

‘You know Inys bores me. No offence.’

‘None taken.’

She patted his back and strode on, her braid swinging from the intricate knotwork that overlaid it at the base of her skull.

The *Longstride* forged past a fire tower. By the time the ship reached the cliffs, the sun had more gold than silver in it.

‘Wulfert.’

A booming voice snapped him to attention. He had been so immersed in the sights, he had failed to hear the king approach.

‘Sire.’ He touched a fist to his chest. ‘I hear we’re almost to Werstuth.’

Bardholt stepped up to the wale with a grin and placed his enormous hands on it. Wulf was tall and strong, but the King of Hróth was a mountain, enlarged by the white pelt he wore.

‘A fine voyage. The Saint is good.’ His golden hair lay oiled and heavy on his shoulders. ‘Did I not swear upon his shield that I would see my daughter’s commendation?’

‘You did, my king.’

‘I have missed Glorian terribly. My queen gave me a perfect daughter.’ He spoke Hróthi with a deep rural accent. ‘While we celebrate, you shall be my cupbearer, Wulfert.’

Only the most trusted and respected members of the household ever received such a privilege. Wulf breathed out. ‘Sire,’ he said, ‘it is too great an honour for your humble retainer.’

‘Honour is an axe with two blades. Should anyone try to poison me, you’ll be the one to ascend to Halgalant.’

Wulf cracked a smile at that. King Bardholt clapped him on the back, with such vigour it almost knocked him overboard.

‘You must visit your family, while we’re here,’ he said. ‘Are they all still at Langarth?’

‘Aye, my king.’

‘Good. Stay for the commendation, then go to them for a day or two. Regny will pour my wine in your absence – by the Saint, she can outdrink us all.’

‘That is true.’

‘Is it also true that you’ve been trysting with her?’

Wulf looked slowly at the king, silenced by trepidation. Bardholt raised his thick eyebrows.

‘Certain people keep me abreast of the small intrigues that unfold in my household. Even in the coops,’ he said. ‘Someone reported you, Wulf.’

Saint, when he kills me, grant me the mercy of a swift and painless death.

‘I never knew you were fond of gossip, my king,’ Wulf said, once he could speak.

It was a dangerous move, but it paid off. Bardholt respected boldness.

‘Even a king can grow weary of politics,’ he said, the corner of his mouth flinching. ‘I was young once, Wulf – I understand – but that was before I knew the Saint. My housecarls must set an example, to ensure all Hróthi respect the Six Virtues. Before you bed anyone else, a love-knot ring must be on their finger. And you know you cannot put one on hers.’

Wulf glanced towards Regny. She was leaning against the mast, hair windblown, sharing a horn of wine with Eydag.

She was the heir of the late Skiri Longstride – Skiri the Condoler, who had welcomed Bardholt and his family when they were forced to flee their village, and whose murder had started the War of Twelve Shields. When Regny was wed, it would be to a fellow chieftain.

‘It set with the midnight sun,’ Wulf said quietly. ‘On my oath, it won’t happen again, sire.’

‘Good man.’ Bardholt gave him a last pat on the back. ‘We shall talk again soon. Find a sanctuary, clear your conscience with the Knight of Fellowship, and let us feast and sing.’

He strode towards Regny, who remained expressionless. As the rightful Chieftain of Askrdal, she would receive a sterner reproach, though Bardholt would forgive her.

Wulf looked back at the sea, but his sense of peace had deserted him. With a sigh through his nose, he steepled his fingers on the wale and watched for the first sight of the city on the cliffs.

Glorian had not expected to be formally introduced to the world with one arm in plaster, but at least it saved her having to dance with every noble stripling in the West. She let her broken arm hang out of the water, feeling rather like a doll.

Her bathing chamber was her favourite part of the castle. It overlooked the queenswood of the Fells, the only province in Inys with real mountains. The shutters had been opened, letting in golden sunlight and a breeze, and water steamed in the wooden tub, which was lined

and tented with white linen. It had been a gift from King Bardholt, made from snow pine, so Glorian could pretend she was basking in the hot pools of Hróth.

‘I can’t bear this wretched thing.’ She rubbed at her cast. ‘When will the itching stop?’

‘Next time, try not to fall off a horse,’ Julain said.

‘Is that the sort of counsel you mean to give me when I’m queen?’

‘I mean to always tell you when you do foolish things.’

Outside, a wren twittered. The linen shaded Glorian, while a small fire kept the chill away. Julain kneaded her scalp. Adela pared her nails. Helisent cleansed her face with rose oil. When she was Queen of Inys, they would be her Ladies of the Great Chamber.

Julain Crest – the eldest – had been her playmate when they were children. The holy descendants of the Knight of Justice, the Crest family had always held enormous influence as courtiers. Queen Sabran was one of the few rulers who did not have a Crest as her First Lady.

Helisent Beck was heir apparent of the Dowager Earl of Goldenbirch. The Becks claimed descent from Edrig of Arondine, closest friend and mentor of the Saint. She was sixteen and as tall as Glorian.

Youngest of them, at fifteen, was Adeliza afa Dáura, daughter of the Mistress of the Robes. She was minor Yscali nobility, her mother the eldest child of a hereditary knight.

‘We should test your knowledge,’ Julain said to Glorian. ‘Who is the Decree of Carmentum?’

‘Carmenti leaders conceal their true names when they run for election, both to protect their families and to ensure their campaigns are based only on their politics,’ Glorian said, making Julain nod her approval, ‘but her tenure name is Numun. She will bring one of her advisors, Arpa Nerafriss, who often serves as her envoy.’

‘I am never going to understand why Queen Sabran would invite a pair of *republicans*,’ Adela said crossly.

‘Precisely because the Carmenti are dangerous.’ Julain poured from a jug, rinsing the suds away. She had such careful hands that Glorian never had to blink. ‘A country that breaks the rudder of monarchy will swing wildly and crash into others, hurling all into disorder.’

‘Aye,’ Helisent said. ‘Her Grace must think it best to keep close watch on their folly.’

‘Well, I think they will spoil the commendation.’ Adela trimmed another nail. ‘We should refuse to receive them until they send *tribute* to the House of Berethnet, which shields them from the Nameless One.’ Another slice took the white clean off. ‘They should be grateful we don’t crush them, as King Bardholt crushed the Northern heathens.’

‘The Knight of Courage has lent you his lance today, Adela,’ Glorian said, amused. ‘I think you would march to war with Carmentum.’ She took her hand back. ‘And that, in your passion, you might relieve me of a finger.’

‘Indeed,’ a new voice said. ‘Be cautious, Adeliza. My daughter is already injured.’

Julain dropped the comb into the water with a gasp. She stepped down to stand beside Helisent and Adela, and they all curtsied, heads low.

‘Your Grace,’ they chorused.

The Queen of Inys stood in the doorway, arrayed in an elegant black gown, cut to show off a pair of white undersleeves. ‘Good morning, ladies,’ she said, gentler. ‘Leave us, please.’

‘Your Grace,’ they said again, Adela with a furious blush. As they filed out, Julain reached up to grasp the handle and pull the door closed in their wake, shooting Glorian a look that said *courage*.

Glorian sank up to her neck, wishing she could draw her arm under. There was something absurd about the way it hung from the bathtub, proof of her failure to stay on a horse.

‘Glorian,’ her mother said. ‘I am sorry to disturb you while you bathe. I am in council for the rest of today, making final arrangements for your commendation. Now is the only time we can speak.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Doctor Forthard has kept me abreast of your condition. I trust you are not in much pain.’

‘A little,’ Glorian said. ‘At night, especially.’

‘It will pass. Doctor Forthard tells me you will only need to wear the cast for a month or two.’

Queen Sabran gazed out of the window. The sunlight turned her eyes to raw emerald. Glorian hunched deeper into the water, hiding behind her black curtains of hair.

In every conversation with her mother, there were snares. Each time, she leapt headfirst and trapped herself. Her first mistake had been confessing the pain. Her mother did not like admissions of weakness.

‘I will be well for tomorrow,’ Glorian said quickly. ‘I will dance one-handed, Mother, if you wish.’

‘And what would people say of the Queen of Inys if she forced her daughter to dance with a broken arm?’

There was her second mistake. ‘That she was cruel and unfeeling,’ Glorian said, cheeks hot. ‘Like the Malkin Queen.’

‘Precisely.’ At last, her mother deigned to look at her. ‘I will be frank. Tomorrow is not only your introduction as an eligible princess, but a display of strength and unity. For the first time, our country will host a delegation from a so-called republic.’

‘Carmentum.’

‘Yes. The Carmenti must see that absolute monarchy remains the only true and righteous way to govern a country. We cannot allow Inys, like Carmentum, to be thrown like fodder to the people, who will tear it apart with their conflicting opinions. There can only be one will that governs – the will of the Saint, who speaks through us.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Glorian said meekly. ‘I will not disappoint you.’ She hesitated before asking, ‘Why did you invite the Carmenti here?’

‘Arpa Nerafriss sent me a letter, asking if I would consider opening trade negotiations. The Carmenti are athirst for our support. They want older, stronger countries to recognise their rule.’ Queen Sabran raised her chin. ‘Inys is small. We must remain open to the world. Through Yscalin, Mentendon and Hróth, we trade with the Ersyr, with Lasia – even with the Easterners across the Abyss, whose ways are unknown to us.’

The Abyss. The great black sea, so wide and full of monsters that few had crossed it and returned. King Bardholt had sailed on it before, but not far. Even he was wary of it.

‘In any case,’ Queen Sabran continued, hauling Glorian back to her own side of the world, ‘the Carmenti have no power against the Chainmail of Virtudom. Your commendation seemed a fitting time to show them.’

Glorian felt a surge of admiration then. It was thanks to her mother that Inys would stand firm against the tide of republican feeling in Carmentum. Before her parents’ marriage, there had only been two countries pledged to the Saint. Now there were four.

‘I need not tell you, Glorian, that you will also meet potential consorts at the dance,’ Queen Sabran said. ‘There will be representatives of noble families from across Virtudom. We must keep our links strong.’

A chill squirmed in Glorian, as if an adder had crept down her throat and curled up in her belly.

‘I don’t want—’ When Queen Sabran looked at her, Glorian drew her knees up to her chest. ‘Must I marry so soon?’

‘Of course not. Fifteen is not old enough to be wed,’ her mother reminded her, ‘but we might arrange a suitable precontract. You must be gracious and courteous towards every suitor, even if dancing is out of the question. You must behave like the blood of the Saint.’

‘Yes, Mother. I promise I will be a credit to him.’ Glorian peeked up at her. ‘And to you.’

For a fleeting instant, her mother almost softened. Her lips parted, her brow smoothed, and she started to lift a hand, as if to touch Glorian on the cheek.

Then she clasped her fingers again, and she was once more a statue, a queen.

‘I will see you on the morrow,’ she said. ‘And Glorian ... we will speak about your riding soon.’

She left without a backward glance. Glorian rested her brow on her knees and wished herself all the way to the East.



6

South

The incense burner was shaped like a bird. Smoke curled from the openwork across its breast and folded wings. Taking in its scent, Tunuva closed her eyes as Esbar pleased her.

Red light needled through a lattice, patterning their limbs. Tunuva steadied herself on her elbows. In a haze, she looked down at Esbar, drinking in the sight of her, the sun catching in her cascade of black hair. It made Tunuva tighter still, her body like a drawn arrow.

Since her blood had started to come less, her fires burned low on some days. The path to release was longer and steeper. Esbar knew it. They were of an age, Esbar half a year older – her body was changing, too. Her blood came heavier of late, soaking right through her cloths.

But on nights like this, when they were both sleek with desire, Esbar rose to the occasion as she did to all things, with tireless resolve. Tunuva tilted her head back as sweetness flared between her legs, tended by a tongue like fire and hands that knew exactly where and how to touch.

She gripped the sheet, her breaths fraying. Just as she reached the horizon of release, Esbar slid on top of her in one smooth movement so their hearts were aligned.

‘Not yet,’ she whispered. ‘Stay with me, lover.’

Tunuva embraced her with all her limbs, smiling into their kiss. Esbar was quick in many things, but in this, she had always taken her time.

They drifted to the cool side of the bed, and now it was Esbar who reclined, and Tunuva who took the lead. Esbar reached up to hold her by the waist, fingertips pressed into skin. Tunuva held still, gazing down at her.

Esbar raised an eyebrow. 'What?'

Tunuva brushed their lips together, then their foreheads.

'You,' she said, leaning her hips forward, feeling Esbar firm her grasp. 'Always you.'

She made her slow way downward, caressing as she went. Esbar watched, each surge of breath coming a little sooner than the last. On the wall, their shadows were seamless, the candlelight melting them into one.

By the time they were sated, sweat bathed them both. Tunuva lay beside Esbar and rested her head against her breastbone, so she could feel the solid drumbeat of her heart.

'Exhilarated though I am,' Esbar said, 'I wonder what brought on such a surge of lust.'

Tunuva placed a kiss on the dark tip of her breast. 'Saghul asked me if I had ever questioned our purpose,' she said, her voice low. 'I told her that I had, and I told her when.'

'Ah, *that* day.' Esbar shifted to face her, hooking a warm thigh across her waist. 'It was not so long after that,' she said softly, 'that I knew what it was to miss you for the first time.'

Tunuva pressed close and kissed her. Even now, she never liked to relive that brief parting.

It had been two months after the Crimson Desert. In her memory, those days were a burning dream, as if she had spent the whole time with a fever. She would wake at dawn with an ache in her body, and it had been all she could do to pray and train before she could fling herself at Esbar. Desire had been a madness in her, grounded by a love that had filled her like breath – as if it had always been meant, written on her soul when it was just a seed.

The day the Prioress had found them, they had been laughing and entwined in the spicery, sprawled among sacks of rose petals and nutmeg and cloves.

At twenty, Esbar had already been the boldest of the sisters, outspoken even to her elders. Tunuva had never broken a rule. It had stunned her when Saghul banished them to separate ends of the Priory with no explanation.

Conception was one thing. In a closed society, bloodlines had to be carefully watched, but Saghul had never stopped unions that posed no risk of a child. At last, when Tunuva had thought she would lose her mind, Saghul had summoned them both to her sunroom.

Is this an affair of the body, she had asked them, or of the heart?

Tunuva had hesitated to answer, afraid that whatever she said could see her torn from Esbar. *I could never speak for Tuva, Esbar had finally said, but, Prioress, must one preclude the other?*

Saghul had been elected for a reason. From one glimpse, she had known theirs was not a passing attraction, one that would erode with time. It was two hearts meeting at a crossway, and deciding to go on together.

You are my daughters. I trust your judgement – but know this, both of you, she had warned. You cannot allow any love to overpower your love of the Mother. Nothing comes above our calling. If duty takes you from each other, as I did these past few days, then you must bear the separation. Whatever comes, you must endure. Be together, if you wish, but remember you are a bride of the tree.

‘No wonder she was so vexed,’ Tunuva murmured when their lips parted. ‘All those cloves.’

‘That was you, as I recall,’ Esbar said, giving her a light slap on the hip. ‘Always the quiet ones.’

‘Not so quiet,’ Tunuva said drily.

They both chuckled. Thirty years later, when either of them smelled cloves, they would still exchange a look.

Esbar kissed her once more before she sat up and raked back her hair, which tumbled to her waist in loose black curls. Tunuva folded her arm behind her head.

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘how long did it take you to disobey Saghul?’

‘I resent your accusation. As munguna, I did precisely as the Prioress asked. Calmed and comforted our sisters.’ Esbar reached for the wine jar. ‘And then I went to Siyu and told her just what I thought of her reckless stupidity.’

Tunuva shook her head and smiled.

‘Shake your head and smile all you like, Tunuva Melim. Saghul may not like it, but I grew Siyu. I laboured for a day and a night to give her life, and I will tell her outright when she shames me. Or you.’ Esbar poured two cups of straw wine. ‘It’s your name she carries.’

‘Has Saghul decided on a punishment?’

‘Confinement for a week. For a month after that, she will not be allowed to go into the forest.’

Tunuva was silent, accepting the wine.

‘You’re too soft on her, Tuva,’ Esbar said, unyielding. ‘You know she has done wrong.’

‘We were young and foolish once.’

‘You and I spilled a few cloves. We would never have climbed the tree.’

It was true. Even at seventeen, Tunuva would sooner have cut off her own foot than place it on the sacred branches.

Esbar set a dish of fruit between them and chose a honeyed date. Tunuva took a butter plum.

‘Hidat retrieved the rope. She has been at prayer all day, asking forgiveness of the Mother,’ Esbar said. ‘I doubt Siyu has been so devout.’

‘Siyu hates to be confined. This will be a hard punishment for her.’

Esbar made a sound that could have been an agreement or a dismissal.

‘I asked Saghul to send her out into the world. To let her taste it,’ Tunuva said. ‘I thought she might do well as a handmaiden to Princess Jenyedi. Saghul did not seem to agree.’ She glanced at Esbar. ‘Am I such a fool?’

‘No.’ Esbar took her hand. ‘I do understand your outlook, Tuva. I also understand what Saghul fears. I am not persuaded that Siyu would behave at court.’ She breathed out. ‘Imsurin must have been the wrong choice. I am steel, he is stone, and together, we made a spark. No matter where she lands, she will burn something to the ground.’

‘A spark can be coaxed into a bright flame, if given the chance.’

‘And who would chance a spark in their own house?’

Tunuva bit into her butter plum. Esbar picked another date.

The matter had no end. Siyu was trapped in quicksand – unable to grow without the world, not trusted in the world until she grew. Whatever she did, Esbar would feel it reflected on her, so she would err on the side of caution. Tunuva resolved to go back to Saghul.

The air was as mild as if it were summer. They shared a flatbread with pounded fig and goat cheese, listening to the familiar sounds that drifted into the chamber. A red-throated wryneck called as it flew. Elsewhere, one of the men played a calming tune on a harp. When

Esbar had eaten her fill, she relaxed into the bolsters and swirled her straw wine.

She was as striking at rest as when she fought. Candlelight feathered across her dark golden skin, limning the thick muscle in her thigh. Except for the lines around her eyes and mouth and the grey strands in her hair, she looked almost the same as she had at twenty.

When Tunuva was young, she had never dreamed that she would know a love as passionate as this. She had thought her life would be devoted above all to the tree, and her ichneumon, and the Mother. Esbar had come as a surprise. The fourth string to her lute.

No, she had not expected Esbar uq-Nāra. Or the fifth string. The one that had come later. The thought drew her gaze downward, to the scars where her body had stretched – like ripples in sand down her belly and sides, dark on the warm brown of her skin.

‘When did you last think of him?’

Esbar was looking at her face. Tunuva drank.

‘When Siyu leapt from the tree.’ The wine had no taste. ‘I never thought his name or pictured his face, but . . . he was with me, in that moment. I would have hurled myself in after her.’

‘I know.’ Esbar laid a hand on her knee. ‘I know you love her. But as munguna, you know what I must say.’

‘She is not my daughter, nor yours. She belongs to the Mother.’

‘As we all do,’ Esbar confirmed. When Tunuva gazed at the ceiling, Esbar heaved a sigh. ‘Comfort her this once if it will ease you, after you see the Mother. Imin will let you in.’ When they kissed, Tunuva tasted dates. ‘And then come back and love me one more time before we sleep.’

There were few titles in the Priory. Two loose ranks – postulants and initiates – but few titles, for the Priory was not a court or an army. *Prioress* was one title; *munguna* was another.

Then there was a third, the tomb keeper. On her fortieth birthday, Tunuva had received that title, and with it, the honour of guarding the remains of Cleolind Onjenyu, the Mother, slayer of the Nameless One and founder of the Priory, who had once been Princess of Lasia.

Few are more faithful than you, Tunuva. You will make her a fine warden, Saghul had said. *Guard her well.*

Tunuva had not failed. Each night, while the Priory quietened, she descended to the burial chamber to perform the final rites of the day. As usual, Ninuru prowled at her side, a white shadow.

Ninuru had been the smallest in her litter. Now she was near as tall as Tunuva and loyal to a fault, as ichneumons always were to the first person who fed them meat. They imprinted on that person for life.

They had also imprinted on the Priory. Centuries ago, a pack had come to the Lasian Basin to serve the Mother, whose handmaidens had taught them to speak. They had smelled the Nameless One in Lasia, marking him as their enemy, and ever since, there had been an alliance. They resembled mongooses in the way that a lion resembled a cat.

At the door, Tunuva set her lamp beside the chest and used one of her three keys to unlock it. Inside lay a mantle. Five centuries after Cleolind had worn it, the dye was still rich, a deep fig purple. Tunuva unfolded it with care and draped it around her shoulders. For years she had feared it might unravel between her fingers, this remnant of the Mother.

Her second key opened the door to the burial chamber. She walked its edge, using her own flame to light one hundred and twenty lamps, each a life the Nameless One had ended when he came to Yikala. Once the chamber was aglow, she turned to the stone coffin and illuminated the final lamp, held by a sculpture of Washtu, high divinity of fire.

Tunuva poured from a jar of precious wine, made with resin from the tree. Only the titled were permitted to taste of it. She knelt before the coffin, drank half of the wine, and observed a silence for the hundred and twenty.

Once she had recited their names, she sang out a long prayer in Selinyi, her throat warmed by the sound of worship. The language was that of the lost city of Old Selinun, from whence had come the prophet Suttu, and from her line, the House of Onjenyu.

Finishing the wine in one swallow, she stood. These days, the floor was hard on her knees – she would have to bring a mat next time. She placed a hand on the tomb.

‘Mother, be still. We are your daughters,’ she said softly. ‘We remember. We remain.’

Outside the burial chamber, she locked the mantle back into its chest, leaving the oil lamps to burn through the night. At sunrise, she would return to replenish them and say the morning prayer.

The third key was cool under her drape. It was made of bronze, its bow shaped like an orange blossom, each petal enamelled in white. In ten years, Tunuva had never used it. *All you need do is carry and guard this*, Saghul had told her. *As to what it opens, that is not for you to know.*

At the top of the stairs, Tunuva turned to her ichneumon. 'Did you find it?'

Ninuru sloped into a hollow in the wall. Tunuva heard a scuffling before she returned with a woven bag in her mouth.

'Thank you.' Tunuva took it, then gave her a rub between the ears. 'Shall we ride soon?'

'Yes.' Shiny black eyes fixed on hers. 'Siyu is in disgrace. You should not give her gifts.'

'Oh, not you as well.' Tunuva tapped her pink nose. 'Esbar has already upbraided me.'

'Esbar is clever.'

'Perhaps you would sooner ride with clever Esbar tomorrow, then.' Tunuva scratched her under the chin. 'Hm?'

'No,' the ichneumon said. 'You are often stupid. But you fed me.'

She licked Tunuva clean across the face before she prowled away, tail brushing the floor behind her. Tunuva smiled and went in the opposite direction.

She found Imsurin sitting at his bench, embroidering the collar of an ivory tunic. When she approached, he looked up, eyebrows raised. They had turned grey over the past year.

'I want to see her,' Tunuva said. His mouth pressed into a line. 'Please, Imin.'

'You should not comfort her this time. Esbar would agree.'

'It is my name Siyu carries.' She came to stand in front of his bench. 'Let her have a little comfort tonight. After that, I will give her time to reflect.'

'And if the Prioress learns of this?'

'I will answer for it.'

Imsurin pinched the bridge of his broad, freckled nose. His eyesight had been failing him for years, giving him headaches. 'Go,' he said, 'but be quick, for both our sakes.'

Tunuva pressed his hand before she passed. He shook his head and returned to his needlework.

Siyu lay on top of the covers, one arm tucked under her head, hair swept over her face. Tunuva sat beside her and brushed a few dark strands behind her ear. She had slept this way since she was a child. Stirring, she opened her eyes and blinked up at Tunuva.

‘Oh, Tuva.’ She sat up and embraced her at once. ‘Tuva, Imin says I must stay in here for a week. And that I may not go beyond the valley at all, for a whole month. Is it true?’

‘Yes,’ Tunuva said, feeling her back heave with sobs. ‘Hush, sunray, hush. Imin will make sure the men keep you busy. It will feel as if no time is passing.’

‘But I *can’t* stay here,’ Siyu said, frantic. ‘Please. Will you ask the Prioress to forgive me?’

‘She will, in time.’ Tunuva drew back and frowned at her tear-stained face. Her skin was a deeper brown, her hair still black all the way through, but otherwise she was the picture of Esbar. ‘Siyu, you must know this punishment is lighter than it could have been. The men do good work, important work. Is it so bad to help them for a few weeks?’

Siyu met her gaze. Something flickered in those thick-lashed eyes.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I just hate to be trapped inside. And I’m ashamed.’ She drew a scuffed knee to her chest. ‘I suppose Esbar didn’t want you to see me. She told me I disgraced you both.’

‘Esbar loves you with her soul, as we all do.’

‘She loves the Mother more.’

‘As we all must – but Siyu, I was there when Esbar gave birth to you. You have made her so proud over the years. This mistake is a small part of your life. It does not define it.’

Swallowing, Siyu managed a nod. Tunuva reached into her overskirt and took out the pouch.

‘For you. So you can smell the forest, at least.’

Siyu undid the tie. When she saw the delicate blue petals in the pouch, she drew out the bloom and held it to her cheek, tears running again. She had always loved dayflowers.

‘Thank you.’ She sank against Tunuva. ‘You’re always so good to me, Tuva. Even when I’m a fool.’

Tunuva kissed the top of her head. Even as she did, she remembered that Esbar could never be so tender with Siyu. She and Imsurin did not have that freedom.

‘I would like something in exchange,’ Tunuva said. ‘I would like you to tell me a story.’

‘What story?’

‘The one that matters most.’ Tunuva stroked her hair. ‘Come. The way Imin used to tell it to you.’

With a tiny smile, Siyu shifted across the bed, so Tunuva could lean into the bolsters. ‘Will you do the fire?’ Siyu asked her.

‘Of course.’

Siyu wiped her face once more, nestling close.

‘There is a Womb of Fire that roils beneath the world,’ she began. ‘Centuries ago, the molten flame within it rushed together, taking solid form. And that form was terrible indeed.’

With a twist of her fingers and a flick of her wrist, Tunuva conjured a bright flame and tossed it into the stove. It ignited the dry wood and tinder in a rush. Siyu shivered, toes curling.

‘Lava was its milk, and stone its flesh, and iron were its teeth.’ Her eyes collected the flickering light. ‘It drank until even its breath caught fire. This creature was the Nameless One, and in his ever-burning heart blazed one eternal need. The need for chaos.’

Tunuva remembered Balag telling her this story. How she had delighted in the chilling voices he would use, the shadows the men would make on the walls with their fingers.

‘Though the Womb of Fire is deeper and wider than any sea, it was not enough for the Nameless One,’ Siyu said, her voice strengthening. ‘He thirsted for the world above. He swam up through the molten fire and broke the very mantle of the earth, and his terrible form emerged from the Dreadmount. Fire streamed in a river down its slopes, consuming the city of Gulthaga, and smoke blackened the morning sky. Red lightning struck and struck again, and as the sun disappeared, the Nameless One took wing.’

In the stove, the flame burned hotter.

‘He sought the warmer climes to the south,’ Siyu said, ‘and so his dread shadow fell upon Yikala, where the House of Onjenyu ruled over the great domain of Lasia. He settled beside Lake Jakpa, and with his

breath and the wind of his wings came a plague that poisoned all before him. The people sickened. Their blood ran hot, so hot they screamed and brawled and perished in the streets. The Nameless One beheld humankind, and he detested what he saw. He resolved to turn their world – this world – into a second Womb of Fire.’

‘As below, so above,’ Tunuva said.

Siyu nodded.

‘Selinu Onjenyu ruled Lasia in those days,’ she said. ‘He watched as Yikala descended into chaos. Its water reeked and boiled. First, he sent warriors to kill the beast, but the Nameless One melted their flesh and scattered the shore of the lake with their bones. Next, the farmers surrendered their sheep and goats and oxen. And when there was no livestock left, Seline saw no other choice. He stepped from his palace and gave the command that every day, the people must cast lots, and one would be the sacrifice.’

One hundred and twenty names.

‘Selinu made a great oath,’ Siyu said. ‘He could not risk his own life, but the names of his children would be among the lots. When it came to the hundred and twenty-first day, it was his daughter – Princess Cleolind – whose name was plucked from the crock.’

‘Cleolind had spent her days in torment. She had seen the people suffering, seen even children go to their deaths, and swore to fight the beast herself, for she was a skilled warrior. Seline had forbidden it. Yet when Cleolind was chosen, he had no choice but to send her to her doom. For this, they would for ever call him Seline the Oathkeeper.’

‘On the day Cleolind was to die, a man of the West rode into Yikala, seeking glory and a crown. With him he carried a sword of rare splendour, the sword named Ascalun. He claimed it was enchanted, that he alone could slay the creature – but it was not kindness that moved him. In exchange for his blade, the knight of Inysca had two conditions. First, he would see the people of Lasia convert to his new religion of Six Virtues. And second, when he returned to his own country, he would have Cleolind as his bride.’

Siyu stopped to clear her throat. Tunuva passed her a goblet of walnut milk, which she drank.

‘And what then?’ Tunuva asked her. ‘What did Cleolind say?’

When Siyu lay back down, she rested her head against Tunuva.

‘She told her father to banish the knight,’ Siyu said. ‘Desperate though their city was, she would not see her people on their knees for a foreign king – but when she went to meet her death, the knight followed. And when Cleolind was bound to a stone, and the Nameless One emerged from the foul water to claim his payment, the knight faced him.

‘But Galian Berethnet – that was his name – was a coward and a fool. The fumes and fire overcame him. Cleolind took up his sword. From the acrid shore of Lake Jakpa, deep into the Lasian Basin, she fought the Beast of the Mountain, tracking him to his lair. There, Cleolind was astonished, for in the valley grew a befruited tree, taller than any she had ever seen.’

That image appeared on many walls in the Priory. The tree, its golden oranges, the red beast twined around its trunk.

‘They fought,’ Siyu said, ‘for a day and a night. At last, the Nameless One set Cleolind afire. She cast herself beneath the tree – and though the beast was drawn to it, his fire could not burn anything that lay within the shadow of its branches.

‘As Cleolind began to die, the orange tree yielded its fruit. With the last of her strength, she ate, and all about her, the world brightened. She could hear the earth, feel its heat in her blood, and suddenly, fire was at her command, too. This time, when she confronted the beast, she drove the sword between its scales, and at last, the Nameless One was vanquished.’

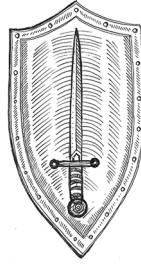
Tunuva released her breath. No matter how many times she heard the story, it moved her.

‘Cleolind returned the sword to Galian the Deceiver, so he would never come back for it,’ Siyu said, ‘before she banished him from Lasia.’ Her voice was slowing. ‘She renounced her claim to the throne, and with her loyal handmaidens, she withdrew from the world to guard the orange tree, to stand in wait for the Nameless One, for he shall one day return. And we, who are blessed with the flame, are her children. We remain.’

‘For how long?’ Tunuva asked.

‘Always.’

Her breathing deepened. Tunuva closed her own eyes, and against her will, she remembered someone else falling asleep against her, long ago. The thought held her in place until Imsurin came and led her away.



7

West

The day of her commendation. Glorian Hraustr Berethnet stared in expectation at her canopy, waiting for maturity to shine on her from Halgalant.

She had prayed for a sense that she was ready for her life. She had wanted the Saint to whisper to her, acknowledge her as his descendant. She had hoped she would finally long for her betrothal to a complete stranger, and her belly to puff with the next heir to Inys.

In short, she had prayed, hoped and expected to feel less of an imposter. Instead, she was drained from another painful night, she still had no interest in consorts, and the only puff she fancied in her belly was the sort that came from a good helping of blackberry pie.

Julain woke at cockcrow and slipped away to dress. Glorian snuggled into her pillows. She could have just a little more peace before she was scraped and trussed like a goose – at least, she thought she could, until Helisent flumped on to the bed beside her.

‘Time for you to meet the world.’ She threaded her arms around Glorian, making her smile. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Sore.’

‘About your commendation. You could be betrothed.’

‘I could have been betrothed since my birthday.’ Glorian looked at her. ‘Did you feel different?’