



# LIANA MIR

what lies before

*stories of gods, magic, and unlikely love*

# WHAT LIES BEFORE

*a collection of short fiction*

LIANA MIR

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First Edition

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## DEDICATION

*To all those who asked for these stories. You had wonderful ideas, and I loved to write them for you.*

*Also to G. Jackson, my tireless beta who has helped make me the writer I am today.*



**WARNINGS:**

This book contains references to violence, war, slavery, explicit sexual situations, mind control, etc. The viewpoints of the characters do not necessarily reflect those of the author.



*what lies before  
in days ahead  
the coming storm  
its certain tread  
o'er horizon  
feel winds blow  
hold onto me  
and don't let go*



L O S T  
C O N S T R A I N T S   O F   P O W E R

It was cold out. Winter had never been particularly friendly to the wayfarer in the wilds beyond reach of city or road, let alone to fugitives, fleeing their former masters. Snow had piled deep through every thicket and stretch of the wood, ice coated the river in all but the most rapid sections, and no path was visible in any direction.

In short, Ishalt was lost, which wasn't a terrible thing in summer when there was food for forage and the only thing that mattered was suitable distance from one's pursuers. In winter, it could mean life or death to find shelter.

He pressed on, determined that no one would find him before he made good his escape. The

distant barking had faded behind him by now, the woods were at least sheltered from the worst of the wind and still falling snow, and somewhere on the other side of the woods, he was sure he could find the road again that led to another city. All he needed now was some hunter's lodge, safe and hidden, to pass the night so he did not freeze. But one did not appear, and Ishalt pressed on.

By the time he found the high wall, his lashes had frozen over and his coat and gloves were frosted. He stumbled through the open gate onto the grounds and fell still, barely even seeing the nearby sanctuary of what appeared to be a large house. His eyes began to close, but not before the vague impression of a person moving toward him. He felt warm pressure on his face, then no more.

—

Ishalt woke to cool fingers gentle on his face, warmth surrounding the rest of his body. He opened his eyes and the hand withdrew. A straight-mouthed, bronze-skinned man, young

and slender with very dark hair and eyes, stared down at Ishalt where he'd been tucked into a bed piled thickly with blankets. His host's tunic was a plain off-white, reflecting the sunlight streaming brightly in through the windows, and it looked very soft, expensive, and hard to clean without causing wear to the material.

Not that Ishalt had worked laundry since he was just a young boy. He dragged his gaze back up to those intent eyes. "Where am I?" he asked.

"You were lost in the storm," the stranger said. "You stumbled onto my lands." He gestured to the side table next to the bed. "Food and water."

Ishalt forced himself to make the gesture of gratitude, one that might be made by a free man and not a slave, however high ranking. "Thank you for your hospitality."

The man stared at him, seemed to see right through the gesture, and even perhaps know what Ishalt was doing, but that was irrational. It was his fear speaking. The man's mouth tilted upward in a tiny smile far from reassuring. "You must tell me when you want to be found," he said in a low

voice that made Ishalt shiver.

It was bitterness that prompted his words. “And if I want oblivion?” He shouldn’t have said it, he thought the moment it was out. He didn’t want anyone to send him back.

His host shot him a piercing look, frowning again. “Then you came to the wrong place,” he said sharply. “No one may reach oblivion from here.” He stood and moved toward the door.

Ishalt caught him just before he disappeared. “Who are you, my benefactor?” Much of appropriate behavior depended upon the answer.

The man merely glanced back and said, “Shir.”

*Lost.*

—

The woman who held the deed for a property others would destroy her for. The older sister trying to save her little brother from sharing her life of hardship. The man who found stolen goods in his possession that he had certainly not thieved.

*Constraints of Power*

In their extremity, they prayed for deliverance.

He was not an unkind god for all he was rarely sought after for any of the things that truly brought him power and gave him life. (He was rarely sought after at all.)

They prayed to lose that which they had, and he honored their requests.

—

When Ishalt felt strong enough, he washed himself in the provided basin and wrapped the provided loose-fitting tunic around his body. It matched the color and texture of his host's and was as soft as he had predicted. Ishalt was no stranger to fine things. His rank had certainly been high enough for some to forget his status.

He took his own measure in the mirror, glad now he'd not objected as a teenager to having his facial hair permanently removed, as he'd hardly had time to shave, and also glad he'd never given cause for beatings or scars. The tunic had a very broad open neck and there was no hiding his

tattoos but there was no help for that. That was entirely the point of them. He was old enough to have fulfilled what they promised.

He rubbed his thumb over the coil of red hair braided around his wrist, the life braid binding him to his family and name. Things had changed, and if he didn't do everything exactly right and arrive at exactly the right time, he may not have saved himself at all. There was nothing to do for it now, so he finished tying the tunic and brushing down his hair, then considered what next.

There was no scent of food or noisy bustle of servants to guide him when he slipped out the door of the bedroom and into the corridor just outside. Windows ran the length of the hall on one side, letting in much light and a view of gardens behind the house and a fountain in the midst of them. Ishalt had found himself out on some sort of estate buried deep in the woods far from any well-traveled path.

An eccentric lord perhaps. But with no servants? A guardian spirit maybe, perhaps even the spirit of the woods. Ishalt had never met one, but

there were rules for interacting with them. He would remain cautious.

He touched nothing as he followed the corridor to the main hall and saw how the house was divided into wings branching off of it, one leading clearly toward the kitchens and workrooms that went into running an estate with quarters likely behind or below them, another leading into the courts and halls for entertaining or the work of the masters of the home, and the one he'd emerged from a large residential wing, each with their own large entry and corridors leading back deeper into the house.

He decided to try the kitchens.

—

The estate was usually very quiet and almost still, the air moving only with Shir's passage and the flow of the breezes through and around his home. His lands were not home for any but himself, though many passed over his property and never knew the estate sat upon it and never met Shir.

He'd been a child as his people counted it when he first arrived here, a little startled and uncertain, but he was an intelligent child and knew the powers of his family. He knew if he stayed calm and looked after himself, eventually his sister would find him.

The house formed itself around him, the lands moved in answer to his wishes, and the shape of his needs called forth answer and provision. He came to realize in time that his power had drawn this place around him, the nature of his power coming clear only when the missive from his sister arrived and explained to him why she would not be coming.

He did not reject those who came over the years and passed through. He would aid those who were dying and send them back to life or on to death as needed. Most, he never saw at all, for they returned on their own to wherever their path would take them. None of them stayed. None of them became close. He was quite used to being alone.

It's why he barely looked up from his tea and his letters when the traveler entered the warmth

of the kitchen with its bright colors and cheery light. The snow seemed to make everything brighter, and Shir had never minded the cold. He gestured vaguely toward the extra large cold box where most of the already prepared foods were. "If you're hungry."

"Have you eaten?" the traveler asked politely in reply, and it made Shir blink and actually look at him.

It was an insignificant question, the polite response, easily explained by his appearance, but no one else had ever asked it. He was beautiful, the golden tone of his skin as though he'd been kissed by the god of light, Nakor, with chestnut hair and warm brown eyes that gleamed with interest and bright intelligence. He was slender but strong with a grace as he moved that spoke of excellent training. He wore the mark that showed where he got that training.

"You're a slave," Shir commented.

The traveler stiffened, but there was no denying the stunning swirls of blue ink covering his shoulders and running down to touch his collarbones. "I finished my term," he said simply.

The mark then did not stretch over his back.

Even so, Shir gave him a sharp look with even sharper displeasure. He was no god of truth and lies, but any god could see through falseness. “Do not lie to me.”

His eyes seemed to darken. He studied Shir for a moment, then, “I finished my term,” he said with the bite of bitter belief burning in his voice.

It was sufficient. For some value of the words he was saying, he believed them truth.

“Very well,” Shir said. “I will not inquire further. For now.” Since he insisted on talking to Shir... “What do they call you?”

“Ishalt.” A lengthy pause as Ishalt glanced over the tea and pile of fine parchment on the table. “Would you like some food as well?”

Persistent. Shir waved him off. “I’m not generally hungry.” Food was a pleasant diversion to those who enjoyed it, but Shir had found enough sustenance without seeking any out. Humanity was forever losing things and never thinking well of having lost them.

He retreated to his letter again, pointedly reading. Ishalt moved away to put together a meal

for himself and left Shir in peace.

The gods could not be lost, but they could lose things, notes and letters and even whole care packages, however much it exasperated him. He scrawled a reply that his sister would find some time and tell him about later in a lost missive. He couldn't help anyone in particular find anything, but he could help a thing to stop being lost.

Shir wrote out additional replies, knowing those would have farther to go. It took someone with his sister's skill to find what had never gone missing. His favorite papers hadn't come from lost care packages.

By the time he'd finished, Ishalt had cooked something pleasant smelling and settled in a lower seat to eat it. He'd hardly been not a slave for long, and not all of his behaviors had been updated apparently. Shir had certainly seen runaways pass through his lands before, though most had done so entirely by accident and did not seek any aid he could grant them, if they even knew to ask. Ishalt didn't wear their furtive aura. He adopted the mode of a steward of a high estate and stayed present and available yet out of the way.

“You don’t have to do anything for me,” Shir told him suddenly, unsure what made him think it would be a problem. “You are a guest here.”

Ishalt blinked, then gestured assent even while he studied Shir speculatively. It was common to exchange goods or service for aid, but unexpected of those one made or called a guest.

Shir didn’t want a servant and didn’t want Ishalt to feel obligated to him. That had never been his nature, to take instead of to give.

No one usually wanted his gifts.

The grandmother drifting from one realm to another. The forbidden love one could not marry. The child never born to life. The small missed items, the surrendered dreams, the opportunities closed before they could be realized. He was not an unkind god, but who ever sought after loss?

He helped those who did not wish to remember their pain, claimed that which was left abandoned to the point of ruin, aided those in desperate need. The only ones who took any pleasure were those who wished to lose their childhood or their virginity or their innocence, and some of them still regretted it in time.

Shir stared at Ishalt, resting his chin in one hand. And Ishalt stood there, allowing it, bright eyes wide, put on independent footing and seeming to have to adjust to the feeling. But Ishalt didn't know why Shir studied him, wondering.

No one usually wanted his gifts.

—

It took all of less than two days for Ishalt to itch to feed him. There were no visible servants, no friendly gossipy chattering to give him insight into Shir's mind, and Shir was prone to very quietly wandering in and out of his study or his library and over to windows with a good view of the currently frozen gardens, like what he really wanted was some warm air so he could sit by the fountain.

He went in the kitchen for tea, he nodded politely at Ishalt in passing, and gave him leave to wander through the public parts of the estate, but he never seemed to eat anything.

It wasn't rude, technically, not really, at least not by his mother's people's standards of hospi-

tality and guest etiquette, so Ishalt finally fried up two portions of vegetables and rice and made the tea before Shir emerged and set them at his usual seat at the kitchen table. The dining room was large and formal and Shir had yet to enter it, so Ishalt stuck to what he knew.

Of course, Shir might take it wrong, thinking he was trying to serve him or whatever, but Ishalt had been a house servant for less than a year as a child, and this wasn't really his style, even if there wasn't someone else to delegate it to. It wasn't even about repaying the food and care and shelter. It was just something Ishalt needed to do.

When Shir did finally enter, Ishalt stared at the rice he was putting in his mouth. Shir paused, then only sat after a long moment. Ishalt wasn't going to blush. He ruthlessly stifled his embarrassment and uncertainty and focused on eating.

There was a small clank that wasn't from the teacup. Ishalt glanced up to see Shir taking a bite then dropped his eyes back to his plate.

They ate without talking and Ishalt stifled his smile rather than a blush.

“Would you like to see the library?” Shir asked quietly.

Ishalt popped his head up in surprise.

Shir was studying him with those dark eyes, waiting with a slight frown for Ishalt’s answer.

Finally, Ishalt gestured assent, a little unsure of what to expect but with some amount of anticipation. He still wasn’t entirely sure whether his host was lord or guardian, but the books he’d seen Shir with looked intriguing. He hadn’t wanted to handle them himself without invitation.

And he wasn’t wrong.

When Shir showed him the library, it was larger than it had seemed from the hall. Bookcases surrounded the room from ceiling to floor and made hallways and nooks within it. Ishalt peered around a corner and realized he couldn’t really make out the back of the room. There was a comfortable reading area under the wide windows—Shir seemed fond of windows, Ishalt was realizing—complete with a small stack of books that had clearly been dug into and a tea station by the windowseat and couch.

The couch looked suspiciously slept on. Ishalt refrained from mentioning the rumpled texture of the cushions and the haphazardly folded blanket on one end. For whatever reason Shir did not hire help, he wasn't wholly un-self-sufficient.

Shir was watching Ishalt take it in, not moving forward himself, and Ishalt wasn't entirely certain what gesture he was missing. This wasn't a business transaction, wasn't a supplicant or guest of his old master, and Ishalt had played the host more transparently than Shir whenever called upon to do so.

He moved to the nearest row of bookcases and studied the broad spines. He blinked. "The Annals of the Founding of Kushir?" He turned and stared at Shir.

"Yes," Shir answered simply.

"That book has been lost for centuries!" Ishalt turned back to the book, ran one finger delicately against the print, but the book was as clean and sturdy as if it were still fairly new. He read the titles after it, more histories and poetry, stories and legends of the civilization that had

predated his own. It was said most of their writings were destroyed in the conquering of them. "These books are all lost," he whispered, awed, then turned. "You find lost books?" The possibilities were startling, and already Ishalt was wondering what else was hidden in this library no one had the chance to read anymore.

"No." Shir stared at him a long moment, then said with a shrug, "While they're lost, they remain here."

Ishalt wasn't entirely certain he understood, but it wasn't difficult to find books to read or to welcome a shared tea near the window. After a few hours lost in the tomes, he finally looked up at the newly slanting sunlight over Shir's face.

"You don't seem much inclined to make me go," Ishalt mentioned cautiously but in an off-hand tone. It was a manner he'd had much reason to practice.

Shir looked at him sharply, then sighed. "And shouldn't you be finishing your business?"

"Not now," Ishalt answered, more honestly than perhaps was safe. "I need to wait until they no longer expect me. The first to the magistrate

generally fares best in a case.” It was something he knew from plenty of experience handling his master’s affairs.

But Shir frowned, eyes narrowing as he considered that. “Then shouldn’t you be there now?”

“I’ve always had many tasks and errands,” Ishalt said. “I was lost in a storm.”

“Ah.”

The magistrate would not declare him a runaway until it could be proven he had not simply been taken by the elements. Ishalt had too few resources not tied to his master to not take such advantages as he could. Which meant arriving in the city when no one expected him or lay in wait, when he could make his own way to the magistrate and have them send word of the need for resolution.

Shir shrugged again, that slight thoughtful frown he wore so much on his face. Ishalt thought he’d like to make him smile.

“You are a guest here,” Shir said. “Stay as long as you like.”

He’d made do for a few days with the clothes provided by his host and the ones he’d been

wearing, but they needed washing. He could find his own way to the laundry, but Shir had lately taken to showing him the places he wanted to go.

The laundry was home to entirely more socks than one person could ever hope to wear in a lifetime. “Shir.”

The ones that should be on lines were on lines, and the coarser, less delicate socks were piled in laundry bins neatly stacked on what seemed an endless row of shelves. Every so often, a bin with something other than socks hid unobtrusively between.

“My sister once wrote me that I should be called the Lord of Socks rather than Shir,” Shir commented, nonplussed. *Hashbar*. It was similar enough to draw a smile.

Ishalt plucked at a lacy white stocking that certainly belonged to a lady. “Do I want to know?”

“I don’t wear them,” Shir said, exasperated.

“Oh.”

He teased that over in his head. Did that make him Hashir, Lord of the Lost? Or just Shir,

lost. Ishalt put his clothes in a basin and ran the hot water he'd need.

—

Shir's estate seemed to take care of him, and Shir really didn't get hungry often, but Ishalt went out of his way to start imposing order on the necessary tasks of a household, pleased when Shir didn't object. There were meals to be had and evening bells to chime. The first time Ishalt set them ringing in the manner dictated by tradition, Shir appeared startled and just stared until the fifteen chimes had sounded, one to honor each of the high elder gods. Perhaps Ishalt imagined it, but Shir seemed vaguely pleased.

Ishalt didn't intrude too deeply into the library nook Shir preferred, but he did get the wrinkles out of the couch and properly fold the blanket in the mornings, leaving a hot tea around the time Shir would want it.

"You're not a servant here," Shir said once a day, a trifle exasperated.

Ishalt agreed readily from where he'd stuck his head in a priceless book or manuscript or from one of the games or treasures he'd been allowed to use from any of the many rooms hidden throughout the house. "Someone has to take care of you though."

Shir blinked at him, then apparently resigned himself and took his finished letters to wherever it was he went to deliver them.

—

*"I don't know why you assume you're not discriminating."* The words held entirely too much obvious amusement. *"You've never even shown interest in taking a lover after a few thousand years. I doubt you need my approval before doing so now."*

He'd have liked to resent his sister sometimes for when she decided to be fussy and interfering without cause or when she decided to let him muddle his own way when he was outright asking for advice, but she wasn't entirely wrong. He'd never been interested in anyone else before. For all that, he'd never spent enough time with any of

the others passing through his lands to have the opportunity.

He only sent her one note that day. *“You’re not helpful. Or funny.”*

Somehow she lost another slip of paper within an hour, not even bothering to wrap it in an envelope. *“I found your note. Of course, I am.”*

—

Shir did have work, and blessings to deliver, and prayers to answer, and his studies, and when the weather was fine, he did much out of doors between his garden and the forest and checking on the poor lost souls who’d offended a guardian spirit somewhere. He wasn’t without things to do.

Somehow, he still found himself gravitating more toward the things he could do while in the general area where Ishalt was. Ishalt thankfully hadn’t gotten it into his head to be a general cleaner or maid, but he was currently updating all the blessings in the borders of the house that were “charmingly ancient” in Nakor’s words. He’d started finding some of the items intentionally lost

by Shir's family and relocating them carefully to the areas where Shir would find and use them. There were more questions in his eyes than Shir genuinely felt like answering.

And there was always that thought in the back of his head, this couldn't last.

—

"You're weird."

"I am not."

"Who doesn't like peppers?" Ishalt asked, nose wrinkling as he set a plate of pepperless breakfast in front of Shir.

"Anyone with sense and a tongue."

"Don't be rude."

"You insulted my taste first."

"Don't be juvenile."

Shir shot him a baleful look. "You are the guest."

"Ah." Ishalt grinned. "It is an act unbefitting of a man of stature to blame his words or deeds on another." He said it in the manner of a quote or proverb, one Shir didn't recognize.

Shir frowned. "I'm unfamiliar with that saying."

Ishalt blinked, clearly stifling his surprise. "Everyone knows Basulf," he said, failing to completely keep it out of his voice.

Shir sighed and picked at his food. "I don't."

"Perhaps you have a volume of his in th—"

"No." Shir didn't wait to cut him off. He would know if anything like that fell into his power, but a light tug found only emptiness, and he let go immediately, the better to pretend he hadn't even tried. "It doesn't matter what he said."

Ishalt stared at him for a moment, bewildered, then slowly replaced his expression with one of self-repression. "All right," he said finally. "I'm going to do a circuit of the grounds' blessings if you don't mind."

"Charmingly ancient," Shir murmured to himself.

Ishalt stared back with a deliberate mask of blankness that likely meant he thoroughly disagreed on the charming.

"It's fine," Shir said.



Ishalt was in fact familiar with the customs of the spirits, even if he'd never met any before and never received any messages from the gods. He was acquainted quite thoroughly with the sort of boundary markers around woods and glens that warned of a guardian spirit protecting them and how these differed from the glyphs and etchings and special ward stones used to lay down the periphery of a temple or shrine.

When he'd climbed to the roof, he had an excellent view of the entire grounds surrounding the estate house, all its gardens, and the high wall Shir had brought him within from out in the storm. The wall's four corners, the way it was laid out, the gate and its design—it took a moment for Ishalt to take it in and that it was the original which temples merely alluded to. That stone shifted, as watchful and responsive as the protection wards evoked. The stone wasn't merely engraved but alive with power in shapes not quite familiar. They were not blessing sconces placed on each corner of the outer wall, but the similar

but not identical forms of prayer receptacles, only these like the wall held power, not mere forms.

Shir was no eccentric lord, hidden away in the forest, Ishalt realized abruptly as he stared, stunned, at the four points denoting the boundaries of sacred ground. Nor a guardian spirit, whose domain had never been within the sacred but outside of it. Nor was he a priest of a temple, however holy or real, nor keeper of a shrine, for he'd been exasperatedly allowing *Ishalt* to begin to fill that role and certainly did not act as the steward of his own estate.

Which could only mean...

—

“You’re a god,” Ishalt said, trembling in the entry hall into the residential wing.

Shir stopped and tilted his head slightly as he studied Ishalt for a long, fraught moment. He'd been just leaving his office when Ishalt found him and now stood in the hall just outside it. His expression shifted to sardonic amusement to match his tone as he replied, “I finished my term.”

Ishalt clenched his fists without thinking as startling, unjustified anger burned through him. “Don’t lie to me!”

The amusement vanished into a sigh. Shir turned and went back into his office, waving with one hand for Ishalt to follow.

After an uncertain moment, Ishalt obeyed that gesture and stood before the desk as Shir dropped into his chair behind it before regarding Ishalt openly.

“Rare is the man who prays to a god, then does not recognize the answer,” Shir commented.

“I didn’t pray to anyone!” Ishalt protested, certain of that at least, less to a god he didn’t even know.

But Shir only frowned. “You wished that no one would find you, *to be lost*.” His eyes turned dark and resentful. “And I answered.”

Ishalt could only stare at him. Everything he knew about Shir and this house suddenly falling into a different light. *Lost*. No wonder there was no one else here, though he knew Shir had sent other travelers on their way, for he’d said as much from time to time. Other people who were lost.

He floundered for a moment with his feelings, for words. What did you say to a god who had taken you in? A hundred formal phrases, right for different occasions or supplicants, flitted through his brain, but nothing was right for this person he knew that had neatly avoided any display of power of his nature directly in front of Ishalt, however much he claimed Ishalt should have noticed.

Ishalt finally dropped into the chair on the opposing side of the desk and just asked frankly, “Why did you hide it?”

Shir stayed quiet for a moment, but finally shrugged and answered, still a little resentfully, “I didn’t.”

Ishalt blinked at him. What was it he had muttered under his breath? *Charmingly ancient*. “You don’t do things like other gods because you’ve been alone so long?” Ishalt said slowly, putting even more pieces together.

Shir shrugged again. As much as an affirmative.

Right. Ishalt felt his cheeks heat with embarrassment. “I apologize for my presumptuousness.”

Shir narrowed his eyes. “Don’t just say things because it’s proper.”

“You can’t not say the proper things,” Ishalt snapped back. “You can’t offend the gods.”

“You’re offending me by being dishonest.”

Ishalt really wasn’t sure why it made him angry or why he thought it fine to respond to such a statement, but the words were out of his mouth before he could catch them back. “I thought maybe I could have a place here, and I can’t if you’re a god.” He drew back, muttered. “I didn’t understand anything.”

Shir was studying him openly again, and Ishalt gestured apology, perhaps more sincerely, and fled the office before Shir could tell him such a hope was as presumptuous as it was.

—

“Why not?”

Ishalt stumbled abruptly to his feet, all his lessons in being instantly at attention somehow fleeing him in this moment. He managed not to

knock over any of the stacks of books they'd left in the reading area.

Shir had waited some amount of time to come after him, but he was here now in the library, a flat frown on his face, in his tone, demanding. "Why can't you have a place here? Is there some taboo I'm breaking? Some binding rules on my kind I'm unaware of?"

Ishalt was blushing again, at the dark sarcasm in that last question. If anyone knew the rules of the gods, it was Shir and not Ishalt. His instinct was to lower his head and wait out the tempest of displeasure, but he chose to stare back at Shir instead. *You're offending me by being dishonest.*

"Guardians don't mind humans tending their shrines," Ishalt made himself say. "Lords have servants and companions. But the gods are not known to live in their temples nor take humans as companions."

Let alone someone like Ishalt.

Shir did not answer for a long moment, long enough for Ishalt to worry he should have kept his tongue still in his mouth and done as he'd wanted to.

“Gods do as they please,” Shir said at last, “within the confines of their power.”

The word choice took him flatfooted, but perhaps it shouldn't have. Ishalt could see that Shir embodied the name he wore, the power he held. He had no idea what pleased Shir though, for he'd rarely seen his smile. It came out faint and noticeable only for the determined seeker when Ishalt gave him food tailored to his tastes, at the first signs of winter beginning to relent, over one of those letters he read so often.

“And they help people,” Ishalt pointed out. He rather doubted that it always pleased them to do so, however much their supplicants attempted to make it so.

“As they wish,” Shir replied. “I wish it.” He had yet to look anywhere else but Ishalt, and now he stepped forward and Ishalt had to fight down an urge to step back. “Do you *wish* a place here?”

Ishalt stared into Shir's dark eyes, that intense, demanding gaze, and felt for a moment, he'd never known him. Shir was older than he appeared, far more powerful, and rarely gave voice to his thoughts. Ishalt didn't really know

him, however much it felt that way, and didn't know the depths of whatever Shir was capable of. He had yet to even think through all the implications. It didn't change how he felt. "Yes."

He wanted to stay, almost as badly as he wanted to see his family again. He didn't think he'd ever be able to bring them here, but that would hardly matter if Ishalt could go and come.

They were so close now, close enough that Ishalt could make out Shir's eyelashes and couldn't properly see his mouth and then they were kissing and Ishalt had never been kissed before. It was warm and brief, and then Shir had pulled away to look at him again and judge his reaction.

Ishalt caught his breath and went with it. "You think too much," he said and pulled Shir in for another kiss.

Shir lowered the tunic from Ishalt's shoulders and traced the spiraling marks of Ishalt's tattoo with his fingers, then with his mouth. Ishalt wrapped his hands around Shir's shoulders, then slid them upwards and tightened his grip at Shir escalating to hot, open-mouthed kisses. Shir winced but did not complain.

Ishalt was getting dizzy with the heat sparking between them, and thinking too much was not a problem. Shir wound his fingers through Ishalt's and brought his hand up to kiss the inside of his wrist softly, and Ishalt just about choked.

Shir didn't stop though, kept kissing warmly up Ishalt's arm and traced over those spirals again with his fingers as his mouth moved downward, then they were scrambling onto the couch because standing wasn't working any more and Ishalt wasn't even sure if he could keep supporting his weight anyway.

It took him a bit to realize it, but it hit Ishalt somewhere along the way that neither of them knew what they were doing. The hesitation when they finally got their clothes entirely out of the way, that sharp assessing look in Shir's eyes that was less about Ishalt and more about what to do next. Ishalt blinked, surprised, but touch and desire and instinct could make up for a great deal of ignorance, and he didn't take long to wonder about it, for Shir had finished making whatever battle plan in his head and put his mouth back to work.

And really, Ishalt wasn't thinking any more at all.

—

"We've defiled the library," Ishalt said after a bit.

Shir made an indecipherable noise into Ishalt's shoulder but made no effort to move or otherwise respond. Ishalt felt wrecked, sore and sleepy and utterly satisfied. Shir *looked* wrecked, and it was a good look on him. Ishalt gently ran his fingers through Shir's now tangled hair and enjoyed the warm weight of him.

"You know, you shouldn't live in a library," he commented, while he was thinking about it. It had become his favorite room in the house, besides the airy kitchen, but it wasn't meant to be an all-purpose living place.

Shir made another indistinct noise of protest and raised his head just enough to mutter, "I have a bedroom."

"Oh." Ishalt thought of that, flushed hot and tried to stop thinking about that immediately. "I'd like to see it sometime."

Shir turned enough to talk properly, and there was that faint smile Ishalt was always trying to catch a glimpse of. “Very well.”

“Just like that.” Huh. Ishalt leaned back comfortably. The blanket shouldn’t have been big enough for them to share, but somehow they’d made do and it was comfortable, tangled together on the couch.

Shir sat up on one arm and kissed him heatedly. As he pulled away, he murmured close to Ishalt’s mouth, “I don’t ever want you to be found.”

Ishalt hadn’t quite expected that. He tried to find how to protest without protesting the sentiment. “Well, I want someone to find me at some point.” He stumbled through words he didn’t wish to offend by saying. It wasn’t like he wanted to leave. Maybe visit. Definitely visit.

Shir stiffened and frowned, his gaze intensifying. “Why?”

“I have family,” Ishalt blurted out, then looked away, blushing. “It’s good when someone cares enough to try to find you.”

Shir blinked at that, breathed out softly, “No one ever tried to find me.” A moment’s silence

while Ishalt digested that, and wondered at what sort of family Shir had. “No one appreciates loss.”

Ishalt sat up on his arm. “What?” he demanded.

But Shir just shook his head, more mulish in expression.

“I don’t regret the twenty years,” Ishalt said softly, conceding somewhat. There was cause for appreciation. “When I was still small,”—Ishalt thought back to that but couldn’t remember much more than being of walking and scrambling about age, and tucked up in his father’s arms anyway as the bargain was struck—“my family was destitute and couldn’t feed me. They indentured me to the city judge of Kienmar in exchange for a family living. I was trained as his left hand where his son was raised as his right.”

Such arrangements were not uncommon, where a child of the right proclivities made a worthwhile slave for a standard twenty-year term, and the purchased fosterling gave a poor family enough to educate their other children themselves and not starve in the doing.

Running away from a high-ranking position and so close to the end of one's servitude was not common at all.

Shir frowned. "What happened?"

Ishalt had been happy once there, proud of what he'd accomplished. He recited dully, "I overheard Master Kienmar telling his son that I had done such a good job, he'd hired framers to get me tried and given over to him for life."

Shir stared at him a long time, seeming to weigh that and feel out everything it implied.

Ishalt had run weeks before the end of his servitude, close enough that to run away had risked almost as much as what he fled. "I couldn't lose them again," he said, back to the first question, why he wanted so badly to be found.

Shir's dark eyes narrowed. He brushed his hair from across them with one hand. "Again." His frown deepened. "You built a life for your family and siblings, even as you gained the skills you now possess. You never resented their freedom with it so far distant when you had none. Was the first time not a worthy loss?"

Ishalt had little answer for that. He'd missed his family, but it had been worth it. "But I always knew I'd see them again. I hadn't truly lost them."

Even in such a short time as it had been, Ishalt felt he knew Shir well enough to read the disagreement in his eyes. "I would not wish you a *slave*," Shir said at last. He settled back down against Ishalt, arm sliding over his waist. "I'm sure someone will find you."

—

Ishalt woke dazed and chill, compared to what he had become accustomed to. The bed had grown hard overnight, and he shivered as he dragged himself upright in the blanket. He was in the woods, the snow less than it had been but not altogether gone, wrapped in blankets, a full pack tucked beside him in his tree-shaded shelter.

Everything felt dreamlike as he struggled to process this sudden state of being. Was there an estate behind that stone wall he could no longer see? Had he truly stumbled into Shir's home and

lands? Had he dreamed up everything in a hypothermic daze?

It didn't make sense. Ishalt was not so light a sleeper someone could carry him out into the cold and abandon him without him waking.

It should have stung, but all he felt was numb as he gathered up his things, packed away the night goods, and refreshed himself out of his pack. There was certainly more provisions than he'd taken when he fled. He shouldered his pack and set forth, a vague remembrance of the map he'd tried to imprint into his mind, of all the paths and roads and secret ways to the city of his birth.

He was found, a young man who looked so much like Ishalt, but hair dark as Shir's rather than Ishalt's fairer chestnut, and more slender. Ishalt had written his family with Kienmar's permission, and he'd tried to arrange a rendezvous he'd almost certainly long ago missed.

“Sereten?”

“Ishalt?”

It was his brother. He *was* found.



He'd lost his grip on his lover sometime in the night, and it wasn't uncommon for such things to happen. No one ever wanted to stay lost, whoever had willed it or prayed it upon them. He did not push any of them away, but he only sighed when his sister gently reached out and plucked them from his hand. He'd done what he could while Ishalt was still his own.

"Take care of him," Shir whispered low at the window. Even the gods had been known to pray.



The homecoming was warm enough, filled with food and celebration, and it was true enough that he'd been expected to arrive sometime around this time, a little sooner, if he'd fulfilled the twenty years of service they'd indentured him for. His mother's arms were not so strong as he remembered, but they were still warm and loving. His father's voice was still stern to outsiders but kind to his children. His younger siblings still looked

up to him and peppered him with a million questions. No one asked why he'd come home early because he'd come home late, but Ishalt had run a city under the watchful eye of his master, and he knew that such things came home to roost.

The first night he came home, when they gave him a room with its own bath, he'd gone in and shut the door, then pulled off his tunic to inspect the broad sweep of spirals and lattices tattooed over his shoulders—the mark of his term.

It wasn't alone.

Ishalt stared, startled and shuddering with the sudden absolute knowledge he hadn't dreamed any of it. The mark of a life claim covered his back with wings and circles and spirals and knots, running right up and over the mark upon his shoulders. The blue covered so much of his flesh with a divine signifier, rare for any to wear but the priests, a clear statement he'd been taken by a god.

Shir. Lost. Who'd somehow ensured Ishalt would never be returned to Kienmar as his slave.

Within the week's grace for recovery from a long journey, Ishalt brought an offering and his paperwork and contracts to a city magistrate and sat before him until brought forward with his case. He removed his tunic and laid out the contract of his term and showed his back before the judge.

"Three weeks before the end of my servitude, I was claimed by the god. He has since marked me with a life claim."

The magistrate considered the matter. He calculated the appropriate fee for three weeks of Ishalt's service, against the price paid for his term, and added to it the life fee obligate by the temple of a god who would make such a claim without consulting any man's prior claim.

"Which temple must the restitution be paid from?" asked the scribe.

The magistrate gestured to Ishalt.

"I do not know the god," said Ishalt, "only that his name is Shir."

The general temple was called and a priest-scholar summoned, who opened the rolls of the legends and found nothing but a brief passage

that there was one whom his family lost and whose name was lost and not written in the scrolls, that he gave shelter to those who wandered in dangerous places and returned many again to the families who prayed their safe return. It was good enough to determine there was such a god among all those known and unknown, and the general temple of all the divine without their own temple seat in the city paid out the portion from their treasury and sealed it in a pouch before the scribe and the magistrate. This was then sent to the City Judge of Kienmar, who sat in judgment over all the city and all the lesser magistrates of that city.

Ishalt was free. He rose up, put on his tunic, and returned to his family's home.

—

Weeks passed, months. Ishalt was welcome in his mother's home and took in hand stewarding it, putting his back also to what labors the family did for their own: expanding the house of their cousin, cooking for feasts of coming of age and marriages,

hauling and helping their elder and infirm and their caretakers. He laughed with his brothers and sister and learned from and taught his father. It was a good time, warm in his belly and heart, but there were moments, he felt more wistful and lonely than perhaps he ought, the memory of knowing fingers and dark eyes and a low laugh and sardonic smile.

Ishalt rested on the front step of nights to stare upward at the stars, hands still on the scrolls he'd left open to stories and legends and histories that never mentioned the lost.

He favored his mother in appearance, and when she sat beside him, no one wondered if he was truly in his home at last. Even so, she reached up and placed a hand across the swirling tattoos, deep blue against his golden skin.

"Is it so wrong," he asked softly, "that I'm not ready to lose you again?"

His mother gave a thoughtful hum and rubbed gently over the mark. "I would lose you gladly, son, if then you would find your own happiness. It would be worth it for that." She held

him warmly and he held her back in their own moment of goodbye.

—

That was toward the end of spring and it was some weeks again before he found his way to the general temple and asked to commit himself to the god in exchange for a life allotment for his family.

The priests and keepers consulted, for the god he had chosen had no temple, no gold set aside in his coffers to pay the standard price for this. So they agreed that they would pray, and Ishalt also, and if the god answered and accepted his commitment, the general treasury would bear the price.

As it was the general temple and prayers to an unknown god could have any manner of rules to be able to know or interpret the answer correctly, first two priests were chosen to preside over the prayers, a man and a woman, and they invoked the god of stones.

The weights given for the interpretations of dreams and answered prayers were blessed and prayed over, then flung in the air within the sacred circle. Ishalt stared as they slowed down before finally landing on the stones.

“The god of stones will speak through the stones,” the first priest said, his voice resonating through the space.

Ishalt didn’t even remember praying the first time, but it certainly wasn’t how he prayed when intentionally asking a god for something. He considered and finally just thought what he wanted to. *“You laid a claim on me. I want to accept that claim and come back to you. They want you to acknowledge that though before I can officially be committed.”*

They cast the weights three times, at designated intervals, consulted, then shook their heads. “Perhaps you must change the manner of the prayer,” they suggested.

Shir couldn’t just do things the reasonable way. *You wished that no one would find you, to be lost.*

Ishalt bowed again and gathered his thoughts and memories of everything he knew about Shir, everything he’d managed to deduce in the time

since, thinking about it. Lost. He was willing to lose his life with his family again if it meant he could have Shir. He'd had time with them, and it wouldn't be the first time someone left their family to join another's.

The priests cast the weights, and in the first cast, they stopped, for the answer was clear and direct.

—

They asked to lose the things they could not keep, the things they did not need, and Shir had chosen to use his power to bless where he could. Few ever bothered to ask such things, and he had little power to comfort those who had not requested nor desired to lose what they had.

Shir found power in every thing and person lost, regardless of the means by which it came. His power had lost him his family, and he could hardly wish that Ishalt would never see his own family again.

—

“No?”

“The god accepts your price but will not grant your request.”

The woman priest bowed her head near the other’s and murmured, “I’ve seen the it the other way but not this.”

Ishalt put on his blankest of expressions while internally muttering imprecations at Shir and whatever was going on in his head.

“The price?”

“Your service,” she replied promptly.

Of course.

*“Then let me lose this life, the one I’d have here if I stayed.”*

The priest hadn’t even cast the weights when they fell. Both priests stared at them, then one gestured for the scribe. “The god accepts your prayer.”

—

His mother looked anxious when Ishalt returned to the house, the scrip for the allotment in hand and his name safely in the rolls of those whose

claim by a god had been confirmed. It was his father who spoke first.

The loss of the life he could have had. That was quick.

Ishalt managed to smile. "It's all right, Mother. It's only what I asked."

His family wasn't so easily mollified but with the proper explanations and the allotment scrip, and several reassurances he would come back to visit, they were eventually satisfied.

"It's a pity to lose an heir twice," his father said at the end. But though his voice was rough and the words businesslike, there was a certain telling softness in his eye.

His mother just hugged him hard and whispered, "Go. Be happy."

—

The woods seemed different when Ishalt returned. He frantically searched above and below, near the path and far from it, the way he remembered leaving and the way he remembered entering

in. It didn't seem to matter *how* he searched; the results were the same: nothing.

Why couldn't he find him? he wondered in frustration, but it was only on his tenth circuit through that he stopped startled at the sight of a woman sitting on a stone under a tree. She was stunningly beautiful with bright hair and dark eyes, dressed formally so only her slender hands were visible below the neck and her robes seemed alive with power. A sword lay open in her hand, etched with living figures and glyphs across its surface. He knew her without asking and dropped to his knees in proper obeisance before saying anything.

She seemed amused as she rose gracefully to her feet. "I am Riskalayeln." The goddess of finding and of difficult causes. "You want to find my brother."

Ishalt looked up properly. "Yes," he answered, desperate for aid if she was inclined to give it.

"You search for the one entity that cannot be found," she said severely. "However, your cause is difficult and your love for him sincere, so I will

help you. You cannot find him, but you already know what is necessary to reach his lands.”

He could have bit his tongue in frustration. “Please, great lady, tell me what it is I have forgotten.”

“Did you pray to lose the memory?” she asked.

And it came to him. She smiled and vanished, and Ishalt whispered thanks for it should have been obvious from the beginning.

He wished to be lost.

—

Ishalt found Shir in the gardens, staring into the fountain, gleaming with its deep bed of lost coins. After everything that had happened, it seemed almost surreal to step back into this world, to be standing so near.

“I tried to find you,” he said quietly. Someone had tried to find Shir. And further, “It is a worthy loss.”

Shir stared at him for a long time with such open longing, it took Ishalt’s breath away. Finally,

Shir left the fountain and drew Ishalt close to kiss him, the first of many, many times. 

I V R A I S  
T H E G R E A T N O R T H

The second time Ishalat saw the Stone Prince, her heart clenched with the fierceness of her anger. He had the sword at his belt that had slaughtered hundreds of her people and the expression on his face was known for: nothing, in the terrifying manner of those who do not care what blood stains their hands if it is for the object of their own loyalty.

This was Ishalat's first impression of him. He was but the infamous sword in his own queen's hand. The *queen's* expression was not nothing. It was calculating and intent beneath the coils of her dark hair, bound up for this special occasion—a marriage to ally two warring peoples and bring an

end to the bloodshed wrought too frequently upon the sword of the stone prince.

His hands were gloved. He stood at his queen's right hand. His cloak covered him, but seemed unnecessary. He was clothed from collar to foot in sturdy wear fit for battle or dueling but with the fineness of one considered noble. His hair was as fair as his queen's was dark, a golden patch of sunlight over his head with a shade kissed by fire, eyes that seemed dull until he turned them on Ishalat. Then she saw that they were a piercing steady blue.

*I will never love you*, she thought in her heart as she stepped forward, her brothers and father behind her, the princess of her own realm. Her blue gown matched his eyes for vividness, a color no one outside of her clan was taught the dyes of; her hair matched the other queen's for its curls and braids and the thickness of its lustre; her neck shone with the jewels of her mother that marked her high birth.

The Stone Prince looked at her with those intent eyes and seemed to mark her as not a threat. It made something painful and hot burn in

her chest, and she had to bite back the retort that sprang to her lips. Today was a day for alliances, for reaching out her hand to his and feeling his gloved fingers close around her bare ones. It was not for provoking this man who had killed two of her five brothers and three of her uncles without regret.

Her heart felt heavy with the weight of her anger, but she made herself smile as she had promised her mother she would do.

Ishalat was the peace of her people. She would do this, just as he would—without regret.

—

Nobody tells three-year-old princesses, excited about the fantasy of a fine prince to wed, that most likely they will be married off in favor of political advantage or to bring an enemy to heel, to produce sons and daughters with the right blood to unite two peoples who otherwise hate each other.

Ishalat remembered when she first imagined her future husband, and she never imagined this,

his hands gentle at the seams of her clothes, undressing her with no more expression than he'd struck down her brother on the battlefield, with no more tenderness than he cleaned his blade after.

She shivered at the sensation of gloved fingers over her bare shoulder. She dared to reach up and stay his hand.

He looked at her curiously.

"You're still gloved," she said. It seemed wholly intimate to ask him to undress, but piece by piece, the armor of her dress and jewelry was dismantled and here, she had yet to see any of him but his face.

"Lady," he said, his voice a scratchy midtone that surprised her, not that of an ideal warrior. There was something in the set of his mouth and the color of his words that was not so obedient as the way he brought glove to mouth and tugged it off with his teeth.

Something flipped within her belly. She ignored it and reached for the fastenings of his cloak. It was not that Ishalat was eager to see what her wedding had brought her, but she refused to

stand by and let him unclothe her without taking some power back for herself by doing the same to him.

He was... not unbeautiful. Lean, fair again, visible strength beneath his skin. But he was covered in scars: unexpected ones like surprises hiding under his ribs, these messier than the crosshatches against upper arm and shoulder on one side, lower arm twice over on the other. Knife wounds those. She couldn't identify those on his torso.

He reached behind her and unclasped her hair to fall warm over her shoulders and he twined his fingers into it. His other hand reached for her belt and her dress was essentially off her, only her undergown and necklace between her and nakedness.

“Boots,” she whispered.

He studied her a moment with those focused eyes beneath that red gold hair she'd never seen before on any but him. It had made her wonder if he'd been kissed rather by blood than fire. His mouth tilted in a faint smile, and its unevenness gave him a rakish look as he rasped, “Lady,” and bent to remove his boots.

This was not the feeling she wanted, this heated, too rapid beating of her heart as her hand came to twine in his hair as his had in hers. She didn't release him when he straightened again, but put the other hand to his shoulder and gestured that he should turn.

The first flicker of something recognizable as feeling within his eyes. But he turned, wordless, let her fingers drop from his hair to his back as she gazed in horror at the scars she had glimpsed as he bent.

Straight, perfectly even, perfectly of the same length—this was no accident or battle that had littered his back with the series of marks. What blade had done this?

Ishalat ran her palm over hot skin, felt the thumping rhythm of heart and her enemy, her husband. She snatched her hand back. She had no right.

He turned to her again then, this Stone Prince, so named for his demeanor rather than any true title. His title was Sword. He was the sword of his queen. He tucked his fingers beneath Ishalat's chin. Mindful of the intimacy he had just allowed,

she raised her eyes to his and let him look his fill. She was beautiful. She knew she was beautiful, for she held the inheritance of being her mother's daughter, and her mother was the most beautiful among all their people.

He said nothing still, this husband of hers, just leaned forward and brought her mouth to his, tasted her with the caution such a man might bring to the edge of the blade when testing its sharpness. She lost her breath in that moment, felt tension jumping under her skin, cool air prickling her arms, and the heat of his fingers on her face, his teeth against the edges of her lips. It was too much. She pulled back. She put her hand to his jaw and studied him while he let her look her fill.

*I will always hate you,* she said within herself and pulled him down to kiss her again.

—

She was a woman now, rising in her own bed, drawing the sheet up to cover her breasts as she looked down at the man sprawled under the

covers still. He looked more vulnerable without his own armor or sword—just a man, nothing to shield him from her gaze.

Not even a name.

Ishalat ran one finger over his shoulder, unsurprised when he instantly tensed up and rolled over onto his back rather than his side, the better to gaze up at her. He raised one eyebrow, and she suppressed the way it made her want to blush.

“Did they tell you my name?” she asked. Politely. It was better than immediately demanding his own.

“Ah.” He rolled back onto his side, eyes half closed as he curled into the pillow as if unwilling to wake. “It’s Seru.”

She had to tamp down on the swell of irritation at his choice to skip her question and answer instead what she’d been aiming for. “Did they tell you my name?” she asked again. It wouldn’t do to let him get away with such a thing so early on.

His mouth smiled faintly, a mischievous curl to his lips. “No.”

She huffed out a breath.

“Ishalat.” Then his eyes closed all the way, and his breath evened out again in sleep.

What an irritating man.

—

Her mother had prepared her for this day from the moment their treaty messengers were first received. Their enemies had never before received messengers from them, sending them back unharmed but utterly rejected.

There were ways to bind a treaty with something other than marriage, something other than blood, but there were no ways older or better, so her mother measured her for fine dresses suitable to a woman of standing and trimmed them with the tassels of maidenhood. “You’ll cut these when you’re wed,” she told her daughter.

There were blessings on the jewels for her wrists—protection against Those Who Hungered, the isinar, spirits once held back by a wall of prayers but now warded against on every new bride and babe. There were blessings for the jewels around her neck—fertility and wisdom, to carry children

safely and guide her husband into aiding their people for the sake of his wife. There were blessings on the jewels at her ankles—strength and grace, for the dance and the hunt.

“Be brave, my daughter, and make him yours.”

—

They couldn't stay in bed forever, and she dragged him bodily from the covers when he seemed likely to ignore the second horn of the morning. The wedding feast always lasted more than a single day.

“Your queen watches us as if we will betray her,” Ishalat commented as she clasped her jewels around her neck and arms again. It was a question, in its way, one he was not obligated to answer.

The Stone Prince had even more layers to don than she did, and she watched him pull boots over trousers and tuck one into the other. “You hate me, don't you?” It was not a question, in its way.

But Ishalat felt her face burning, the heat rising in her chest, as she remembered the first time she'd seen the Stone Prince's red gold hair, when he cut down her brother in battle. "You have slain my family."

His hands stilled on his belt as he looked at her curiously. "I have served my queen loyally. And now I have given that loyalty to you, my wife, and to any children we may have."

It was— It was no answer to what bothered her. She wrapped her lace over her dress, stitched with embroidery of battles won over isinar, and went out into the feasting place.

—

Ishalat rose from the table when the food had been tucked away into hungry bellies, at the first strike of the music and staff. She was counted among the women now, not the maidens, and she had always been best and fiercest of the dancers since first her feet had learned the steps.

She whirled to song and dance with all the strength and grace her mother's blessings could

possibly bestow, listened to the laughter of her people, for this was a celebration, for them more than for her. She danced for them, faster and faster and faster—

Before hands caught her and twirled her to him. He let go her sash and turned her, moving in the dance with her at a speed no other had matched.

The air was cold against her skin, but everywhere he touched, even through cloth, was far too warm as they drew close, breath mingling harshly, before whirling apart and letting him twist her into the spiralling moves of the dance.

The music felt a living thing. They moved to its rhythm—in, out—keeping time like they'd learned it together, and it shouldn't make her heart beat with something other than anger or make her burn with a hunger she'd never known before last night.

They drew to a close with the last strands of the song, and his arms were around her—chaste in appearance, but every part of her body felt on fire.

Her people shouted their approval but it was the faint tingling of bells that drew her eye, up to the queen with her cunning gaze, shaking a wrist gently in the manner of approval of his people, not hers.

“Well danced,” the queen said with a smile so sharp it could cut.

That was when Ishalat remembered she was held in the arms of that queen’s sword. She drew away, not far enough to be impolite, just enough to conclude the dance they had shared.

“Ivrais,” the queen said to one of her councilors. They brought her the ceremonial stone, which she held out for Ishalat’s father to inspect.

He took it in his hands and looked it over before returning it with a nod.

It was vivid blue and bright, polished, and set on a thin chain of gold. The queen gave it to the Stone Prince, who fastened it around Ishalat’s neck over the jewels of her birth.

The queen smiled. “It is done.”

—

“I wonder sometimes,” Ishalat said as she cut the tassels of her virginity from her maiden gowns, “if the knives will cut me. Or perhaps that is merely the price of wielding the blade.”

He slipped his sword from his scabbard, held the weapon with his right hand, and studied the flat of it with a critical gaze. Then looked at her with a gaze more intense and answered, “Is the sheath cut by the blade?”

“I don’t think your queen would like to think of her sword as sheathed.”

He smiled sharply, so it startled her, holding the same edge as his queen’s cunning gaze. “What do you know of what my queen wishes?”

Ishalat blushed hotly. “I hope that she will keep that which she has spoken in treaty.”

“Yes.” He leaned forward as he repeated it slowly. “She will keep that which she has spoken in treaty.”

She stared at him, frowning, certain she could read the weight of meaning between his words, but not knowing him well enough to ferret it out.

He murmured, as one would a story told from memory, “You shall make war against them

for a hundred years, and weaken them, that the spirits of cold and hunger may come again.”

For a moment, Ishalat couldn't breathe and felt as if all the blood had drained from her face. The spirits of cold and wind, winter and hunger, pain and ice dwelt beyond the great north, where her people raised their prayers year after year to hold them out. There was enough of these things in the world without those who wielded them and feasted on those who felt them.

“You—” she whispered.

“As all of us have been taught,” he continued as if he had not stopped. “For this our grandfathers traded for the lives of our own people, brought low by the spirits when you drove them before you.”

For a hundred years...

Surely, it had been nearly that long. Or that long. Ishalat thought furiously through all she knew about his people, the word engraved on the hilt of his sword, Ivrais, their fierceness in battle, that of the seven times her fathers had reached out for a treaty, only once were they not immediately rebuffed.

He sheathed his sword again. “I am the Sword of Ivrais.”

“The stone.”

“Oh? In our tongue, it means the bargain.”

Her hand flew to the ceremonial stone at her throat. They had seen that word on his hilt so many times as he brought their people low. *Ivrais*. Stone, they thought. The bargain struck with powers one ought to leave alone.

“Your queen has kept what she promised.” She looked up at her husband, Seru, the Stone Prince, saw something glinting in his eyes, the taste of something sharp still lingering in that smile. She considered all he had said this morning in their bed. “And you have given your loyalty to me?” And to their children.

His smile eased. “My Lady.” He bowed as he offered it.

The bargain was over. The war was truly over. “You were the Sword of Ivrais—” she began, but could not finish.

“My Lady,” he interjected. “I am the Sword. A new bargain has been struck. With my blade and its seven blessings, that are unharmed by cold

or flame, that strikes down spirit or flesh alike, whose aim is true, that cannot be turned aside nor lost.”

It stunned her as she finally grasped what his queen had calculated.

Ishalat shifted her dresses from her lap and laid aside her knife, then stood and went to her husband to take him to her bed. ❧



SHELTER  
CIVILIZED SPECIES

They told a lot of old stories out past the boneyards where humans buried their refuse and their dead. They told stories of the olden days and knights in gleaming ships and dragons riding between the stars, their flames licking the earth and warming our places: city and hearth, home and dark machine heart. They told a lot of stories and Shania listened with the open ears of a child, drinking them in with her dark eyes, and storing them in the secret spaces of her memory.

So when the cities cast her out and rejected her, when she had to scramble into the boneyards to save herself from scavengers and dangerous men—some in uniform, some in no better

uniform than that of the lawless ruffian—she didn't stop there. She kept going. There was shelter beyond the boneyards and civilization beyond the wilderness. It just wasn't human.

---

Gleaming Scales was one of the younger dragons, much less inclined to run off a small stray human shivering in the entrance to his caverns, at least if that human was curled up in a kit-like ball, damp from weather, sleepy, and outside the door as though that human was civilized.

He very carefully evaluated this unexpected guest and even more carefully warmed her with a small puff of breath.

Her eyes blinked open, she stared at him, then she yawned just like the cat one of his neighbors kept for companionship. Then she made a warm, humming sound in her throat that sounded like bones singing, closed her eyes, and went to sleep.

She was such a tiny thing, likely not full grown, and Gleaming decided right then to take care of

the little stray human. He made her a soft bed of the silkiest, gleamingest soft things from his hoard and tucked her in by the fire.

---

No one told him before that the nature of humans. They were as unbidable as cats and clearly as intelligent. She showed affection, the little human he called Bones Sing, curling up against his scales, sometimes cleaning them or scratching an itch too hard for him to reach. She also made herself a nook to cook food in and asked him for things out of his smaller treasure rooms with a gesture or a questioning head-tilt. It fascinated him to watch her put his things to use.

Humans were fascinating. She may have been impossible to order around beyond a few simple things she seemed to agree to rather than just obey, but she wasn't an overly difficult human or too demanding, and he couldn't fathom why the wild colonies, their shining lights in the distance, hadn't wanted her.

He decided to take a visit to the boneyards between and see if there were other stray house humans that needed a warm shelter for the winter.

—

Shania felt and heard herself actually growl when she first saw the bundle of stick and bones that her dragon brought back and set in front of her. He looked at the child that couldn't be older than four or five, then back to Shania, and made a low, whuffling sound. Shania was at least in her early teens before she'd been outcast.

Shania made herself small and reached out to the child, who sniffed, then whimpered.

She grimaced, then carefully brushed back the child's hair and was allowed it.

Shania didn't know by finding her shelter she was signing up to be the host to human guests by a philanthropic dragon, but as more guests came, she found so long as they respected everyone else, she couldn't begrudge them having their needs

met. It wasn't so bad that the dragon looked at her and thought he wanted to help others.

It was mostly when the dragons friends of his own species came through that she made herself scarce. Which was how she found the library.

Books upon books upon books on neat shelves, all written in the Old Tongue. She knew a little, but not nearly enough and here was a treasure trove. Her dragon found her after his party and poked his nose in the great door. Shania very, very delicately turned a page and studied the intricate illustrations of dragon society.

She'd always heard stories of how much like people they were and heard those stories written off as myth. But those myths had always said you could find shelter in their dens if you came with respect and deference and without weapons.

Her dragon tilted his head curiously but let her read, and it didn't feel like a myth at all.

—

Many of the humans scattered whenever Gleaming Scales brought his hulking, fiery presence

back into the home cavern. They weren't unfriendly, but the arrival of a dragon had never been a small thing. He supposed he shouldn't get too attached, considering how many he would give away to a good home, but as he settled down before the fire with a quick renewing breath upon the hearth, there was little Bones Sing, content to stay where she was with the object of her interest—one of Gleaming's books out of the library—and even snuggle warmly into the crook of Gleaming's arm, her customary humming song barely breaking.

Ever since the first time he'd seen her wondering wide eyes and oh so delicate turning of pages on one of the illustrated editions, he hadn't denied her the pleasure of looking.

Bones Sing was the first and, would Gleaming admit it, the best of all the stray humans he had gathered. He thought of her as his own.

From the beginning, she'd often bed down between his claws or in the crook of his arm or snug between his wings, clearly pleased at his natural heat in the winter cold. She bossed about the other humans when they got too rowdy and

he despaired that he would have to try to discipline them. Humans were like the cats they'd once served, utterly unbidable and inclined to do as they pleased. But they would listen to each other, apparently, and establish their own loose pecking order, and Gleaming couldn't help wanting to care for as many of them as he found, house humans cast out by the wild colonies and their fantastic cities built with as much industry as shown by prairie dogs. These didn't build cities, but they filled the caverns with warm chatter as they filled their bodies with the food he provided them and grew strong, instead of wasting away to die.

Gleaming Scales might be convinced to part with some members of his shelter. Other dragons deserved the joy of adopting their own human. But Bones Sing and her humming tunes whenever she was happy, her fierce glares whenever she was chiding a fellow human, and her contented form curled up against his scales when she slept—she was his favorite and so he'd decided not to let her go to anyone else.

He put his snout over her shoulder to see where she was at in the book, and one of her hands came up to rest against him, almost as if to hold him close, but she didn't look up, still humming to herself as she turned the page.

The dragon found himself startled. She hadn't brought one of the illustrated tomes with her to the fire, and she wasn't poring over pictures but words. But of course, it was silly to think humans could read. Maybe she found the script lovely?

But no, she took her time, finger sometimes tracing words across the page as she paused her tune and murmured to herself with her human tongue he could no more understand than she his dragon chirps and roars. Only when she had clearly read the entire page did she turn it again.

Gleaming Scales was thunderstruck. He thought back over the many weeks, the interactions with all the humans he'd taken in, young and old, large and small, and while it was one thing to consider them intelligent, it was another entirely to wonder if they might be people.

He snorted, blowing an unfortunate number of live embers swirling into the air. He looked

down at Bones Sing giving him one of her more skeptical looks. He dipped his head against hers in apology. She patted his scales affectionately and returned to poring over the volume.

Could Flames Excessively have been right?

—

Her dragon was being weird, Shania decided. He was eyeing her book choices suspiciously, testing her food preferences again instead of just handing her cooked meat and letting her add it to the plants and vegetables he knew she picked from the field outside. Come spring, she was going to turn it into a proper garden. He knew she liked to sleep up between his wings where it was safe and warm but suddenly wanted to keep her in sight all the time. The only good thing was he'd stopped trying to bathe her in the big pool at the back, then bake her to get her dry again. Shania may have been young, but she was far too old to get washed up by someone else, even a dragon, and no human wanted to stand in his breath when it went past warm to flames.

She still hadn't solved the problem entirely of communicating, but even he knew what she looked like when she was angry, and that she'd go hide in the little kitchen nook they'd made where he was far too big to fit. She was hiding there now with another book in the Old Tongue and figuring out why humans never knew before that dragons were literate and likely just as sentient as they were.

Her dragon sat his nose down outside of the tiny (to him) doorway leading into the kitchen and whined at her. She hadn't scratched behind his wings in that one spot or sang him to sleep for more than a day now. Because she was avoiding him. He was being weird and watching her all the time like he used to do before they got to know each other.

But finally she sighed, pulled out a big square of paper she'd found in the library and wrote on it in the glyphs she was finally getting the hang of: **LATER.**

She went to the doorway and held it up, and he reared back, clearly surprised, then dropped his head back down again, in that slow way he

had when he was deliberately trying not to startle her, and stared at the makeshift sign with one eye.

He made a little whuffling noise, picked himself up, then trotted away to his private cavern where he hadn't let the humans go. Something about all that gleaming gold back there, she figured. Dragons really were stingy little packrats in love with shiny things. Oh well.

She rolled her eyes and went back to her book.

—

"They're, they're... people!" Gleaming Scales gasped into the phone.

"Calm down," Flames Excessively answered, then sneezed. "Oh dear."

In the background, Gleaming could hear that low muttering sound he associated with less than happy humans.

"You were quite right they make splendid companions," Flames said and sat in the telltale creaking groaning sound of scales and tail beneath the dragon's not inconsiderable weight.

"Just put out my bedspread. Now, what's this about people?"

"She's reading!" Gleaming exclaimed. "And writing!"

"Writing?" Flames' scales creaked again. "Well, that solves the problem of asking her how then."

And of course, Flames Excessively was right. But Gleaming wished he would acknowledge the gravity of upending all existing knowledge of humans. He muttered under his breath and went with a thick stack of plain paper to go make sense of this.

—

It took Shania about two sheets of her dragon's admittedly imperfect handwriting, her muttering about his need to return to finishing school for dragons to fix that, and comparing all the words she didn't understand to others in the books at hand in the library while her dragon stared at her, tail twitching back and forth in excitement.

There were myths among dragons that humans could think and reason, but apparently a wealth

of received wisdom that humans were the former pets of cats, so surely all those stories about dragons and humans exploring the stars together were just that.

Shania laughed. She couldn't help it. Myths on both sides.

CATS?

It was delightful really. Maybe cats had their own language and myths as well.

She wrote again, MY NAME SHANIA.

The dragon plucked the paper from her hand with care in his claws, read, then wrote again in his atrocious handwriting, MINE GLEAMING SCALES. Then he said it in his absolutely impossible mouth.

"Shania." She didn't try to repeat his aloud, and he didn't try to repeat hers, but they had to refill the paper twice and the big bucket and little cup of tea they were drinking from as they passed their notes back and forth all night long.

—

There was shelter out there beyond the bone-yards. Maybe it wasn't human. Maybe it had only been a myth. But this myth came to life. ❧

## YOU HAVE MAGIC

### HIDDEN MAGIC

You're always on the lookout for magical items, especially unusual ones. They're the lifeblood of your small shop at the edge of the living mall where regular humans only wander by fate or by accident and magic-users congregate on any given weekend. So when you hear that mermaids have returned to the lake in the deep woods, you're wrapped up in your invisibility cloak that protects against all weather almost before the words are out of your aunt's mouth.

"It's hardly polite to go haring off like that, Karina," she admonishes.

You nod, nod, gesturing your heeding. "Sorry, Auntie, but mermaids don't stay for long."

An understatement. Not only are mermaids migratory creatures, but freshwater mermaids are amphibious and not bound solely by waterways. Summer's coming and it's going to be hot. No doubt they'll estivate even if they do stick around.

You've never met a mermaid, you remember as you cross brook and stone on your way to the woods, then through them. You've seen one once by the sea, a seawater mermaid that prefers deep waters and barely bothers to come ashore.

Mermaid scales have their uses, and only seawater mermaids have proper scales. Like dragon scales, they heal many ailments and are imbued with magic that does other things beyond healing. But freshwater mermaids have hair that breathes, and thankfully, the hair is as harmless to a mermaid to remove as a scale and grows back quicker.

You hope you find the mermaids, you hope they're familiar with and friendly with humans, and you hope against hope the things you've gathered to trade are of any interest to their kind.

—

She flicks her tail. She's been sunning herself on a rock, and all you can think is she's magnificent. Her hair is thick and red and luxuriously long. Considering it subs in for lungs, that's not surprising and mostly just indicates how old she is. Younger mermaids scramble around the trees surrounding the lake or dive below. The youngest of all still look more like fish than people, but this is clearly a gathering, and you know better than jump into the water and find out how discriminating the children are in their hunger.

She stops and looks at you, head tilting, green eyes almost glowing in the afternoon sunlight, and you catch your breath. She's certainly not a merman, considering the shapely breasts her hair grants modesty to, nor is she any less wise to the ways of human than you are to those of her people.

You raise your trader's flag, set your basket on a rock, and back away with a bowing gesture common to the magic folk.

Her curiosity looks piqued, and with a soft splash, she's in the water, then emerging again directly by the rock you've chosen.

You hold your breath, but she doesn't drag at your feet and feed her siblings. She presses both elbows on the rock and hoists herself halfway out of the water, sets nimble fingers to the basket's fastenings, and roots through your stores.

You're almost certain freshwater mermaids have no use for shells, but you brought some in case it's universal among the merfolk, the seawater mermaids' love for smooth shells and shiny things. You brought real gems, as mermaids are known to trade when friendly. You brought food and bread, magical in their own way, and pearls and various useful things or pretty and a waterproof camera for deep divers. You've heard they've taken to the technology.

She lingers on the camera the longest, a hint of pleasure in the set of her teeth, but in the end, shakes her head and sets it down. She stretches out her hand—you glance at the webbing between her fingers, supposed to have superhuman grip—and beckons to you, smiling with sharp teeth.

You come closer but just far enough away she can't quite touch you without time for you to shield yourself with magic.

She pouts and flirts her tail, tosses her hair. She cocks her head and gestures a question in trader's sign. *What do you want to trade for?*

A friendly. You're grateful for that much, though part of you still feels an insane amount of tension since your familiarity with her kind is secondhand. You sign back. Perhaps speech is taboo? Perhaps she doesn't speak your language? You're not sure so you stick to what she's expressed comfort in. *A few locks of hair, if you can spare them.*

She frowns, looks thoughtful, opens the basket lid again and thumbs the camera. Then shakes her head and closes it. *You*, she says. *Show me around your woods and town.*

You glance at her tail and she laughs a surprisingly bell like sound, then gestures again, eyes dancing and bright. *You have magic.*

Ah. Yes, you do.

You rummage through your cloak's pockets for what you need and pinch a little magic from

the air of the woods, mix it with your homemade bubbles of sweetness and fire, and glow a seeming that could be real but won't last and breathe it over her tail. It shimmers for a moment and then she has legs. You wonder if she'll use words now, but she doesn't.



It feels oddly like a date, being dragged hither and yon, your status as guide notwithstanding, though she clearly has her own money and baubles to spend for the things that catch her fancy. She tries the crepes at the stand near your shop, plays in the fountain for minutes while you distract the local area guard from noticing with a glamour more expensive than the one on her tail, and she laughs as you point out your favorite sites.

She's calm and quiet in the library, as is proper, running one reverent finger over the spines of the books she does not read and peering into several for long minutes before you go.

It's a pleasant day, refreshing in its own way, and she kisses your cheek softly before settling a

few hairs in your hand and returning to her rock as the seeming wears thin. It's time for her to return to the water.

You look at her. She's beautiful, you think, but it's not the way you looked at her the first time, in awe of this creature you barely understand. This time, she's beautiful because you've seen her smile, heard her laugh, felt her hand in yours as she skipped through the fountain spray and twirled on cobbled stones.

You open the basket and press the camera into her hand.

She cocks her head and stares at you, then shakes her head and tries to give it back.

"It's a gift," you say, offering your voice at last. A rare thing for a mermaid. A dangerous thing to give some of them.

But she just looks at you in wonder with those brilliant green eyes, then draws the camera to her chest. She caresses it with one hand, fiddles for a moment with the settings, and raises it. She takes a picture and you think that this is a different, but no lesser, kind of magic. ❧



## FOUR LANDS, ONE HEART

### THE POWERS

#### One. Beloved of the Gods

The blood of priests and oracles ran thick in the royal family. Eleya had wakened from night sweats and visions when she was sixteen seasons old and been delivered to the convent furthest from the Royal City at the Heart of All Things. There she was devoted to the gods, and what has been devoted to the gods should not be taken back again.

“The Plague, my Queen.”

Eleya stared unbowed before the royal messenger, but it was not royalty that stiffened her back but the blood of the heavens within her veins. "I am the tithe."

"The gods wish the tithe to rule."

She spun her staff in her hand and caught down the last of the vines she had been seeking to harvest, delivering it into her basket. The basket tucked up neatly under her arm, the staff in her hand, she turned to go into the convent, one of many outposts of the Order Beloved of the Gods. She paused only once with a glance backward, that the messenger might understand her wish that he follow her.

None left of the First Royal Family but herself? It was unthinkable. They must have sinned greatly against the heavens to be so punished. Her blood burned and leaves in the canopy overhead whispered, but they did not speak to her, and she did not know why this would be.

She chopped and stirred and poured tea and soup before the messenger, ignoring his stiff back, the clear unwillingness to be served by a member of the royal family. 'I am not royal,' she

wanted to tell him. 'I have never been royal.' But it wasn't entirely true. She had a precious few memories tucked away inside her of mother, of another little girl she used to laugh with, something fuzzy that made her think perhaps she had had a brother.

She had delayed studying the sitting crown. It was unworthy of an oracle of the gods to avoid discomfort, but she had sought to avoid other things, like an inappropriate possessiveness of what had once been her own life.

"We have no other tea but the bramble-berry." Eleya had yet to send one of the younger novitiates to the village for more herbs, and the garden had been robbed of all it could produce to stave off Plague in all who asked.

The messenger waved aside her concern, as if for a moment he'd forgotten her new status with her plain speaking. He caught himself, looking mildly appalled.

She tapped the bowl closer to him. "Eat. You need refreshment. Do not make of me something I am not."

He stared at her, suddenly grave, actual emotion and not mere necessity. He had not been trained long enough to be stoic, she considered, but even so, she listened to his words more closely, tasted the regret he imbued them with. “My Queen, I must.”

Her mendicant’s staff leaned by the wall. She could feel the prayers of the young girls filling the convent air upon the hour, as if they were the convent’s breath. Her hands were callused and sun had made her skin and hair sticky with sweat. She stretched her arms in front of her as if to gather or wash or work, and the sigils scrawled across her arms burned.

*Go, queen. Go, queen,* the leaves seemed to whisper through the open windows. The breeze lifted the finer hairs on her arms and at her nape and temples. *Go to the Heart.*

No, she supposed. He must deny her.

“It is not good to snatch back a gift from the gods,” she said.

Eleya had been trained her whole life to serve the heavens. She was not uneducated. There were

sacrifices that could be made to appease them. She sighed. "It is not good."

But she packed her things and went.

—

Eleya was the daughter of the previous Southern Queen. Yet it had been the Northern Queen who'd named her and taught her to listen to the wind. They did not devote their children to the gods in the northern mountains. They kept them close and listened to their counsel, but all of their land was to be devoted in service to their people, to their land, and to their gods.

She packed her things and remembered a braided coil of copper hair she used to clutch in the night whenever visions raised her from the bed. She had no such reassurance now, no one to stand between her and the gods but the most senior oracle at the convent. Eleya was being cast out from the order. She could hardly turn to the oracle now.

She paused in packing the tiny satchel. What need had she had for things before now? She

looked around the cell that had housed her, a stone room just large enough for the smaller dances with a cutout window to allow the winds to enter. The floor was stone beneath a layer of packed dirt that allowed both humility and a comfortable surface for those dances. She'd been expected to leave this room, to sleep in peasant huts, to devote herself to the service of the land, to offer prayers and supplications and prophecies.

Her staff was against the wall and there was still a dark glow to the embers on her hearth. She snatched up the staff, stretched out her arms, and danced and twirled in the small space as her arms burned, sigils slowly glowing brighter as flames burst upon the hearth. She did not sing aloud but formed the verses in her thoughts that would carry her prayers upward.

‘Guide me and show me your will  
through this river of happenings.

‘Do not let me be led astray in the  
twisting of truth or politics.’

Her feet faltered and her cheeks burned as hot as her blood when the gods moved through her limbs. She picked up her pace and added,

‘Choose for me the ones I will  
marry.

‘Let me not be ashamed on my  
wedding night.’

Her dance complete, she dropped to the earth, closed her eyes, and listened to the soft swish of wind through tree branches, to the crackle on the hearth. The flames sputtered and went out.

It wasn't exactly reassuring.

—

The City at the Heart of All Things was not merely a city. It was a sprawling verdant valley at a river's path from the northern mountains and the greater river's path from the western forest. The eastern plains lay to one side of the Heart and spread all the way to the sea. The southern

lands were an archipelago of thousands of islands nestled in a massive bay. The land between the coast and the heart was inhospitably dry, mountainous, and troubled by bandits, lured by the rich trade routes carved into the mountainous land.

Once, almost before Eleya could remember, she had traveled the road from the Heart to the convent in the foothills high above. It was hardly the only order of mendicants or monasteries in the Four Lands, nor was it the only convent of its order, but it was where royal children were taken and gifted when priestly blood expressed in their lines. To say nothing of oracles.

Eleya did not remember the great city walls, the well tilled fields around them, the unending stream of people, foreign and domestic. Even with recent Plague, they could hardly be denied. There would be a royal wedding soon.

“You should be arriving with a procession,” the messenger said glumly.

“Nonsense,” Eleya said coldly, a verbal rap across the knuckles as though he were one of the new supplicants. “It’s safer this way.”

‘Who else would be coming?’ she considered.

People who knew what had become of the royal house, who thought the Four Lands would be weak, and the new Queen easily killed.

Cold swelled in her chest. Better to take precautions. Better to remain unknown. But who could hide from the gods?

## Two. City at the Heart of All Things

There was always the element of balancing political relationships and the intricately woven web of loyalties, rebellions, even small defiances, and having the right lineage in the first place when it came time to evaluate the four royal spouses a new monarch must take.

“The new ruler will be a woman, so we must take men.”

“She’s allowed any proclivities.”

“She was raised in a convent. She was not allowed to have proclivities. Besides, the point of

the spouses are to potentially provide heirs satisfactorily of the blood of all four principalities under her rule, without favoring any. Selecting a female spouse would deprive that principality of any potential heirs.”

The most bookish of their number, rarely drawn into speech, perked up. “Actually, the point is to provide equal *rulership* from each of the—”

“The Southern Isles could use depriving,” another muttered, shutting the mouth of the first abruptly.

“Spoken as an unlearned resident of the Heart. Are you not a scholar?! Do you not stand counsel to royalty?” the Chief Scholar demanded.

His unwise companion shrank before him. “Of course.”

The others remained silent.

“The Northern Wind is far more dangerous, and yet we do not suffer them insult. The Southern Isles bring great wealth to our nation and have thus far missed the Plague. They guard our southern borders and secure a retreat from threats and difficulties that do not visit us so swiftly.”

Truly this plague had come from the gods, to claim the sacrifice of the entire First Family of the Royal House to require this particular ruler to come to the throne. It was a terrible omen.

“The last time the gods required a priest king ushered in a dangerous era with foreign intrigues. We must be united in the face of them. I heard the Northern Wind was also devastated through their royal lines.”

“Oh?” Their most bookish perked up again, more cautiously.

“The first prince remaining must be the ones the gods have marked. Or whoever survived in the midst of that court. Better if it is the same.”

Less room to wonder. Certainty was precious at times like these, when the only certainty that went without saying was that any misstep would have grave consequences.

—

The Four Lands had stood together for centuries, united under the molten metal heart of the City at the Heart of All Things. The northern kingdom

of fire and wind, the western mountains of forest and ice, the eastern plains of iron and breath, the southern isles of stone and sea.

The King or Queen of the heart married the Princesses and Princes of their lands, uniting metal and fire, ice and breath and stone. This had gone on for centuries and generations, and would for centuries and generations more.

“I’m not the Metal Queen,” Eleya pointed out to her Chief Scholar.

“No,” he agreed. “It is acknowledged that the marriage has led to elements intermingling, and every person may be born with any.” He studied her carefully. “But we must choose your husbands to complement your element.”

She scoffed at him with an openness she could not have imagined taking to the Chief Scholar in all the kingdom before she’d been made Queen. It felt like fire ran up her arms under her skin, and when she spoke, her voice was cold and layered. “Let the gods decide.”

He stared at her openly. Had he never heard an oracle speak?

“The gods have chosen whom they will,” she told him coldly. They had taken by Plague any they deemed unsuited. What more did her counselors need to do?

He lowered his head and bowed. “Yes, my Queen.”

—

In the end, that is what they did. They sent to the Principal Houses of the Four Lands and asked they send their first princes of the appropriate lineage. Three were sent. One had already arrived.

—

Tanata had served as a loyal guard throughout the entire spread of the fever. He had been the guard of the middle princess of the royal line, and had remained by her side throughout the plague, guarding her against everything but the gods. The gods came and went and took her with them, leaving Tanata.

With little else to do, he took up with the Palace Guard for daily training and companionship and served within their ranks when asked. He may have been of the first line of the Principal House of the Western Mountains, but he was only the second prince. He had chosen years ago to do his duty and serve in the City of the Heart.

Every Principal Household was supposed to send a younger son to the capital to serve in whatever capacity suited them best. These were not generally the sons most likely to be chosen as Prince over all the Four Lands nor as Prince in the land to the Western Mountains, but Tanata's parents had only brought forth two children, and he assumed one day he would be recalled to serve as Prince in the land.

He did not expect the Royal Counselors to inform him that his father had offered him to the new Queen. His father wished to keep Tanata's older brother by his side, who was more familiar with his own land's ways.

"I am honored, Lord Counselors," he said slowly, "but it is not fitting."

They exchanged glances among themselves.

One spoke, “It is a time of great trials from the gods, and you have always been loyal to the Royal House and to your charge in particular.”

“Yes,” he agreed with a slight nod.

“It is for this reason that the Queen has ordered the will of the gods to stand. You have remained here through the Plague and survived when almost all others fell. You are here and your brother, the Prince in the Second Land, is not. Your Highness, you are chosen of the gods as Prince of the realm.”

He had not wished it, never strove for it, nor reached for it in any manner, but he bowed his head in agreement. If the gods demanded and the Queen decreed, what had he to speak against it?

—

In his first ten seasons, Caedros was just a child, not a prince, not eligible, barely worthy of instruction as he learned only the basics to all children: how to run, laugh, play, speak, feed himself, and trail after sister or mother with a silent tongue as they did business in their court. In the seasons

after, he began to be instructed properly in the ways of the court, given lessons taught to princes, taught to understand his own land and their customs and the laws that governed it. He was a quick learner. By his fortieth season and the tenth annual celebration of his birth, he was declared a worthy eligible member of the Principal Household and a potential marriage partner for the future Queen.

At the time, it meant nothing except that he was to abstain from the attention of women and girls and begin learning the politics and governance of their entire kingdom, not merely the first of the Four Lands, the Northern Wind. It meant nothing because there were cousins and brothers well ahead of him in ranking and skill. He was younger than their seventy to eighty seasons, his voice had not yet deepened, and he still preferred to trail after his sister, the most ferocious and powerful princess his family line had produced in three generations. She taught him how to rule more than any other, and if some thought him too womanly in his manner of command, they did not discover his ire by telling him so.

He was never favored for becoming the Northern Prince in the sacred royal marriage. He was favored for ruling the Northern Wind under the future Prince's authority, and that was what he trained for in earnest. The lessons toward ruling as the Prince himself were a perfunctory addition.

This was never meant to happen. The gods often chose rulers, deposing or claiming the life of one earlier in the hierarchy. It was understood, and Caedros would not have resented it so fiercely if only his older brothers had died, if only his cousins, if only every eligible male in the line ahead of him had died. He wasn't a hundred seasons yet and without those remaining years, he would not be chosen as Prince unless there were no other male of his line available.

But his sister.

He cared for her ceaselessly from the moment the Plague glazed over her eyes and shortened her breath. He stayed by her couch and gave her medicines and comfort, read her the stories she'd once read to him. He had no hope for the men who had taken ill and cared less than he dared

admit. The gods would claim whom they would, but his sister was not eligible, his sister did not stand in the way of the gods' will for succession, so surely his sister could be saved.

That is where Mendit found him, beside his sister's bed in the early morning hours when the entire Principal city around them reeked of illness and death. He had closed her eyes gently, as he had closed their mother's, their father's. Now he could not even see the manservant for the tears that filled his own eyes.

"My Prince."

Not Caedros. Not your Highness. He was alive in the midst of devastation and he had been chosen of the gods to rule.

Never had he hated them more fiercely.

—

The First Prince of the Southern Isles was a scholar at heart. His father had successfully forced him to train in the basic arts of governance, diplomacy, and such physical exercises as swordsmanship and riding, but Sahasarel remained

a scholar, who preferred to learn all he could about the world through books, the people most others wouldn't even talk to, and by getting himself into situations and scrapes anyone else would be wise to avoid.

"Scholar?" The captain scoffed and shook his head. "That boy is a menace and has not a lick of the self preservation any other creature was born with!"

"I won't fall," Sahasarel called down from his happy perch against the mast, half hanging off the crow's nest instead of being sensibly inside it. If the Prince were to fall, the captain would perhaps not be held liable, but the kingdom would be short another ruler, and the lookout made a point of dragging Sahasarel back to safety.

He was sailing to the coast at last, Sahasarel thought happily. He'd been on the isles his entire life and the only time he'd supposedly visited the mainland was in his infancy, so he had no recollection of the event. Now he'd been summoned to the City of the Heart to meet his future spouses in the Royal Marriage, something that had never quite felt real to him.

There had always been a chance someone else would receive the call, based on the Queen's element or the loyalty and defiance and politics demonstrated by those from the Court of the Isles. He'd heard the first of a line had been passed over once from the Court of the Wind, but Sahasarel had apparently been deemed acceptable and chosen.

He wondered what they would be like and what it would be like to be married to more than one person. His father, the Prince in the land, said Sahasarel be joining a harem; his mother merely shook her head, giving his father a warning look that implied such a statement was bad politics. The books all agreed it was a political arrangement devised to ensure the equality of all Four Lands, except those books given to rhetoric or propaganda, where the marriage was described rather mystically.

He was sure the truth was somewhere between all, and he was eager to find out for himself.

—

The message that came to the Court of the Plains was simple, and the Principal House wasted no time consulting oracles or counselors. The Prince in the land went out into the courtyard where his eldest son was overseeing the training of new guardsmen, and told him he would leave in the morning for the City of the Heart.

Nirune canted his head obediently and returned to watching the trainees. No one had a better eye for a bad apple than Nirune, so his father left him to it.

They came to the City at the Heart of All Things, and the palace of the Royal House received them.

### Three. Patterns in the Winds

The Northern Prince was about what they'd expected, slight of build and almost delicate in appearance, with fair skin like morning clouds

and blue eyes like chinks of sky, narrowed at them in wary distrust. That delicate look, those airy features had always been deceptive, and even the most coddled royalty of the first of the Four Lands had an uncanny ability to survive.

“You have always been loyal to the Crown.”

Never mind that he had always been a member of the Crown, though a lesser one.

“I have,” he said, accent lilting softly over otherwise familiar words. He did not bother to use higher than casually polite speech. While they usually received honorifics and formality, he was royal, about to be Prince in the sacred royal marriage, and they may have been high-ranking members of the Royal Council, but he could speak to them as dogs and only the Queen herself could tell him no.

They did not address it. “Forgive us, Prince. Our land is vulnerable in this time, with so many lost to the gods.”

“Taken,” Caedros said in a low tone. “Taken by the gods.”

This made them tremble. They were hardly words to be spoken, and not at all to a vessel of the gods, devoted to them in her youth.

“The Queen—”

“Did she send you?”

They could yet select another, but no. This was the one whom the gods had marked. They would invite disaster to choose anyone else.

“No, Prince. She is resting in her quarters.”

—

The Queen was not resting.

She had rested when she was brought into the capital city, she had rested after being fed as she had been instructed, she had rested and allowed servants to bathe her in the evening as she bit her tongue on many complaints against it.

‘It is not good to be served too readily,’ she had been taught all her life, but Eleya was no longer an oracle cast out from the Royal House. Her blood had come back her, and she struggled to adapt to it.

There had been a certain rhythm to her days. Rise early before the first rays of the sun to sing her prayers and let it find her working to draw water, to cut the morning meal and pour the

morning cup, opening her heart to any word that came to her. After the sun, she served those who had come in the night to the convent in need. There would be time yet to go out into the surrounding villages come afternoons after the lessons she taught the youngest girls, not even novitiates yet, merely devoted by their parents to the gods.

There were the members of their order who took seasons for travel and returned to teach during the long summers or the longer winters. Eleya was a winter mendicant and a summer teacher, leaving her available when the royal messenger came to find her.

The palace at the City at the Heart of All Things was of as ancient stone as the convent, though the sun seemed to gleam less warmly and the wind bit with less cold.

She rose early, without thought to what would be expected of her because she knew nothing else. She looked in the wardrobe, full of fine gowns from dead relatives, not yet fitted to her, and closed it again. Eleya found her simple oracle's robe and pulled the rough cloth over her

body, tied the rope tight around her waist, wound her wrists with the protective cloths, and took up her staff as though she still had the right to it.

Once devoted to the gods, one could not simply be taken back again.

She went out into the courtyard like that and settled with the solid ancient wall of the palace against her back to watch the guards at their training.

One of the pairs in particular caught her eye, and she watched them for a while as they crossed swords with no small skill, their strokes swift and sure. It was pleasant to watch them, as pleasant as watching her sisters in the dance when they lifted their staves before the gods.

“That is Tanata of the Western Mountains, my Queen,” said the softspoken guardswoman materializing at Eleya’s side. “And Bastos of the Eastern Plains.”

“You are faithful,” said Eleya. She thought she had left the bodyguard behind.

The woman only inclined her head. “I have devoted myself in service.”

Eleya felt the pang of such a declaration. She had once done the same. Or been devoted, not that the difference mattered a great deal to a girl of sixteen seasons.

One guard struck the other sharply, and Tanata drew back, with a hiss, bright blood spattering on the ground between them. They saluted each other and parted. A spar to first blood then. Eleya had seen such before.

She approached the bench where Tanata dropped, cradling his sliced hand, and ignored the shadowed footsteps of her guard behind her. “Will you?” Eleya asked, hand outstretched, oracle sigils visible upon her arms.

He saw them, warm brown eyes widening slightly, and nodded shortly, holding out his hand for her to her clean and knit the wound closed with a soft humming tune to the gods.

“Anessa,” he nodded at her bodyguard.

Anessa nodded back. “This is the prince of the first line, my Queen,” she added softly.

Eleya’s hand froze on Tanata’s. Tanata’s face startled almost blank.

“My Queen,” he said abruptly, recovering himself enough to incline his head to one of higher rank, not an equal, not an oracle.

Eleya almost regretted it, almost chided Anessa for the interference, but she couldn’t because she too had benefited from the revelation to know that this was one of the men she would marry.

He was among the Guard. “Be careful whom you fight,” Eleya said. She finished tying off the small bandage and released him. He was not just a guard now but a Prince of the realm.

“My Queen.”

There was something in his tone, question or protest, *something*, and she found the words welling up again on a burning wave of heat. She spoke again with the layered voice of an oracle. “Be careful, Prince, whom you take swords against.”

He stared at her. He knew the sound of the gods on her tongue, had heard an oracle before, with the way his expression shifted to resigned, to understanding, to dutiful. He bowed his head before her. “Yes, my Queen.”

It was pleasant in the courtyard and she fell to watching the guardsmen train. Tanata did not leave her, and it only occurred to her much later that perhaps it was because she had not dismissed him. There were points of royal etiquette she'd never had need to acquire before. When she had questions, he would answer simply and clearly. It was a pleasant way to pass the morning.

"You seem loyal," she noted. "Few remained through the entire Plague at the threat of their own lives."

"How do you know I did, my Queen?"

"You've not just arrived."

And he hadn't. He was as comfortable here as the Swordsmaster training new recruits in the corner of the yard. He only shot her a puzzled glance but acknowledged the truth of it with a gesture.

Eleya could hardly help falling into her own habits of picking patterns from the winds, the leaves, the clash of wood and steel around them, the stance and steps of each person near, the way their eyes spoke, and she turned to Tanata in surprise as she realized the difference in the quality

of his appreciation as he looked at her or the women fighting as opposed to the men. It was a subtle thing but blatantly present in the patterns he wore.

“You’re not particularly attracted to women,” she said, only a faint hint of questioning in it. It was an observation rather.

He stiffened and set his jaw firmly. “I am loyal, my Queen.”

Eleya frowned, not understanding his meaning at all. “I know,” she said.

Tanata opened his mouth, shut it, tried again. “I know my duty to the marriage bed.”

Eleya felt the blood rush to her cheeks and opened her own mouth before shutting it. She had little deference in her body, but to discuss sex so brazenly with her own future spouse was somewhat outside of she had intended. She sighed and set herself to it. “I’m sure we both do,” she answered ruefully and was surprised to see him smile.

“It can’t have been something you’d planned for,” he commented, casually, in a manner not requiring an answer.

“You’ll not be required to offer duty to me but once,” she added. “Nor I to you.”

“I cannot take a lover, my Queen.”

Eleya stared at him. Lovers were not unheard of in the noble ranks, though it was said the gods frowned on those who were married taking them, and would show their displeasure to a member of the royal marriage who did so. But surely, Tanata didn’t think he would have no options. “Are all men so dense? You will have three husbands.”

He seemed taken aback. “*You* will have three husbands.”

“Four actually,” including Tanata, “but it doesn’t work like that. It is one marriage,” she reminded him. “I’m sure at least one of them will be amenable.”

The bodyguard coughed lightly behind Eleya, a gentle warning that she had crossed the bounds of propriety at last.

Eleya sighed and rose to her feet as Tanata rose with her.

“I apologize. It grows late,” she offered, a polite excuse allowing an end to their interchange. “May the gods smile on your afternoon.”

He looked at her oddly.

She wondered why it would puzzle him, then decided it must have been the greeting of an oracle and not a common greeting as she expected.

“And on yours,” he replied.

Though it was sincere, it wasn't the right answer, and she was surprised to find that hurt.

—

She went in to lunch that would be served to her, made for her, that others would clean up after, and thought to herself that Tanata was firm and strong and the roots of his duty had grown deep.

The Stone Prince. Typically, it was the blood of the South associated with stone, and she had once been called a stone daughter, for her own mother was born of the Isles.

Eleya did not know her own element. She knew that the fire of the gods had taken root in her arteries, that the breath of their dances sang in her flesh, and the ice of their words had glowed on her tongue. She was not the Metal Queen, though she'd been born in the Heart. She was not

the Stone Queen. Though her mother was of the Isles, her mother was not of stone and neither was Eleya. All of her ice and fire and breath came straight from the gods and not her own body.

Her arms itched to dance, but she quelled their hunger and entered the dining hall where she would slake a more physical thirst.

“The Princes have arrived, my Queen,” said the Chief Scholar. “Would you like them to join you?”

She stared at him, considered her state of dress, her blunders earlier, and shook her head, drawing her composure back around herself again. “Perhaps at dinner.”

—

After lunch, she located the library and set herself to the many piles of books left her by her counselors—ledgers of the kingdom’s state of affairs, minutes of the many gatherings of council, statistics of those taken in the Plague. She frowned over patterns and listened to the silence of gently shifting leaves in the wind outside the open windows.

This work was new to her, but if she would be made ruler, then she must prepare herself to rule and surround herself with wiser minds than her own, with strong husbands to rule their own lands, and never forgot to obey whatever the gods might speak through her.

She would be Queen. The idea was difficult to wrap her mind around. She needed to absorb different details from the books before her than she would have if she had been merely an oracle in the Royal House, a path she'd rejected only because it would draw her too close again to her former life. Perhaps she had been hasty. Perhaps the gods would not have taken everything if...

Eleya sighed and leaned back her head to banish the idle, distracted thoughts from her mind.

That is where she was when Caedros found her.

The royal bodyguard beside the desk and the clothes her maidservants had dressed her in made it clear who she was, and he had barely entered the room before he bowed before her and seemed about to withdraw.

But he was also clearly of the Northern Wind, dressed still in the manner of his land, his indifferent formality to any but her an indication of high rank. If he was not the Prince, he had arrived with the Prince, but there was no doubt in her mind who he was.

“You don’t have to go,” she said. “There’s room for two to be in here.”

He paused, eyes so startling blue as he followed the path of her sigils, still visible even in the proper dress. For a moment, Eleya wondered if she should wear sleeved gowns, but it was summer and she had no wish to hide herself.

Instead, she answered warily his unspoken question, “I am an oracle of the Order of the Beloved of the Gods.”

“You speak for them?” he asked, gaze rising again to her face.

She shrugged. “When they choose to occupy my tongue. Otherwise, no.”

Something complicated filled out the tensions surrounding him, as if a bright flare of fury and a sigh of relief comingled in his reaction.

She kept her head up, feeling the desire to understand what it was she sensed. “Are you the Prince?”

“Of the Northern Wind,” he supplied. “My name is Caedros.”

“Eleya,” she answered back.

“The Queen?” he asked, politeness to a superior in the way he said it.

She hesitated, then acknowledged, “Yes, they have made me queen.”

An odd look in his eye again mixed emotions, as if perhaps he understood her but resented her all the same.

“I suppose I represent unpleasantness to you,” she offered.

The grim way he frowned indicated she had guessed correctly. “You represent the gods.”

“And yet, I am also at their mercy.” She rested her chin on her hand. “It is not wise to grow angry with the gods.”

“They are capricious,” Caedros said, “but do not tolerate it in their worshippers.”

She didn’t like the taste of that. It was odd how she couldn’t put her finger on it. Caedros

could have been fire, could have been ice. His resentment had not yet cooled to smoldering embers, but there was a certain coldness to his voice and demeanor and patterns that told her he would not be so easy to forge friendship with as Tanata, who did not resent being tied to a wife even when he had no desire for one.

Eleya chose her words carefully, and if they came from a lifetime of training in such matters, so be it. “The gods are not capricious,” she said slowly. “They do not follow our ways.” And she knew their ways. She knew why it was little comfort to their people that the gods should consistently follow their own.

“You are saying it was not caprice that my sister is dead?” He leaned against a bookcase, an interested look on his face. He was resentful but not of her personally. She was merely a welcome and convenient object for the anger he could not safely direct at its true target.

Even so, a bitter heat rose up in her own words at those. “At least you were the last of your line, not your entire house.”

There were still princes and princesses of the Northern Wind, even within the direct line from previous rulers. The only princes and princesses of the Heart that remained were of secondary lines from siblings and cousins of the direct lineage. No one would take back a sacrifice to the gods when there was any other option considered better, of either gender.

But Caedros clearly knew which royal daughter she was. “I knew them all. I was raised with them,” he said. His voice was even but his eyes held such cold anger.

He thought her loss not personal.

“You think because I was sent away at a young age that I did not have reason to care?” Eleya felt her arms burning, her eyes stinging, but no cold words in her throat. This anger was her own. “Everyone I have even remembered loving is dead,” she said. “This does not please me.”

They understood each other, but they could not say they liked each other.

—

Dinner was not a pleasurable affair, though it was not a complete disaster. She was struck favorably by the eager interest of Sahasarel of the Southern Isles in everything different about the City from his own homeland. Sahasarel was eminently Southern, straight as an arrow with burnished skin and long dark hair, only hers was braided in the manner of an oracle and Sahasarel's was tied back simply in the manner of the Isles. Tanata turned out to be an enjoyable conversationalist, offering answers and details to Sahasarel and the occasional warning when appropriate. Nirune of the Eastern Plains was quiet almost to a fault, but he seemed to miss nothing. Caedros was polite and had plenty of stories to keep Sahasarel occupied.

For herself, Eleya became as quiet as Nirune, listening and sensing the swirling patterns around her. They had yet to coalesce into a single weave between people who would bind their lives together.

Their journeys to the Heart had been uneventful, the weather was not cursed by the gods, and only her House and Caedros' had fallen to

the Plague. The other Houses were respectful but did not share their upheaval.

They were all strangers, and she was strange to this life and the task of ruling. She excused herself at the end of the meal without staying to socialize further as she should

Instead, she passed through the antechambers to her rooms, ordered the maidservants to stay in the antechambers, clambered out of a dress too complicated for her, and curled up in the bottom of the wardrobe like it was a prayer closet and finally wept for all the things she could never change.

#### Four. Consummation of the First Land

The Queen's bedchamber was opened and aired through the day as the servants cleansed it from top to bottom. The Queen herself was not allowed within during the process. Eleya tried to occupy

herself by moving upward through the castle's once familiar halls towards a destination she could not remember.

So much of this long-lost home was utterly forgotten to her.

"My Queen." The Prince of the Southern Isles looked startled, dark eyes widening, even darker finer hair than hers blowing loosely in the wind that wound through this tower's open windows.

Eleya gestured for him to continue as he was and sat beside the window. *This* place stirred memory within her. The view of the castle environs below, the soft cat purring in a sunny corner, the sparse furnishings of the observatory. It wasn't the same cat, but somehow she knew there had always been one here.

After a moment, the prince, Sahasarel, relaxed again.

"The consummation of the First Land is tonight."

He turned toward her, caution in his movements and expression. "Yes, my Queen."

“We will be married properly.” She looked back.

Sahasarel, of all the princes, seemed the least weary, of duty, the gods, death, and least experienced in the ways of men and women who were to be married. Other than Eleya herself of course. She could hardly be expected to become very experienced in such things spending nearly one hundred and fifteen seasons in chastity she’d anticipated being permanent.

He looked at her with those soft wide open eyes that always seemed so innocent and welcoming. “Yes, my Queen.”

“Does it bother you?” she asked candidly, more candidly than could ever be considered proper. But oracles were trained in etiquette of a different nature than most. They were the only ones allowed so many liberties with politeness.

But Sahasarel only shook his head. “I was raised with the understanding I might marry the Queen one day.”

She paused and tasted that, considered a girl in her sixteenth season delivered screaming from her mother’s warm arms to the cold welcome of

the convent. She had found belonging there in time, found it not so cold, even burned with not unwelcome heat when the sigils ran down her arms and gods opened her mouth to speak their cold, layered voices over hers.

The question bubbled up despite herself. “Did you ever have a choice?”

He seemed surprised, but surprisingly free of bitterness when he answered, “No.”



By the time evening fell, she had been returned to the chambers of the First Princess, not those of the Queen. They bathed her in warm baths and cool, dried her skin and perfumed it. She shivered more from the unfamiliar floral scent permeating her skin than from the coolness of the evening air. She had not been raised with finery.

“My Queen,” the maidservants murmured, and she let them do as they asked, let them stretch and comb out her hair and weave gold thread into her braid. She let them bind her waist and privates with soft garments, then slip a soft undergown

over the top and pluck at the lace until it sat right. She let them pull an overdress of green and gold and white over her head and shoulders and arrange it against her body until she looked like one of the fine ladies of the Royal House she'd never been allowed to become.

They trimmed her nails and softened her skin with oil, smoothed over her complexion with powders, colored her lips with the simplest, most innocent of shades, the one nearest her own.

"What is it like," she asked them, for she knew no one else to ask, "to lie with a man?"

The maids exchanged glances, but the eldest sat down opposite her and took her hand. "It will be your first time. You must be patient. It might not be pleasant."

"But it might be," lilted the voice of the one straightening Eleya's hem. "Best lay I ever had was new to the whole thing, but teachable."

"I cannot teach him anything," Eleya said quietly, her eyes dropping to study that hem and the gold slippers another maid had brought her to wear.

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong,” said the younger one. Younger than the first, but not young as Eleya. “No one knows your body but you.”

She asked more questions. They gave answers. Her whole body trembled with nerves she had not felt before. It wasn’t like the Prince of the Northern Wind actually wanted her at all.

—

The room was not so much changed. It was clean and beautiful, more adorned than it had been before. Incense filled the room with scent, the hearth blazed with fire, and light glowed from sconces along the wall. The bed was without coverlet, only sheets beneath where they would lie down, and there was a large space on one side for their other spouses to stand witness. A small ornate jar on the nightstand held oil.

It was warm in the room, almost too warm for the dress she wore, and certainly pleasant along the exposed parts of her skin. Her hair began to cling to her neck at her nape. There was a reason

for all this, that all members of the royal marriage were obligated to take part in each land's consummation, that they would be accountable in each other's eyes and not just to the examiners who would later view the unwashed bedding.

It could all be embarrassing to Eleya if she allowed it, but she had been bathing naked with her sisters from their cold cistern, and while modesty was a required virtue, she had never been raised with or among men to develop a shyness toward them. Even so, she had never been naked before a man, and no one had ever prepared her to marry one, let alone four.

Sahasarel of the Southern Isles, Nirune of the Eastern Plains, and Tanata of the Western Mountains had arrived a little before her and gathered near the hearth where it was clearly set with chairs and comfortable leaning spots should someone prefer to stand. She waited a moment in the center of the room, taking a moment to look at them before everything that would follow. Sahasarel persisted in seeming so innocent to her eyes, talking lightly with the other two but no tension in his body or more than a friendly smile when she

had entered. Nirune remained quiet and withdrawn, a mystery to her, firelight glinting off his hair, his seat well positioned to miss nothing and but saying little. Tanata was as practical and level-headed as ever in his conversation, but he looked at her with knowing eyes. He was not so nervous as she, but he was quite as aware of their purpose for being here.

Caedros entered without her noticing. He was not there, then he was, beautiful as ever, features almost too fine for a man's and his face was set with determination if not pleasure.

He paused when he reached her, the first look of softness she thought she had seen in his eyes. "This is your first time."

But she only raised her eyebrows. "From what I understand, we should all be virgins," she reminded him. As soon as the future heir was set, those eligible of the opposite gender in the Principal Houses were obliged to abstain from relations until it was known whether they would be chosen for the royal marriage.

Caedros shrugged. She followed the shift of his cloak with her eyes. "The eligible princes of

their house may not lie with women until the royal marriage has been made.”

It gave her pause. It was quite specific. “And you kept the law as stated?”

Sahasarel looked confused at the question, but Nirune looked up sharply. Tanata was very quiet. It was no secret to her that Tanata preferred men in the first place.

“The Northern Wind keeps the traditions and laws of the Principal Houses,” Caedros answered, sidestepping the particulars but clear enough. It wasn’t his first time in someone else’s bed, only in hers.

“Would you like me to call up one of the others to share our bed?” she asked slowly. Maybe it would be easier if there was another man, as he was used to, but he shook his head.

“We do this as tradition states. We keep the traditions and laws of the Principal Houses.”

Eleya felt the patterns in his words, the set of his jaw. Tradition meant something to him, beyond merely the requirements set upon the principalities to follow it. “Very well,” she agreed.

There was nothing more to wait for, to talk about. She let down the thick braid of her dark hair until it fell like a curtain between her and the sight of her many husbands. But there she stopped. It was not her place to undress herself.

It was Nirune who gently but deftly unfastened her overdress as her heart beat too quickly and his fingers were rough where they met her skin. If he was a scholarly prince, he must always be found with a pen in his hand, but she suspected he was more a prince who worked among his people, who served them.

He removed the soft undergown and she found her face heating under his gaze and the way Sahasarel turned his own face away with a blush. Not just from her but from Caedros. Tanata had finished undressing the Prince of the Northern Wind and they both stood bare before their husbands.

She found her voice then. "You should look, Sahasarel. He is your husband, not only mine. I am your wife, not only his."

Caedros looked at her as the other two withdrew, and she found while she was aware of the

three besides, she could not break gaze with the prince of the First Land nor the way he seemed to breathe a little more shallowly as he took in her body. She wasn't especially beautiful, not slender or delicate or without blemish or scar, but she was not ugly either, merely plain. Yet he seemed to not find her wanting.

Caedros, though, was as beautiful as his face. It was clear in his body that he was as active as Sahasarel was scholarly and he moved with grace and poise she could only ever find when she was dancing.

She sat on the bed and he gently laid her back. He didn't want her or love her, but he was a man and she was a woman and they were married, so he touched her and let her run her own hands over his shoulders as he kissed her with a warmth that made her melt.

She was naked and he was touching her, palm warm against her hip, leg brushing up against the inside of hers, his neck under her own hand, responding as she drew him closer.

Sahasarel made a small noise of surprise, as if he'd discovered arousal as surely as she just had,

and Caedros drew back startled. He pressed a kiss to Eleya's shoulder and she couldn't help but think it was an excuse to hide his face from those watching.

"Do you like being the center of attention?" she whispered against the side of his face.

A shudder ran through his whole body. "I do not."

What an unusual trait for a prince. "You seem young," she commented. It was barely fair. She was older than she ought to be for the marriage of the royal heir, though not for becoming queen, and she already knew he wasn't quite of the age considered appropriate to become ruling prince, but he was definitely an adult.

He pulled his head up to look at her, amused and huffy in equal measure, not so self-conscious. "I'm not so young as I look."

"What? Are you a hundred seasons old?" she asked, raising another eyebrow.

"Not quite a hundred," he admitted. A faint red flush spread across his cheeks.

Oh. She hadn't expected it, nor the sudden rush of heat through her chest. She wanted to see

that flush chase down his limbs and she pressed her own face to his shoulder, hands running down the strength in his arms. “You are beautiful,” she said softly. She peeked up from his skin to see his face.

His eyes widened in surprise, seeming bluer and brighter, then his blush dulled and she could see wariness gleaming in his eyes, but he did not stop touching her, running fingers warm over her breast, making her breath catch in her lungs. Untrusting of compliments, but generous in return.

It was easy to get lost in the heat of his breath on her shoulder, her neck, the warm pressure of his kisses. She turned her head to grant him better access and saw her other husbands, accidentally locking gazes with Nirune, who stared back with such intensity, she felt like he could feel her patterns as an oracle, feel what she was feeling, missing nothing of the sensations incited by Caedros’ hand on her thigh, his mouth on her collarbone, his fingers sparking pain and pleasure as he teased her nipple. It made her face heat and a sudden nervous flutter settle in her belly as she squirmed beneath each touch of Caedros’

skin, everywhere Nirune's gaze wandered. She could just see Sahasarel staring as if he could not bear to look away.

She could understand the urge to look elsewhere. She closed her eyes for just a moment to feel the heat sparking in her body before opening her eyes and urging Caedros to his back so she could press her own hands to his skin, straddle him between her legs, and feel his hardness and strength beneath her as they moved. He let her take the top, a sharp grin on his face, hands pressed down on her thighs.

She had seen a cock bare before but not erect, and seeing his standing upright, flushed and damp, made her want to touch and maybe even taste. Her cheeks burned, her sigils were cool, and she leaned down to take what kisses she could as she copied Caedros' hands from earlier. He traced shivery, meaningless patterns on her hips, holding her as she touched his neck, his shoulders, traced over his chest and teased as he had her, then groaned when his fingers slipped between her legs. She ran her hand gently over his cock, studying the signs of pleasure on his face, then gripped

more firmly and watched him bite his lip with a soft hiss.

His fingers were inside her, feeling her out in ways that made her skin burn with want and hunger for more. She tried moving her own up and down his shaft, and for a second, his face contorted with pleasure, then he pulled out to cover her hand with his and guide her in how to do it. A firmer grip, more sureness in his touch until it bled over into hers.

“If you want to do it this way,” he said, “use the oil.”

Eleya drew back, hands falling to his hips as she straightened. “How am I supposed to do it?” she asked with a frown. This way, that way. Even after asking dozens of questions about sex, she didn’t know nearly enough.

Caedros gripped her hips then and adjusted her position above him. He ran one hand down over her pelvis and the inside of her thigh again, provoking a whimper she couldn’t hold back, then guided her over him slowly.

“Oh,” she breathed, without any real words for the feeling of him pushing inside with his

cock and not his hands, of the fullness stretching her open. She pressed both hands to his chest and slowed them even further.

He let her, following her pace until finally he was fully inside her, flushed red and a look of desire in his eyes.

The slightest rock of their hips set off a wave of sensation, discomfort mingled with pleasure. “Wait, stop,” she whispered, a shudder running through her.

There were his hands on her hips again, hot and firm, holding her still.

She opened her mouth against his skin to taste against the line of his neck and shoulder. When she lifted her head, a flush had bloomed across his cheeks and ran down almost to his chest.

She waited for the feeling of their joining to not be so thick and awkward, until she was warm and full and it felt good with him inside her. “Caedros,” she whispered, fingers curling, and he seemed to hear her unspoken question and moved, rocking gently up into her, setting off ripples of pleasure.

“May we come closer?”

She had not expected the question, and it almost startled her. It was Sahasarel’s voice, and she swallowed at the idea of it, of him coming closer with that fascinated expression he so often wore, his exploratory nature being applied to her and Caedros in this moment.

Caedros had said nothing, and when her eyes moved to his, he seemed to be waiting without expression, but for the edge of tension in his face, the soft way each breath panted out of him. She tucked her fingers into his hair and he suddenly met her gaze with sharp focus, then realizing what she was asking him, his eyes widened and cheeks flushed pink. He glanced away to one side, but he did not deny her.

After a long moment, she answered, “Yes.”

She did not like to be the center of attention, she decided, but this, the weight of her husband’s gazes heavy upon her; this, the shivery sensation of being watched by them; and this, the heat sparking in her belly with the weight of Caedros hands, every minute shift within her, the taste of each kiss he bestowed on her: this she liked very much.

Their rocking motion went on for minutes more, his fingers sliding over her skin like bright flames of heat. He thrust in harder, sharper, and she gasped at the radiating pleasure, her breath caught on a whimper. He stared at her like seeing her for the first time.

“My Queen,” he said, voice rougher and softer than she’d heard it before, as if all this was fraying at his edges like it was hers.

Even so, she corrected him. “Eleya. In my bed, call me Eleya, not queen.”

But the brief moment of openness vanished from his eyes. “Not everyone wants such intimacies.”

She stared at him, gritted her teeth, and ground down against him, punching a startled breath out of his mouth. “Then call me nothing,” she said.

And he didn’t. They exchanged no more words as their pace grew frenetic and their movements jerky. She could see the need in his eyes and the want in that of her other husbands’, Tanata watching Caedros as if he could hardly help himself and wished he could, Nirune watching her with the same sense of intent observation he’d

displayed earlier, saying nothing and reacting little, and Sahasarel watching them both with the fascination she'd expected, following every slide of hands, every snap of hips, and fixing themselves on Caedros' face when he hit his climax.

She felt the wet heat filling her with his release and hid her face and muffled groan against his neck. His fingers were still on her, just above where their bodies met, and then he found her clit and she cried out, helpless against the tide of pleasure that washed through her, leaving her shaking behind it as it ebbed.

When the euphoria faded, she became aware of how hot and damp with sweat her skin was, almost dripping under her hair, and the strange sticky sensation of his semen on her thighs as he withdrew. She felt the sudden ache of emptiness without him and a sort of boneless limp feeling that she'd thought physical exertion no longer gave her.

Being undressed before them, by them, had been one sort of feeling of vulnerability, but she found it disconcerting as she blushed, shuddering, at the sensation of Tanata gently washing her

down with a cloth, pulling her forward and holding her hair to get her back and nape, swiping over her ribs and belly and under her breasts, gently lingering between her legs where the mess was worst. She wanted to shut her eyes against it, but she had never shut her eyes against anything since she became an actual oracle in truth not merely training, and she studied her husband as he worked, tucking her fingers in against his hair.

It didn't light a fire in her belly like when Nirune had slid her clothes slowly from her body, but that was probably a good thing. Tanata wasn't looking at her like Nirune had. Even so, it was intimate in a way difficult to ignore.

She turned her head to watch Sahasarel washing Caedros, sneaking peeks at Tanata every so often as if he'd never done such a thing before and wanted to get it right. It was endearing. Caedros' face held a soft expression that seemed to agree.

"Sleep now," Nirune said quietly as he drew the thick coverlet over them that had been absent before. His voice was low and deep, and Eleya shivered in its warmth.

She closed her eyes and slept.



Eleya had long been used to rising early, before the sun, that she may begin her duties before it found her. Tendrils of sunlight had curled around the edges of the heavy curtains and cast their glow on the bed by the time she opened her eyes.

She'd never in her memory woken up so warm, tucked into Caedros' arms, his breath hot against her temple. She pulled back enough to prop herself up on one elbow beside him and look at his sleeping face. He looked as relaxed as she felt, her body unable to grasp its usual tension, his face finally free of that resentful, if well hidden grief.

His eyelashes fluttered softly and she stared at it, fascinated, then his eyes came open and focused on her.

"We should get up," she said quietly, as much to herself as to Caedros.

He gave off the impression of faint puzzlement with a slight shift of his brows, then amusement in the quirk of his mouth. "It isn't wrong for the sun to find you sleeping," he said just as quietly.

“The sun prefers to look upon an industrious people,” she said absently. It took no thought to repeat the mantra of years.

“A people yes,” he agreed easily and that made her listen to the rest. “Not a particular person.”

For a moment, Eleya considered it, then she slipped out of his arms and out of the bed and didn’t listen so closely to the sigh that followed her.

She couldn’t reach for her oracle clothing this morning, and she tried sorting through the ridiculous pile of underclothes. How many pieces of white fluff was one woman supposed to wear? Her maidservants had put it all on her the first time, and she’d been too distracted by her nervousness to consider learning how it was done.

By the time she’d gotten to frowning at the undergown and overdress, Caedros was fully dressed. He put one hand to her shoulder in a brief, gentle touch. “Here.” He deftly pulled the clothes over her limbs and arranged them, fastening ties at her back with an ease that made her wonder if he’d been truthful about never sleeping with women before.

“You’re quite skilled,” she said evenly, ruthlessly suppressing any bite from her voice.

Caedros’ fingers paused. He smoothed out the last bit of collar with thoughtful slowness. “I was my sister’s favorite sibling,” he said at last. “She’d have me help her with this part.”

“Not servants?” Eleya turned. He had much more understanding of this world she’d found herself in, but she thought the servants universal.

He smiled, but there was no pleasure in the smile. “My sister was favored to rule the land. She preferred to keep the servants to a minimum.”

It hadn’t saved her.

Eleya nodded. “Thank you,” she said.

There was no hostility in the way he put a hand to the small of her back to lead her toward the doors and soon after breakfast. “Shall we?”

## Five. The Second and Third Lands

Tanata rose early most mornings, except on the rare annual holidays he'd always been granted leave for. He'd been trained in the Guard since he was a young boy, newly arrived from the mountains. One didn't laze around in bed or in the courtyard. Too young to fight, there were errands to run, messages to carry, armor and weapons to polish and care for. Too old to scramble about, there was training and light duty shifts until the day there was the strength to stand in the Guard.

He tried not to think about the night ahead of him, even knowing that this gentle reprieve in the mornings when he could remain in his old life, would soon be gone. Right now, he still looked like a bodyguard with his dark fitted leather armor and short hair cut same as anyone else. People hadn't seen him hold audiences, nor stand in the Court of the Heart, so they did not know his change in station.

He breathed deep of the morning breezes, in, out, hoping for serenity to return to his steps within his chosen duty as it always had.

That's where Nirune found him, studying him with an intensity that made Tanata think of the sun beating down from the sky, inescapable and palpable. He was all angles and sharp lines, sturdy where Sahasarel was fine-featured, hair longer than Tanata's but short in the manner of those of the middle lands. With his quiet manner, he should have been invisible; instead he stood out for reasons inexplicable.

"Come, spar," Tanata said, in lieu of a proper greeting.

It was easier than asking Nirune what it was he saw when he studied them so closely, saying nothing at all. It was easy to understand Caedros, who radiated grief and anger in the wake of the loss of his line. It was easier still to understand Sahasarel who had been so sheltered in the hope of shepherding him alive to this day that he resembled nothing more than an eager young recruit, blind to the pain waiting in the life ahead.

Nirune was silent yet present in a way that didn't quite speak of the watchfulness of the Guard or of holding vigil, and Tanata did not find understanding nearly so simple.

Nirune looked at him for a moment, seeming almost puzzled, then took up a training sword from its place among the equipment and breathed in properly as if he'd been trained to this from his thirtieth season or sooner. Perhaps he had.

His stance was solid and when Tanata circled him warily, Nirune moved with him.

They sparred. It was a revelation, that he and Nirune could be so in tune with each other. Neither won nor lost, they simply brought steel against steel, blade against blade, pitting body and strength and strategy against the other to find a perfect equal. It brought warm pleasure in Tanata's heart, something that felt natural and right in the middle of everything that didn't.

When he pulled back from the fight, he found he was grinning. When he looked at Nirune's face, he found his pleasure mirrored there.



The second night, Eleya was more sensitive to the presence of her husbands, sharp nervousness in her throat when she realized who she would be consummating with, and yet the familiarity of having already braved the bed once for such purposes made it seem an easier task than the first time.

Right before Caedros gently tugged on the shoulder of her gown, and she remembered the feel of him inside her even as he removed her clothes. The slide of cloth felt heavy and significant, and it didn't matter that she told herself, it was Tanata she would be with tonight and Tanata had no real interest in her body, the other three had shown interest and being naked before them no longer felt innocent.

Sahasarel withdrew with Tanata's clothes right as Caedros let her go. They joined Nirune near the fire where they'd started the evening last night.

Tanata looked very dutiful, and Eleya felt very dutiful because she couldn't imagine any other

reason to be sleeping with a man so visibly un-attracted to her.

“My Queen.” He was looking at her with a questioning expression on his face, as if he could feel her reluctance to go on.

It was Caedros who spoke up first. “You could try rubbing off most of the way if you want to make it quick.”

Rubbing off. Eleya felt herself flush and only worse when she saw the interested look on Nirune’s face.

“It’s not difficult,” Nirune commented, humor underlying his voice.

“Of course not.” She said the words as if she meant them and tried to remember what Caedros had liked before he redirected her to a proper joining.

It was quick and efficient, Tanata largely taking over using the oil and bringing himself to an aroused state. She rode him, but as he held her, he looked over her shoulder toward their husbands, and it was enough when she felt him shudder and spill inside her without seeking her own pleasure from the experience.

It was Sahasarel and Nirune that washed them and Caedros that pulled the blanket over their bed.

“I’ve had worse,” Tanata said quietly when they’d gone.

She could not help but laugh softly under her breath.

—

It was both easier and harder with Sahasarel. He was eager and curious and Eleya let him try all the things he’d watched and all the things he’d apparently read.

“There are books about this?” She stared at him bewildered.

There was definitely snickering from someone near the fire. She almost glared at them, but the effect was somewhat ruined by her sudden gasp at Sahasarel’s tongue entering her. She lay back and let him pleasure her, since he seemed to want to do it, and certainly she had few complaints.



“I’m getting far more cleaning up than the rest of you,” Eleya noted as Nirune ran the cloth over her skin. While each received care, she was the one constant in their bed.

For the first time since this began, it bothered her.

“You’re the Queen,” Sahasarel pointed out lightly.

“This is one marriage. Four lands and one heart.” Words that belonged to the royal marriage and the royal house. “It is not good to receive too much service from others.” Words she’d kept all her life.

“The Queen receives the service of all,” Tanata reminded her.

“And the Queen also serves all,” Nirune said. “You will not serve less now that you are no longer devoted to the gods.”

She stared, taken aback. Is that what they thought? “You cannot take back what has been given to the gods. Would they destroy all of the

Four Lands for my sake and not just my House?" Real fear burned beneath her skin.

Caedros' head came up sharply, gaze meeting hers.

"I can't—" She shuddered and turned her head, forcing herself to still, back straight. "I'm sorry." She was the Queen. It was her duty to be the strength, not to take her strength from others.

But she was startled by Nirune settling his hand at her hip, holding her with a light touch and drawing her face up to his. "It is right that you speak of these things with us and not your servants."

Caedros stared, stood, and went to stand by the window, looking out. Firelight flickered in dance across his back.

"You are the bedrock of your lands," she whispered. "It is your place to be the strength for them." Not for me.

"Who better for you to be human with than with the princes who are your husbands and who rule beside you?" Nirune persisted. His hand was gentle on her face, but he spoke with all the authority as if he were the oracle and she the seeker.

“Why are the gods so cruel even to you?” Caedros asked suddenly. His gaze seemed to burn into her. “To do this to you and to take all of our families, your house and my line?”

She understood his pain, but she could not agree with it, even now. “Because we have demanded they care for and secure our lands, and for this they assume we are willing to pay the cost of that.”

“But my sister? She had nothing to do with the succession.” Frustration furrowed his brows and cracked his voice. “Why?”

She could feel it there, shimmering in the cold and silence beyond, sigils warming without burning. Not yet. “Do you want me to dance as oracle for you?”

His eyes widened, horror dawning in his face. “No.” He shook his head. “Let their cold words speak through any mouth but yours.”

She could not blame him, even as she released the patterns of gathering power. It was bad enough he saw her and saw the gods, let her not speak an answer concerning his heart that he would be unwilling to hear.

“I am sorry,” she said. Not because she could have helped him, but because she could not. No one could have changed what the gods had decided to do.

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Sahasarel could usually be found in the library, when he wasn't climbing to inadvisable heights in his insatiable desire to explore. Caedros had always preferred to retreat to libraries when he wanted to be alone, burying himself in work or study or even a pleasant hour's respite with the literature and poetry of his own land, but Sahasarel had put paid to that idea, and Caedros couldn't even resent it due to his irrepressibly cheerful nature.

Where Tanata's acceptance of what the gods had willed for him made Caedros avoid conversation, Sahasarel was simply too eager and pleased with all of them for Caedros to resent him for petty reasons or just ones.

“I take it you're discovering more exciting things,” Caedros offered as he dropped into one

of the plush library chairs with a slim volume of mountain poetry. He wouldn't get any work done punctuated by Sahasarel's frequent exclamations of delight, nor was it really his duty to accomplish real work until the marriage with the Queen had been fully consummated. For a few days anyway, he could try to drown out the bite of grief gnawing at his throat and stomach with pleasant verses or companionship.

Sahasarel's dark head popped up over the teetering pile of books he'd been perusing. "There are some books on shipbuilding I never saw in the Isles."

Caedros hummed thoughtfully. "I don't know I'd trust them more."

"Perhaps not, but—" Sahasarel went on for a little bit longer, things Caedros knew nothing about and could barely understand, but he understood the excitement gleaming in Sahasarel's dark eyes, and the way his hands moved enthusiastically in tune with his words.

"Caedros?"

"Hm?"

Sahasarel's gaze had caught on the book in Caedros' hands. Not an obscure collection nor a happy one. "May I ask something personal?"

It made Caedros want to laugh. They had been thrown into a state of personal the moment each drank from the marriage cup and vowed themselves to the land. "Why not?" he asked wearily, barely even thinking of who it was that was asking.

But Sahasarel didn't seem to take it personal. He came to stand near the chair Caedros had occupied, teeth worrying nervously at his lip. It made Caedros think of his sister smacking small hands away from bad habits unbecoming of princes. No biting one's lips or nails or scratching an itch in the Principal Court. It struck him with too sharp a pang for such a small irrelevant thing.

"Did you ever cry for them?"

Caedros caught his breath. Such a strange, sharp question. "Why would you ask that?"

Sahasarel flushed red beneath the long fall of his dark hair, and Caedros dug his hands into the arms of his chair in lieu of clenching fists, another habit his sister had never had patience for.

“I’m not curious about grieving customs,” Sahasarel said quietly, and for the first time since Caedros had met the young prince, he seemed serious, like a man and not an overeager puppy. “Unless you want me to join you in any. You should have been given time to grieve.”

It was a sentimental thought, one not suited for royalty. Caedros just gave him a sideways look. “Who has time for tears?” There had been Plague, coronation, marriage, one on top of the other, a rapid change in the hands of power that there would be no vacuum for enemies to occupy.

But Sahasarel bit his lip again. “I do. It is not right that those we love should go unmourned.” He looked rueful as he added, “I hope someone cries for me when I am gone.”

Caedros blinked at him, then stared. “Who wouldn’t?”

Sahasarel was well liked by all, even those who complained of his incessant and troublesome curiosity.

“I was always the son that would leave,” Sahasarel said frankly. “My family will not be

there when I die, nor will they miss what they already do not have.”

For a moment, Caedros wondered if Eleya mourned all those she'd never had. He reached out and tucked his fingers under Sahasarel's jaw to draw him closer. He watched Sahasarel's eyes grow wide and pulled him down and close enough to kiss him softly, a small startled sound drawn from Sahasarel's throat.

“I'll cry for you when you're gone,” Caedros said. “I'll miss you.”

He leaned his head against Sahasarel's shoulder and sighed, finding it not unwelcome when Sahasarel reached up his arm to wrap around his shoulders and settled against the arm of the chair to hold Caedros better.

“I do miss them,” Caedros said quietly. “I cried for my sister.” It left him feeling hollow inside, cold in places that used to be warm. “I miss her all the time.”

It was warm in Sahasarel's embrace, and he let himself feel it without the need for more words.

## Six. Consummation of the Fourth Land

Sahasarel had wondered at the knowing words and looks Nirune used when watching the previous consummations, and he finally asked directly. “Did you sleep with others too before the marriage?”

Caedros had. Tanata had. Only they’d slept with men and not women.

Nirune just looked at him. “Who would want to offend the gods?”

Considering all that happened, it was a reasonable question and a reasonable answer, but it troubled Sahasarel still. “Do you think Caedros and Tanata have offended the gods?”

“Who can say, but the gods.” Nirune let his mouth shift to a sharp sideways smile.

Sahasarel asked him no more.

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She found him in the courtyard in the heat of the day and wondered a moment to herself why she had chosen to seek him out, but Eleya knew there was one husband she did not understand. It bothered her. As an oracle, there were always those hard to read, but Nirune had managed to be harder than most, despite offering her the most comfort she had received when he held her gently last night.

“Leave us,” she ordered her maidservant who had followed behind her dutifully. “I do not require a chaperone with my husband.”

The maidservant hesitated less than an instant before disappearing on swift feet. Anessa moved another foot away to lean on a wall just out of hearing range should their voices remain quiet. Eleya had little concern for that. Nirune’s voice was always quiet. It rumbled through her pleasantly but never rose for other ears to take hold of.

“That serving girl is in someone’s pay,” Nirune said suddenly. “You should get rid of her.”

Eleya looked at him in surprise. “The one I just dismissed?”

He tilted his head sideways to look at her and made a small sound of affirmation.

It was the last thing she’d expected him to open with. “I see. Do you know whose pay she’s in?”

“Don’t you have a master of spies?” he asked, mild humor in his voice.

Something cold washed over her. “He was among my relatives.” There was nothing to be done about that.

Nirune understood immediately, a flicker of comprehension on his face. “You need to appoint a new one.”

One of the many tasks Eleya was beginning to realize she had yet to accomplish. She sighed, as she thought over who to ask for help. The Royal Counselors were helpful, but they were not as astute in judging character as they believed. “Is there anyone you trust for the job?”

“We’re not in the plains, my Queen.” His tone implied she should have known this and that

he wouldn't know the eddies of loyalty and trust in her court as he did his own.

She did know. But she already knew that ruling was a burden she could not carry without help. "Could you find someone you would trust?"

There was a long moment of silence, the quiet sound of his breathing. He wasn't looking at her. He was studying the Guard doing their exercises. "Yes," he said at last, no uncertainty, no questioning.

Relief welled within her. She nodded as she had when directing the younger novices about. "Then do so."

"You command like a Queen," he commented, half complaint.

It made her laugh. "I've spent the last few days being told that I do not." And perhaps it should have bothered her more than it did, but it was hardly her fault she'd learned deportment in the service of the gods and not the service of a country. "We all do our duty," she said, considering Tanata and Sahasarel and even Caedros, all of whom had always acknowledged they'd never had a choice.

But Nirune looked up sharply, something slipping sideways and cutting through the warm unchanging intensity of his patterns she'd somehow grown used to. She caught her breath as he came closer. She stared up at him evenly, unsure of why she felt the sudden need to do so.

When he touched her, it wasn't nearly what she'd expected. She'd expected something intimidating, not the gentle way he drew his fingers softly over the line of her hair to tuck back the loose strands. "This," he said low and close to her, syllables warming the air between them, "isn't duty."

Eleya knew there was something there, something she could feel but not name, and for the first time, it was shimmering on the surface, in the spoken, and this is what she had come here for. To know him before she claimed him.

"Then what is it?" she asked.

He only smiled, mouth edging up on one side. "Aren't my patterns right here?"

"I think you like being mysterious," she said dryly.

He said nothing for a long moment, fingers still lingering warmly at her temple. At last, he dropped his hand and caught hers with it to draw her down to the bench they'd been standing near.

He spoke as if instructing, as if he'd heard the words from his own father or mother and was now passing them to her. "We are chosen to stand between the humans and the gods, our own country and those around us."

She nodded.

He frowned. "For you to be chosen, *now*, over all your house, for Caedros to be chosen and his older sister barred from becoming Princess in the land, something terrible is coming, and I will protect you from it in all ways I can. Can't you feel that pattern? This is fate."

It was the unspoken thing everyone in the land could feel. Something was coming or the gods would never have intervened so harshly. And she had been trained to serve them but she wondered sometimes, if she could truly be the strong priest king needed for a time of upheaval. "You believe in fate?" Perhaps it should comfort her, but it did not.

It was a long moment before Nirune whispered, “Who dare fight the gods?” There was story behind such words, one she did not wish to hear.

Eleya shuddered, thinking of all she had lost. “I did not fight the gods.”

“I believe you.” He rose to collect his sword, and she stared at him, suddenly aglow in the sunlight when he stepped out from the shadows.

“You are the prince of the metal,” she realized. A sharpened blade honed to his purpose and with no consideration of whether it was duty or pleasure that drove him.

He turned to her and smiled. “And you are the daughter of the metal,” he reminded her.

She was, she realized. Her mother had been the princess of that element and served well within it, even if she’d been born from a land traditionally of stone. There was something akin between them. “But I am not the Metal Queen,” she said, still uncertain of what exactly beat within her.

He didn’t answer then. He looked to Tanata, just entering the courtyard, and offered to spar for a little while.



Nirune enjoyed crossing swords with Tanata. Both of them understood the necessity of occupying fully the position you were placed in. Tanata fought grim and worthy in the face of things that made it difficult to serve: a father who did not want him, a role he'd been born for denied him, and the obligation to marry a woman he would never love the way some might think he ought.

Nirune was unconflicted. Some days, he thought there was something wrong with him that no passion burned in his heart for or against the role he was born to fill. No one had ever stood against him taking up the position of First Prince, no one had demanded he remain in the Eastern Plains to rule after his father, and he had no quarrel with the gods.

But the gods had chosen those who had quarrel with them, and Nirune found losing himself in the focus of a battle with Tanata helped ease the way that troubled him. The Eastern Plains had given themselves over to their purpose after his grandfather had angered the gods and brought

fear upon their land. The gods had never found reason to harm them under the guidance of Nirune's father.

He'd taken Nirune out to the fields when he was still a small boy to show him the harvests of the Four Lands. It was the plains that grew their food and delivered it to the cities and mountains and isles.

*"You are protector and keeper over the Fourth Land,"* his father had told him. *"Guard it with your life. You are one among many brothers. The land is only one among four."*

Nirune grunted with the effort of blocking Tanata's strikes, whirled with the instinct for battle he'd honed against raiders and bandits, felt the pattern trembling there on a distant horizon that he had been born for this now, to protect his husbands and wife against others and against their own selves.

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He answered her later, passing in the hallway, before the evening meal and the consummation of the Fourth Land. “Eleya.”

She paused, looking at him with a quiet question on her stoic face that had long ago lost the urge to softness. He wondered sometimes when he looked at her, what did they teach oracles that she so rarely allowed herself to feel anything as deeply as she ought.

It hid her true nature, that neutral aura of service she pulled over her skin like armor every morning. She would serve the Four Lands well, he thought, but it was not for her service that the gods chose her.

“You are the Ice Queen.”

She stared at him, breath caught in her chest, a startled look in her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to say something, and he felt it between them, wondered if it was the patterns oracles spoke of. But she left it unsaid. She closed her mouth, looked thoughtful, and finally nodded. “Thank you, Nirune.” She swept on and he didn’t wait to see her go.



She was starting to feel the act instinctively by the fourth night, and he'd been watching closely. She could tell at first that he was fumbling with the unfamiliarity, but he continued the way he'd seen it until it felt natural, following the trail of pleasure on her body the others had marked before him. He didn't need her guidance to find her clit or make her tremble and ache, shivering with heat and want. He didn't waste time with feather light kisses when she preferred to gasp under the hard press of mouth to neck, the nip and scrape of teeth over her jaw and shoulders, the bruising warmth of him marking her below her collar-bones and between her breasts.

He let her press him down and ride him, leaned his head lazily back into the pillow with a grin too fierce to be subdued. He was generous with her, hands pressing warm and rough everywhere she put them, thrusting up into her with every clench of her fingers demanding more.

It didn't last nearly as long as it should or could because they were both impatient, and then

she was coming in a haze of desire, distantly aware she only outlasted him by moments. She leaned down to press her face to his shoulder as she panted in the aftermath, dizzy and lightheaded with the intensity of it. He rubbed his fingers gently over her scalp through her hair, and she listened to his own breath move slowly from ragged to even.

The ritual was soothing now. It was Caedros who washed her, his touch gentle through the soft damp cloth, and Tanata who washed Nirune as Sahasarel brought the warm coverlet to press over them both. Eleya caught Caedros' and Sahasarel's fingers before they withdraw, her voice caught in her throat and her gaze on Tanata's, the one she could not reach with her hands. He settled on the edge of the bed beside Nirune, and she tried to put words to this nameless feeling within her.

There were five people here, five of them, and somehow the moment felt intimate and utterly private, as though in only four days they had made a space for themselves with only room for them and room enough to know each other.

“It’s tradition,” she said softly with a glance at Caedros, the one who cared most about that, “for it to be just the two of us tonight. But tomorrow,” she paused, “tomorrow would you stay?”

All of them. Together.

Nirune huffed a small scoffing chuckle. “There isn’t room on the bed.”

He was not a small man and the bed *swallowed* the two of them. She almost told him so, but Sahasarel spoke first with barely contained eagerness. “I think we could make it work.”

Tanata’s, “If that is what you wish,” overlapped Caedros’ answer, “Certainly, my Queen.”

She tightened her grip reflexively and looked at the northern prince. “Will you never call me Eleya?” she asked.

He stared at her, eyes widening, for a heart-beat’s moment, then his face and voice softened as he breathed, “Eleya.” ❧

## BREATH FROM A STONE

### BREATH

Jaguar kneels over the small sleeping form of her young brother. She strokes one finger gently over his golden brown cheek. His skin is as yet unmarked by the green tattoos her people painted across her own. She is fifteen. He is five.

The difference does not end there.

Jaguar glances out of the hut door into dim pre-dawn duskiess and shadow. Sun has not yet brightened through the thick jungle leaves. Returning to her brother, she speaks into the stone, "Monkey, wake."

Monkey wakes and sits up, his dark eyes as dark as hers but empty of understanding.

She slides the stone inside the thin sheath of her shield garb near her heart—where she would carry a child if he were younger, smaller—and holds out her hand. “Monkey, come.”

Those five tiny fingers clench hers and he does.

—

It takes Jaguar the day to find a stone-breather’s trail. He is not alone, this one. Beast tracks dot the damp dust around his prints. His feet are shod, and she sniffs in contemptuousness. Monkey does not react at all. Nightbeasts, slender, dark-footed things with limpid eyes and baying jaws. She will not encounter the stone-breather before the sun dips behind the wide santhan leaves and vanishes for the night.

The tracks are easy enough to follow—for Jaguar. She was a smaller child than Monkey when first her people left her alone beneath those leaves and ordered her to bring home meat. A tiny thing, she was fearful of the dark, for her eyes were black and human, prey not predator.

Yellow eyes startled her out of the night. The jaguar shifted forward from the undergrowth and picked his way on great paws to breathe against her shoulder in a voice she should not have been able to understand. "What is this soul and skin you wear?"

That was when she knew she was Jaguar, when she lifted her small hands to his great shoulders and embraced the beast, breathing back, when she learned how the jaguar hunt.

Now, it is as easy as that breath. She follows the footprints of the nightbeasts, breathes in the jungle wind until her nose is filled with their stench, draws Monkey beside her when they are close.

Night falls swiftly. Moondark comes before her legs have time to cramp. She can smell the beasts, hear their panting in the silence. Even stonebound beasts hunt.

Nightbeasts coalesce like shadows out of the dark, their slender forms barely whispering among the leaves. One whines low in its throat. The rest are deathly silent. What life they have is captured in stones like the one she carries.

Jaguar unfolds from her crouch and whispers, “Monkey, stay.” She casts her aura over him in a golden glow. He stays still, breathless as stone. All she has to do is stay alive.

The beasts step forward. A tale swishes. She counts them. Seven or nine. She has a jaguar soul, not its eyes.

Jaguar raises her spear barely in time for the attack. Three leap at once, teeth bared and hissing in anger. She throws one off and takes a bite in her left arm from another. It’s block, thrust with her spear, duck into a crouch, throw, and block again. In her peripheral vision, she catches sight of the two beasts worrying at her aura, but there is nothing they can do to breach it.

She manages to plunge her spear into one of the nightbeasts, and the others snarl, but back out of range of her backswing.

“Beasts, hold!” a man’s cold tenor breaks the night.

Jaguar holds steady with them as she watches the man step out into the faint glow of her aura. He stares at Monkey, at the golden shield surrounding him.

“Moon,” she says, invoking old stories of the Forces and the Powers.

His head turns with a snap. His hair is white, but he is not old. He is a stone-breather, thin and dressed in the vest and tunic and leggings of his people. His eyes are cold like black stone, his skin pale. He nods at her. “Night. You have speared my beast.” He glances at the blood pooling on the animal at her feet, then at the steady line of the other nightbeasts growling and waiting for him to release them.

Jaguar keeps her spear aimed. “Name them and I’ll not kill them.”

The stone-breather’s gaze returns to Monkey. “Give me his stone.”

She expected as much and wonders if he knows what he should also expect. She lifts her spear and rests the staff against the jungle floor. “If you can speak my name, then I will give you his stone.”

The man raises his hand to his mouth, and she sees the drawstring bag he holds. “Beasts, come.” The nightbeasts return to him and lay at his feet at another soft command. He sets down

kindling in a circle of stone and lights it, then sits by the fire. The bag of the nightbeast stones rattles as he sets it down beside him. "If I learn your name, I could breathe your soul into stone," he warns.

She crouches before the fire on the other side and lays her spear over her bare knees. "You can breathe from the stone?" she asks.

The old man laughs. "Cannot all the breathers?"

Jaguar flashes him a smile, all sharp white teeth, then closes them as if she has bitten flesh. "Not the breather I slew." Breathers could breathe souls into a stone by definition, but not all could take it out again.

His own smile vanishes at this word. He studies her with obsidian eyes, so much more lifeless than the night eyes of her people. "An aura-caster." That brief glance toward Monkey. She does not deny it.

"You are unafraid," the man observes, and with his breath, she tastes power woven through the air to catch at her.

"You are not blind," she returns.

When the breath reaches him, he frowns. It is just a taste, sweet taste, so incomplete he could never capture her name thereby. "You are fierce."

"You are not a fool."

The fire crackles between them. Black obsidian eyes gaze into black night ones. The moon begins to rise and brighten. It is night.

—

There is a story told among the tattooed men and women that crowd the nighttime fires. Just as there is a story told among the young of the stone breathers, before they separate from their families and wander to their own territories. They are one. They are the same. They are two and nothing alike.

*In the words of the children of Night:*

*Once in the forest nights upon the dark lower mountains,  
the force of the moon and the power of night came and sat  
across from each other beside a burning fire.*

***In the words of the children of Moon:***

*Breath from a Stone*

*When the world was young, the powers  
gathered and spoke to each other often,  
kindly then, for all the world was kinder then  
when it was young.*

*Night was beautiful and raised her dark brows at Moon,  
for he was also beautiful. "A wager," she said and shook  
her dark hair so it swirled.*

*And the powers took on the forms of men and  
walked about among us, claiming each  
people for this one or this other.*

*Moon laughed and his laughter was brightness, for he was  
as white and brilliant as Night was black and dark. You  
know how they tell these stories, my daughter, how those  
unlike tend to gather.*

*Now Moon granted gifts to his children, the  
gifts of breath to harness souls, and Night  
gave dark power to her daughters, the gifts of  
souls to steal and cast.*

*“A wager then,” Moon agreed. “And what shall we wager?”*

*So Night’s daughters cast their souls over the souls of Moon’s sons and stole the breath of Moon’s daughters, and Moon’s people cried out, so Moon hushed them and comforted them and spoke kindly to them. “I will speak kindness to Night and make peace between our people once more.”*

*Night smiled darkly and offered, “Our souls.”*

*So Moon sought out Night within her forests on the dark lower mountains and lit a fire to draw her, for he knew how dearly she loved to wager.*

*Moon laughed at her again, for he was the trickster, was he not? And he dearly loved to wager.*

*“Come, sit by my fire. We must wager for the souls of men.”*

*“And why would I wager that?” Moon asked. “You have the souls of your people, as I have the souls of mine.”*

*“Perhaps it is not your soul I desire,” said Night, for surely you know how these stories are told, my daughter. She desired his heart.*

***“And why would I wager that?” asked Night.***

***“I have the souls of my people, and also the  
souls of your own.”***

***“The souls of my people are mine,” he said,  
“so I must claim yours for my own or receive  
my own again.”***

*And so they wagered. And who names the life claims the soul.*

***“Name the souls we have taken,” Night said,  
dark eyes snapping with the darkness, “and  
we shall return them again.”***

Jaguar knows that stories are made truth each time they are lived.

*And so you must never tell a man or a woman your name or the name of your life, for in so doing you have lost your soul.*

***And so you must whisper your name to the Moon, that he may safeguard your soul from the Night.***

—

“And is your name Huntress?” he asks, almost playfully. Moon, you should know I know your tricks.

She flicks a brow upward and says nothing.

He studies her darkly, and she knows he has known her well and better than even her own to first call her Night. And yet, the name does not match what he has tasted of her.

Silence hovers over the flickering flames, and the man holds out his hands to warm them. “Do you tell stories among your people?” he asks, lips curling into a thin smile.

Jaguar runs a finger down the intricately carved shaft of her spear. She nods, unspeaking,

just breathing. She can take nothing from him without a trick, and isn't Moon the trickster? But he needs her to speak, needs to taste her soul on her breath across the fire, needs to find her name from the flavor. Beneath her skin lies the urge to shed this game, this myth she plays and hunt. She glances at Monkey standing within the glow of her aura.

"Tell me a story I have not heard," the man asks gently, and his voice has lost the harshness of the moon. She thinks he could be beautiful were he to leave the stones.

Jaguar's fingers dance along the spear. She leans forward into the fire to let it warm her face, draw out the breath from her that she may more quickly end the wager. "We are a people of the dark lower mountains, and we rest in safety beneath the santhan leaves—so long as the Souls are pleased."

Obsidian eyes glitter as he listens. He has heard of Forces and Powers if he has ever heard a story told, but Jaguar knows she has sparked his interest, for he has heard not of the lore of souls.

“Once in the forest nights on our mountains, Night rose up and looked over her people, but her raven tresses were not long enough to comfort them, for where she looked a great cat stood and roared with his displeasure.”

His mouth is just slightly open. She lets him taste her, pours what of herself there is beneath this skin into her voice. What is this soul and skin you wear?

“The people hid within their huts in fear. They had no meat, no song, no harvest drawn from their lands around them.”

“And what lands are those?” he murmurs so softly, she may ignore him.

“They were afraid.” And here she cannot hide her fierceness but sniffs in contemptuousness, for she is not afraid. “They were afraid of the Soul who stole a great cat’s skin and of the claws it stretched out toward their young and of its fierceness.”

The man frowns, torn between listening, between tasting, never knowing the story is more answer than her breath.

“They were afraid and so they took the vessel of one of their daughters,”—a skin; perhaps, he will think the child dead—”and gave her up to the great cat upon the mountains to be consumed.”

“Aurelia,” he whispers, naming her. Aurelia. What is this soul and skin you wear?

She stared at him, let her voice stutter into silence, let that softer name wash against her and strum a place of recognition within her soul.

“Aurelia,” he says, voice stronger, now that he knows he has her, black eyes brightening and hard.

She stares at him and prays the powers he does not look at Monkey, the faintest flickering of the light. She draws his gaze as she lays down her spear from off her knees, as she straightens her back and draws Monkey’s stone from inside the shield garb near her heart.

He stands slowly, comes to stand before her, and lowers his head just so as he grasps it with startlingly warm fingers. His other hand holds the rattling bag of nightbeast stones and he opens his mouth to speak.

Her golden aura winks out and wraps around his vessel, holding him stiff and immobile.

His eyes narrow. "You promised me the stone."

"Not his life." She holds the aura tenuously, but she only has to stay alive. It will remain as long as she does.

The stone-breather nods, genuine understanding lighting his gaze. If all goes as he expects, she will be unable to protect him when this is concluded. "He is your brother," the stone-breather says.

"He is a child," she answers bluntly. A child's soul taken by a stone-breather. And they call Night's children the thieves of souls.

"I will bargain with you," he offers. "Your soul in my stone and I will deliver his from this."

They both look at the shiny black pebble. She lowers her eyes just briefly, an acceptance, for you know how these stories are told, my daughter. Night dearly loves to wager. "My soul for my brother's."

"You have not finished your story," he comments.

She flicks her eyes downward, acknowledgment. “I will.”

He nods and she releases him, drawing her aura back beneath her skin. She watches as the stone-breather raises Monkey’s stone to his mouth and inhales deeply. He whispers into the stone and Monkey walks woodenly, unseeingly to the man, who exhales into Monkey’s mouth.

Jaguar waits motionless. It seems she can hear every leaf that rustles overhead, the soft rush of wind through undergrowth, the still, shallow breaths of the nightbeasts underlying their acrid scent. The stone-breather smells cold and warm at once, and Monkey—who has had no scent or sound or life since she found him, since she slew the breather who would have enslaved him—Monkey, who is a child... His eyes light up with the dark depths of the night and burn with sudden fear. His limbs spark up suddenly and jerk as he throws his body away from the stone-breather and his sister standing over him. He closes his mouth tightly, an instinct unnatural to any whose breath has not been taken. It saves

them both, for though his gaze flies to his sister, he does not say her name. Her real name.

She leans across the gap and breathes the stone-breather's breath. It is a battle.

At first she tastes the expectation that this is fulfillment of her promise, but then the jaguar within her roars to life, and he realizes his own mistake.

Life. Breather of life she is, as breather of souls he has always been. She will finish the story of the jaguar's hunt.

Her human soul rushes into his mouth, but she holds on tighter and breathes into herself his life. His hands struggle to claw at her, but her aura holds him back. Only an aura-caster can use her soul when it is not within her, but she has always been that, since before she knew that a jaguar can kill with a single kiss. Since before she hunted as the jaguar hunts.

She pulls her own soul back and throws her aura over his, shoving away with the spear between them, grateful when she gulps in deep, ragged breaths of night air, and the stone-breather stares at her, alive, as he does the same. He will

be weak, but he will recover. She has left more than one quarry when her supplies were full.

Jaguar steps away and says softly, “But Night hated the sacrifice. Souls may be bartered but never human flesh. And so, she entered into the daughter and consumed the great cat instead. The souls were satisfied and the roaring silenced.”

“Your name is Aurelia,” the stone-breather whispers. He has more than tasted her human soul; she gave it to him as promised before she took it back.

“I will not leave you dead,” she replies. The price for her betrayal.

Then, she takes Monkey’s small hand in hers and guides him back under the santhan leaves. Monkey looks back over his shoulder, but Jaguar does not. She holds her aura still until they pass from the territory of the stone breathers and into that of the jaguar. 

THE LEGENDARY  
CONSTRAINTS OF POWER

The press of the crowds was beyond tolerating, but somehow the crowds tolerated it. They pushed and shoved and sweated and swelled and broke around the Great Way, bound by guards, which lead from the gates of Granavak—the great city at the heart of the Empire of the Four Suns—all the way to the palace complex and military barracks and fortress at the heart of Granavak.

They'd taken Ilat and Kalos, and hear tell, they'd taken the Merchant Empire that supplied those quarrelsome states with arms as well.

Then the regular beat of marching troops pounded the ground, and everyone pressed as

close as they dared, considering the guards along the way.

It was practically a parade—their heroes coming home. The aranat, the sunborn, caught sight of the golden hair of their golden son and throats roared with the cry of "Braza! Braza!"

His armor and gauntlets were dark, but all the rest of him was as gold as the sunborn magic he wielded. He raised one arm, grin bright and fierce on his face as the cries grew stronger.

"Braza! Braza!"

The golden son had returned. The Lesser Prince of the First Circle of the Royal House, he'd devoted himself to war, on the path to become of the Legendary Generals of the Land of the Four Suns. And they loved him.

A groundswell murmured alongside the open-throated anthem to their prince.

The parashat, foreignborn they were called, though not all parashat had been born elsewhere, nor was every member of the trodden without the blood of the sunborn. Their murmur became a roar as the parade turned and twisted again, revealing the second of their rising commanders.

"Kier-Dan!" The foreign name slashed through the air.

Braza turned in his chariot to see.

The bronze Haijarin, ever his rival, a glow of fire banked within his eyes. His hair was bronze, his skin was bronze, his spear and gauntlets were bronze, though his armor was as dark as Braza's, his rank currently the same. High Commander over a large company.

They'd taken the cities Ilat and Sahogonia and the land of Kalos. Saigiri, the third of the high commanders considered likely candidates to become the next Legendary Generals, was securing the new borders before her own triumphant return.

Kier-Dan did not raise his arm in victory but he looked out over the people as they claimed him with their adulation.

—

Most of the troops were remanded to the barracks, a massive plaza near the heart of the city but also stretching out with three arms towards

the walls of the city and providing easy access for the changing of guards.

Most of the officers and certain of the High Guard retired to the Fortress, an ugly edifice of stone, unadorned with gilded metals or decoration. The Fortress was the original Granavak, heavily fortified, with sufficient room to house the first chieftain's family, his retainers, and his strong men and their families when the Empire of the Four Suns was still just the Clan of Nakor, the sun god, when the four strong sons of that chieftain had yet to conquer any surrounding territory or build a temple and a city to rival that of any other the world over.

To the officers trained from Kawusert and the noble houses both aranat and parashat to serve as commanders over all the armed forces of the Empire, the Fortress had become home, whatever estates or houses they eventually founded elsewhere.

Braza for one had been looking forward to the baths and scrubbing the grunge of a long campaign from his body, but scowled when he

finally reached the coveted chambers and found Kier-Dan had already availed himself.

It was typical. Kier-Dan had always preferred the main bath and settled back in the corner, head leaned against an ancient stone headdress, the water around him seething as though he were boiling in a pot.

Braza took one look at the amount of steam rising from the front of the pool and moved to the side bath. Where Kier-Dan ought to go if he was going to heat the water so much.

"Parashat," Braza snapped as he was stepping down.

Kier-Dan huffed the smallest laugh under his breath. He'd made it clear when they were children that he didn't care about Braza's royal rank and he was going to gain his own military rank regardless. He didn't say anything now or honor Braza with a reply.

—

They'd met in the Kawusert, the school for royalty, nobility, and hostages of the conquered nations

and peoples the Land of the Four Suns had added to itself. Braza had never asked quiet, fierce Kier-Dan what people he was from or what nation he represented or what place in their hierarchy he occupied. He'd never had to. Kier-Dan was foreign-born and Braza was sunborn, and the only thing that mattered to a student in Kawusert not bound to rule the nation was how well they performed.

And that is why he hated Kier-Dan, one of few who could outstrip Braza in battle enough times to be noticed. Enough times that Braza was not openly acknowledged as matchless.

Saigiri—beautiful, stunningly fierce Saigiri, one of their four greatest warriors and matchless with a spear—thought they were both ridiculous. She twisted up her long black hair and shot Braza ugly looks when he was scowling at being beaten again.

But Saigiri was not concerned with the rank she acquired from her feats. She was neither godstouched nor royal, a parashat of the Meijhot, devoted to their death goddess Ilis from her birth. It didn't mean anything to her people when she rose or she fell.

"Idiot aranat," she said quietly in that death-soft voice of hers, too gentle to match her personality.

But she still chose to battle dance with Braza, take cup with Braza in the meal hall, and call for his sun magic to burn bright and blind their enemies when she danced with her spear in battle. Saigiri gloried in the strength of her companions, never taking thought for whose name was shouted on the people's tongues.

—

He hated Kier-Dan because when he arrived at Kawusert at six years old, his older half brother had introduced him in passing to a handful of the other students by waving a hand in their direction—the left hand, an insult—and said, "Meijhot tribute,"—in reference to Saigiri and, "The Haijarin tribute."

That at Kier-Dan, five years old at the time, small but already smoldering like fire in his bronze skin and bronze hair and eyes like dark

flames. At Kier-Dan who curled his lip and muttered back, "Aranat tribute."

He didn't use the neutral term Braza's brother had used. He used the one that meant tribute given before one had been conquered, in the hopes of staving off true defeat. A coward's tribute.

Braza didn't think, didn't pause to notice his older brother's harsh laugh, just rode his anger and threw a fist at Kier-Dan.

Kier-Dan caught it, twisted his hand, and threw Braza to the ground like it was nothing.

Braza stared up at him and seethed. Kier-Dan stared down at him as if he were nothing, no different from any of the rest of them.

Tribute.

He wasn't even wrong.

—

Karkil avoided all the crowds with the ease of long experience, slipping into the Fortress with her archers before dawn, without sending sufficient word of her arrival in advance to gather one in the first place.

"Sneaking in as usual," Braza's right hand Denebir said with a laugh when she appeared at the pre-exercise wash.

Karkil stiffened and snarled. "Are you calling me a coward?"

Braza wasn't much known for sparing his men their own share of troubles, and he'd never been inclined to save anyone from Karkil's righteous sunborn wrath when it awakened. She was tiny, golden, and rippling muscle from shoulder to calf, the finest archer alive.

"She'll slaughter you on the sands," he commented.

"You underestimate me," Denebir cried, thumping a hand to his chest.

"You underestimate Karkil."

The battle dance was where they honed their skills, stretching early, then taking to the sands to practice with and without magic, with and without weaponry. Karkil was sunborn but no godstouched mage. Denebir wielded the sun in the gauntlets at his wrist and had defeated hundreds. Braza only grinned when he took place near the ring to watch.

By time he'd raised his hands to the sun, she had him pinned with two knives in his sleeves, her knee to his groin, an arm to his throat, and the other arm lifted in a withheld lethal strike. Her bow remained with the other weapons not yet taken down for dancing.

Denebir swore and surrendered with what pride was left him—not much.

A soft sound of disgust brought Karkil and Braza looking toward the portico.

Saigiri had clearly avoided the crowds as well, though Braza had to wonder how she'd managed it. "A real fight," she said, looking pointedly toward Braza and Kier-Dan near him.

Kier-Dan looked bored but shrugged in agreement, slipping his gauntlets into place and sending a questioning glance toward Braza.

Braza would never hesitate to fight Kier-Dan. "Bring it, parashat."

—

He hated Kier-Dan because when he went in the baths for the first time, there was the little boy,

like barely contained copper fire, sitting in the best spot, steam swirling around him that didn't entirely come from the waters.

"The sun will always be stronger than fire," Braza's brother commented. "And gold more valuable than bronze."

Kier-Dan looked at them both under the fringe of his hair, narrow-eyed, face without expression. He closed his eyes again and ignored them both.

The next morning, his was the only name commended in the starting battle dances. His was the only name called in praise by Braza's first teacher. Because Kier-Dan could fight already, and everyone else was trying to catch up.

Braza fought for every rank and merit he earned. He strengthened his body so Kier-Dan would have to *fight* to ever throw him again. He strengthened his skills with spear and sword and gauntlet and howler, learned sun magic and light weapons, strategy and command. He became the best and excelled at every form of combat he undertook.

It galled him that he shared the position of "best" with someone like Kier-Dan, who never looked at him unprovoked, but rivalled him in all things they both studied. That from the first year they both took to the battle sands, Kier-Dan and Braza split the first cup in meal hall time after time. This day it was Braza honored as first. That day it was Kier-Dan. It took several years for Saigiri and Karkil to begin claiming it, and neither were godstouched.



Kier-Dan was unaffected by sunheat but could be blinded by sunbright as easily as any other. Braza didn't hesitate to use what advantages he had, casting light into his opponent's eyes. Kier-Dan dropped unhesitating and would have swept Braza's legs out from under him, had he not anticipated and turned aside.

They fought skin on skin, wrist on wrist, fist on fist, kick and leg and parry and grapple and tumble and strangle. In the end, Braza barely won, mouth wide, teeth gritted with blood and dirt, and

Kier-Dan stood afterward, panting but unbroken. He rarely used fire magic in a battle dance, and they'd all learned he wouldn't answer why if asked.

Braza hated that. He hated that he could never be certain of his victory when Kier-Dan refused to fight with all his power and life.

—

They'd all come from Kawusert. They were the high ones, sworn to the duty of the crown, a ready pool of counselors and commanders to fill the ranks of the elite with those trusted by the Greater Prince who studied among them and befriended them.

There were five Legendary Generals who ruled over all the armed forces of the Four Suns, four who grew old and one who was young. Those who would take those places had to be stronger than strong and greater than great. They had to be legends.

Saigiri slew a thousand men on one spear and conquered the Three Cities before she'd made High Commander. Karkil rained flaming arrows

from sea and sky and captured the fleet of the Merchant Empire, then razed its thirty-one cities to the earth. Kier-Dan harvested his enemy's fields as they were shut up in their cities, then overnight, the lands were scorched and burnt to nothing. His command rose refreshed and strong in the morning and burnt the walls and took their cities. "He's a godstouched fireborn," whispered the people of the Empire. It should have been obvious already, Braza thought.

Braza learned to wield the sun. He cast its light bright enough to blind watchers at their posts and charges on the battlefield. He brought darkness over all the surrounding land by hiding its light and cast shadows where he willed. He burnt armies and houses and great walls and dried up moats, then took sword and spear and finished the job with his own two hands. There was no other sunborn mage among the Low Commanders when he began to rise, and no one conquered so many of their neighbors among his rank.

—

*"Oh, Nakor, you do grow bold." Riskalayeln, his niece, stared at him with blazing displeasure.*

*"You know why I've done this," Nakor answered petulantly.*

*"To end all their petty wars between each other," answered his mother, the heavens. "You would make them one people."*

*"And yet there is only more war," Riskalayeln answered again. "Does the sun see an end to all of this?"*

*But of course, the sunborn had founded an empire and only conquered more and more, swallowing every squabbling tribe and nation around them, swallowing their children and making warriors of them.*

*"If you're going to conquer the world," Mebut added with a scowl, "the least you could do is abolish slavery." Mebut's power was found in freedom and flight, and with every conquest, there was less of it.*

*Ilis shook out her grey robes, swirling with power. The grass around her feet died. "You take and take, brother. What have you given us back?"*

—

Crops died in the fields. Harvests burned with no enemy upon their heels to conquer. Rains failed to pour from the heavens. Clouds covered the sun.

After such victories as brought by their High Commanders, the sunborn peoples were afraid. This should have brought the pleasure of the gods, not otherwise. The Greater Queen could be seen making oblations in the High Temples all over Granavak.

Then rains finally came and washed away what was left of the crops, breaking down walls and houses in the extremity of the flood. The gods were angry.

Salathos, the Lesser Queen of the Four Suns, went to her husband the king with a suggested appeasement. Then she sent for her son out of the Fortress within the city.

—

The Lesser Queen, Salathos, never did anything without more than one reason, not even bathe. She always had practical reasons for her decisions,

as well as political and social. That was why she'd become Lesser Queen.

Braza knew when he entered her presence in her house his father the King had built her, that this was no exception and there would be plenty of traps laid throughout whatever she had planned.

"The gods are angry and must be appeased," she said simply. "They have brought us victories and we have not sufficiently honored the parashat commanders." Or honored them at all, but for the fetes of the people and the rising of the ranks. But that was the acknowledgement of military and populace, something the royal houses benevolently presided over but did not partake in.

Braza had considered the nature of the curses against the land. It had occurred to him that perhaps the gods of the people they conquered were less than pleased by their treatment. Only in the military were they generally given equal rank. He gestured impatiently for her to go on.

Salathos allowed it without visible displeasure. He hadn't inherited his temper from her. "Kier-Dan commands too many of the hearts of the people. He grows more powerful."

"So? Saigiri is also parashat," Braza pointed out. Not Karkil. Karkil was sunborn, wed young, got herself an heir, then went sterile to more easily devote herself to her archery and to command. But for the parades and the festivals, none of them had been honored but Braza, because he sat in the royal house at the proper times and seasons and partook of dinners and royal parties that preferred him fighting to politicking.

"They have yet to receive any of the traditional honors," his mother pressed on regardless. "We have waited too long."

The *traditional* honors. Braza was thunderstruck for a moment. Saigiri's death goddess demanded vows of chastity and discipline. "Saigiri cannot marry."

His mother glanced back at him. "Of course not. She'll be given a fine land grant, worthy of the nobility, and raised in rank."

A non-traditional honor but a potentially acceptable substitute. So this was all really about, "And Kier-Dan."

"The traditional honor is marriage and title," Salathos stated quietly.

Braza sucked in his breath. To give a Haijarin the royal earring would be astounding honor, promoting him into the First Circle of the Royal House, making him royalty himself. There were two ways to raise one's rank in the Land of the Four Suns, by marriage and politics or by war. But it would also be grave insult to a Haijarin, a bit in his mouth, and he would lose face in the eyes of his own people. For the first time in his life and a career built solidly on outperforming every other member of the troops he'd fought in, Kier-Dan would be conquered.

"You're telling me this." Braza was no fool. He clenched his jaw as he stared into his mother's coolly calculating eyes.

She may have been the Lesser Queen, but she had fought her way to that position from a House of Concubines and ruled far more of the court than the Greater Queen could hope to sway. "Because I want him to marry you."

The Lesser Prince was a threat to the Greater and often went into war to separate his path from the one leading to the throne. This would make him less of a threat still, with no likely heir to be

had from the union, until he took female concubines. His mother would not look down on a concubine should heirs be needed later.

"His victories would no longer be his alone," she said.

"I don't want *his* victories," Braza hissed back at her.

"Nevertheless." His anger had never moved her when she'd made a decision. It would not avail now.

He swore, darkly, in every tongue he knew the ugly words of. He swore and stood there, undismissed until finally his mother nodded and he could storm away, slamming the golden door behind him.

—

Gods, he didn't want Kier-Dan's victories. He wanted his own. He wanted blood under his hands and golden sunlight in his mouth and an army to wield and the title of Legendary on his shoulder. He didn't want to be a tool of his mother in her aims. He didn't want the throne.

Braza shot sunbolt after sunbolt into targets, tore strawmen asunder with every weapon easily to hand, danced battle with the first one willing, left him bruised and groaning then found no takers for another battle. He shut himself in his quarters in the Fortress and put a rein on his temper. He plotted the conquest of Areshesh and waited until a small messenger boy brought him the royal notice from the palace of the great feast they would hold to honor their foreignborn commanders, both high and low.

Karkil would likely scoff at her exclusion, secretly relieved no one would force her to endure it but as a guest to her companions' honor.

Braza noted the time of the gathering, then dropped the note in the fire.

—

The congratulations were raucous by the time they reached the last to honor. It had been well handled, Braza thought sourly. Kier-Dan deserved the highest honor so they'd saved him to last.

By the time they'd gotten through honors and ranks befitting the Low Commanders and Saigiri's new land, there was also no certain predicting a welcome into the royal family. Not unless you were aranat. To do less would not be honoring the gods, but flaunting their denial in the face of them.

The congratulations for Kier-Dan were no less than for the others. Some offered greater surprise, greater pleasure or jealousy for there were only two ways of advancing rank in this godstouched land, and marriage into the First Circle of the Royal Family was much to be desired.

Kier-Dan listened, face like a stone, made proper obeisance and words of gratitude, then went out from the court.

—

Braza wasn't entirely sure what made him follow. But he did follow to see Kier-Dan's uncompromising back as he slipped into a quiet antechamber where stewards politely ignored those who lost

the full control over their emotions after a royal decree.

Every fiery highlight in Kier-Dan's color glowed livid red as he whirled on Braza, anger flaring in his eyes. The word he spat was incomprehensible.

Braza blinked then realized that was because it was Haijarin. Braza had his own temper but he had already exhausted his on this. "You don't have to accept," he said calmly, not sure whether he wanted Kier-Dan to reject him or not, considering all the factors.

But Kier-Dan only scoffed. "Reject the offering to appease *my* gods? You anarat do love your traps."

He seethed for moments more, the air in the small room heating to an unnatural degree. "If you dance battle with me between now and the wedding, I will slaughter you," he said viciously, and he did not mean it in jest.

It struck Braza hard. Braza wanted badly to see Kier-Dan fighting all out, nothing held back, to test himself against that strength. In the end,

he didn't. He knew better than to risk his life without purpose to the sands.

---

It was a royal wedding and thus a public affair. There were public feasts for three days, a royal palanquin both of them hated to be aired in, and long silences to endure from each other as every eye and ear was turned their way.

Just because Braza was the Lesser Prince did not make him a matter of no importance in the court at the times his presence was required. He had always bound himself to the military, and that saved him much of the political scrutiny they both now underwent. But a marriage was the founding of a house, and a house had potential a mere commander did not. Kier-Dan's own family was inquired into, and he left it at admission he'd been educated at Kawusert.

It made him socially inept in the ways anarat nobility preferred, his unwillingness to dally in alliance-making. When Braza put the ruby ring in his ear, it made him the lesser spouse in the eyes

of the parashat. Salathos had certainly planned this well.

Even so, the floods had eased, the late crops flourished, and when Saigiri conquered the Areshesh and gave it to them for a wedding gift, all could see the gods had removed their wrath from the land.

—

He may have been conquered in marriage, but he was not conquered in bed.

Braza had devoted little time or energy or attention to sex through the years of training or battling in the field or eventually commanding. It was inappropriate to solicit sex with those not one's peers within the military, and he'd avoided anyone outside of the military as much as he found possible.

Somehow he doubted the same could be said for Kier-Dan.

Kier-Dan wrestled with him for dominance, and this time he did not lose. He bit down hard on Braza's neck, making Braza swear at the pain,

but then there were kisses behind it, lighting up his nerve endings, and that was wrong on so many levels, he tried to throw Kier-Dan off again.

Kier-Dan pressed him down and growled. "You already put the bit in my ear. You're not taking this too."

It didn't take long at all for that to sink in, but Braza hadn't exactly been anticipating consummation at all, let alone as the *receiving* party. "We don't have to consummate at all," Braza said roughly.

Kier-Dan didn't lessen his hold but he did pull his head up and breathe out what could only be called a laugh. "Only the anarat." His skin was still burning to the touch, anger a live thing in his body, if not his voice.

"I'm not ignorant," Braza growled back.

"This is an offering to the rihaleri *gods*," Kier-Dan reminded him, another swear word in his own language. "They're going to know if we don't."

Braza blinked upward and swore back. He hadn't really thought about that. He hadn't thought about that at all. Because to his mother,

this was a political opportunity impossible to go without exploiting. To the gods, he had no idea what this was.

"To not marry a commander like you to a member of the First Circle would be an insult to both your gods and mine," Braza pointed out. It's how they would have honored a sunborn.

Kier-Dan narrowed his eyes as he looked at Braza for a long moment. "Shut up." Then he leaned down and shut him up with his mouth.

Braza stopped arguing, mostly tried to stop fighting, but Kier-Dan was rough and relentless, hands going places that left Braza breathless. He was so physically *hot* and yet it just made every rough bite and bruising grip and thrust more intense. It wasn't comfortable, but it lit off every sense and all the energy in his body as they were in battle.

Finally, Kier-Dan collapsed onto his back, panting quietly, looking not so much satisfied, but more as if he'd just finished bruising and being bruised in battle dance. Which in a way, he had. Braza's neck still ached from that first bite.

"You're an animal," Braza growled.

Kier-Dan laughed, a surprisingly soft, open sound. Then he rolled over and went to sleep.

Braza stared at his back incredulously for a long time before finally staring at the ceiling until sleep took him too.

—

Three days feasting, one week wedding leave from duties. They were both going to be tearing the walls down if they were stuck with only each other for that long.

—

Saigiri's eyebrows came up when she saw the angry bruise covering half of Braza's neck. Kier-Dan ignored the pointed look Karkil sent in his direction. The ruby ring in his ear flashed in the light. Conflicting signals. Not something Braza had actually considered before.

Of course.

"Shouldn't you lovebirds be off," Karkil said with the appropriate shooing gesture, "love-birding."

Kier-Dan scoffed right as Braza snorted disbelief.

Saigiri laughed beneath her breath, then raised a spear.

Kier-Dan lifted his before Braza could reach his. It glowed red.

She grinned back at him.

They danced on the sands, spear on spear, fireborn heat on nothing but Saigiri's inhuman speed and reflexes. Kier-Dan had tightly contained all of the anger into intensity and economy of motion, ruthless battle. Were they but younglings again, he would have taken first cup.

Braza danced with Karkil after. He'd have to rub out a dozen bruises from her bow-strengthened muscles. He reveled in it, fought for her, brought her down on the sands at last.

Some things hadn't changed.

They all turned around and put their men through training hell.



"Will you cover me like a wolf?" Braza demanded, brazen and harshly amused.

Kier-Dan dragged his head back and up by his hair, and it hurt and it didn't really bother Braza that that's why it felt good. He'd never considered before this whole farce of a marriage that he might actually *like* the spark and push and pull of going up against Kier-Dan when it felt like both of them were fighting.

Kier-Dan's skin burned hotter even as Braza's burned brighter.

"You're not humiliating me. It's not a disgrace to the anarat." Braza always thought the honor of the Haijarin made little sense to him, and now he was certain of it.

"Then you can choke on it," Kier-Dan said viciously.

Braza growled, surprised to realize he wanted to.

That made Kier-Dan pause. He let Braza up enough to turn over onto his back, which was better. Braza didn't mind the renewed grip in his

hair. There was a fiery gleam in Kier-Dan's eyes but he was very very still as if deciding whether he wanted to deny Braza or himself.

Braza grinned. "You got a problem with that, parashat?"

Kier-Dan leaned down and it was more of a bite than a kiss, teeth on teeth, tongue sweeping his mouth and every drop of blood from the rough treatment. "I'm Kier-Dan, not Kier-Rash. Don't forget that."

"Why would I know your tongue, Haijarin?" The faint curl of condescension Braza always brought to such insults.

"Yet you know my tribe," Kier-Dan murmured so low he'd barely heard it. A faint smile crossed his lips. He looked like he'd kiss Braza again, but he didn't. He shoved Braza's head at the right height and angle and for a second, Braza thought he *would* choke on it with how hard Kier-Dan thrust into his mouth.

He found a rhythm and knew he had it right when Kier-Dan hissed pleasure between his teeth.

It was too much, not enough, new and still burning hot. He didn't mind the roughness—he'd

had worse from battlefields—and there was compensation in the strained sound of Kier-Dan's voice and breath as he managed barely to not come apart.

Then Kier-Dan was pushing him back, dragging him up with an iron grip, and kissing him like he hadn't before.

He kissed sensuously, like he actually meant it, lingering over Braza's mouth like he was enjoying the taste of it. His fingers came up and gripped his jaw, pulled him closer, their bodies finding friction. Braza's hand slid downward and Kier-Dan didn't shove him, didn't force the issue to dominate. It made him feel heady and light-headed, or that was the fact that they were barely breathing, just chasing kiss after kiss, nipping and licking at the blood it brought.

Kier-Dan's breath was harsh between each kiss, his hair brushing Braza's eyes and getting in the way, but neither of them stopped to fix it, didn't even bother lining up to join properly, too intent on the chafe and press of their bodies exactly as they were.

Braza groaned as he spilled between them—first.

Kier-Dan pulled back just enough to grin before biting down on Braza's shoulder as he shuddered through his own climax.

Braza viciously kept his hand moving through it and past the end just to watch Kier-Dan lose himself in it.

—

"Clearly, he's both rough in bed and good in bed," Karkil commented comfortably after carefully examining Braza from her seat at the commanders table in the meal hall.

Braza scoffed and sat. "How's that?"

Karkil shoved a platter his direction. "You're only required to consummate once, and those teeth marks are new."

It took all Braza's discipline not to reach up to find the new mark with his hand. Instead, he made himself shrug. "Some bruises don't show up right away."

The look Karkil gave him could have smelted metal. "Good in bed," she repeated. "Careful though. That kind's the jealous kind."

Braza just groaned. "And how's that?"

"Trust me. I'm wed," she reminded him. "You're new-wed. Listen to your wisers and betters."

He stuffed his mouth with bread before he said something she'd take him to the sands for.

—

Karkil wasn't wrong. Kier-Dan was ridiculously good in bed, and Braza really needed to even the score out at some point.

After another breathless round and leaving enough red welts and bruising kisses to consider the favor returned, Braza decided keeping the score even could wait until after the new-wed period.

Instead, he opened up a different conversation. "Old Sero's going to the Varhas Mountains against the Eternal Emperor."

Kier-Dan drew a sharp breath. Old Sero was first among the Legendary. He'd once swept across the maritime trader tribes that preceded the Merchant Empire and established primacy over all the seas, taking seaports and trade routes in a single season.

The so-called Eternal Emperor had repelled every attack of the Four Suns since the founding of their empire. It was a campaign to forge legends.

Braza knew he was hooked. "I heard you once razed the entire arable acreage of the Suhan with one strike of the gauntlet."

Fireborn. Kier-Dan had rarely shown what the barely contained fire of his body was truly capable of.

He kept his counsel now, face neutral. "I heard you once blinded every watcher on the wall of the Bastor permanently and smelted their cannons."

They were both deadly, both tense as they considered the meaning behind their probing words.

"He might not take more than one High Commander besides his favorites," Braza finally said.

"That's what's bothering you." That look of disgust Kier-Dan had always managed so easily. "We're all of us going to be Legendary, Braza."

Braza narrowed his eyes. "Don't tell me you don't care."

"Why should I care about *you*?" Kier-Dan demanded, a livid flare of red along his flank.

Braza traced over it with his fingers and wasn't batted away. He made himself speak quietly. "We split first cup how many times? We were always rivals for first."

Kier-Dan stared down at him for a long time. Finally, he asked, "And who else took first cup those years?"

Not often, but they certainly *had*. "Saigiri. Karkil." Braza shrugged. "They're not godstouched."

That mattered in the way rankings added up.

"Who but the godstouched could slay a thousand men on one spear?" Kier-Dan looked incredulous. "Just because we do not understand

their magic does not make it less magic." He dropped down to the bed to lie beside Braza, his body heat calming to something just above someone normal's. "You want to be first among the Legendary," he said in a quietly calculating tone.

"Don't you?" Braza retorted harshly. "You're angry about this marriage."

Kier-Dan's eyes narrowed. "I would never insult a Haijarin by marrying Rash."

Braza paused, memory flying backward to the comment of a previous night. "So your name's Kier?" He'd never asked what Kier-Dan's social ranking was among his own people.

Kier-Dan scoffed. "Now you ask."

"And what of people in love? Don't they ever marry outside their level?" Braza persisted.

"They work their way to the level they want to marry in," Kier-Dan replied. "Before they marry."

"No one can just work their way into a rank."

Kier-Dan raised an eyebrow. He'd done as much in the military, but that was the military.

Braza let it go. He knew nothing about the Haijarin but that they were parashat, they were

fireborn, and the things that mattered to their sense of honor were ridiculous. "So what are you?"

"Dan."

Braza gave him a look.

Kier-Dan sighed, worked his head back into the pillow. "My grandfather is the ruler over all the Haijarin." The calm was deceptive. Red flared under his skin, burned under his hair.

He wasn't treated anything like his rank.

Braza was stunned. He didn't say anything at all for a long while. "You're of the first circle."

"Yes."

But it wouldn't have mattered because first circle or not, he was parashat, foreignborn, and the sunborn were terrible at acknowledging anyone else as their equal.

"You never say anything," Braza pointed out, barely noting Kier-Dan's eyes opening halfway to study him. That slow, intense silence had always hidden anger he realized. And why was he saying it now?

After a long pause, long enough to tell Braza had no more to add, Kier-Dan finally answered.

"And then where would I be? They'd blame it on my parsh't'ha blood and hold me back."

Unacceptable. Braza had always wanted to see Kier-Dan utterly unrestrained, but he wasn't wrong. Braza could have a fit of temper and that's all it was. Parashat couldn't and still rise the way Kier-Dan had.

"Do you want to express your anger?" he asked.

But Kier-Dan surprised him. "No." He exhaled, gestured dismissively. "Only anger harnessed is good for anything." He looked so tired, like he had taken down his guard he wore everywhere else. Or removed the gauntlets that harnessed his power.

Braza let his gaze wander down to where they usually sat. An angry scar stopped right at the gauntlet's upper boundary, then the skin beneath was unmarred, but shaded darker than the skin above and below. He'd viewed Kier-Dan as his rival for so long, and he didn't really see that changing. But he didn't hate him.

"You really think we'll all be legendary," he commented.

Kier-Dan didn't even open his eyes. "Who else? Of course, you won't be first up then, not until Shahadiar dies and then you'll be old." His mouth curved upward. "There's always someone in front."

Braza scowled. "I want to be first."

Kier-Dan opened his eyes then, looking amused. "You have your wish, hazari."

Braza glared at him. "I do not speak your language"

"I thought you didn't need to."

Braza swore, frustration rising into anger. "I'll kill you."

"How?" Kier-Dan laughed outright. "By biting down next time you suck my cock?"

Braza's answering growl didn't lessen Kier-Dan's humor, but finally, he did answer. "Hazari is atrit." First spouse. The position Kier-Dan had been forced to cede to Braza, by the rules of the sunborn.

"You're terrible." Braza settled back beside him.

Kier-Dan agreed readily. "All legends are."

It's all Braza wanted, had ever wanted. But... "The Lesser Queen," he said quietly.

"Yes, your mother wants to use me as a tool to put you on the throne," Kier-Dan cut him off, just as dismissively as before. "And you just want to be Legendary. We'll dance that battle when we reach those sands."

The displeasure in his tone implied the words he did not say. Can we sleep now?

Braza curled around him, like Kier-Dan needed it. He didn't. But he sank back into the embrace like for the first time since they wed, he didn't mind. 

## STRANGER IN THE STORM

### SEASON'S KINGS

#### Winter

It was early evening at the great Summer Court, but it was storming outside and already quite dark. The lanterns and chandeliers had already been lit, and there were those who shivered when standing near any of the great windows of the royal hall. It had been winter for a very long time.

The King and Queen of that court had already received the heralds of the coming storm—watchers blasted their trumpets, gates were shut, but the doors for the wayfarer and stranger left unlocked though guarded, for their kingdom was not at war with anyone at all, but

for the endless winter of a hundred years, and no man could do battle with that.

Except perhaps one.

No one looked twice at the Summer Prince. Some thought him one of the royal princes, though it had been generations since all thought him so. Some thought him the Court Mage, who reserved his powers for the growing of their food. Even the King and Queen only knew as their parents had told them that the Summer Court was obliged to house the Summer Prince until such time as his father sent for him. As his title and not his name went in the books of the records, no one even realized that Arot had been in this court for more than a hundred years, from before permanent winter had claimed the land.

Arot felt winter batter against the royal palace, the fortress surrounding, the city surrounding that, the lands surrounding that. He felt the cold like frostbite at his fingers, felt the overcast sky like an oppressive weight hung from his shoulders, shivered though he stood at the very heart of the room near the great roaring fireplace and did not look towards the King and

Queen, one the great-grandchild of his one-time foster mother.

There were other things he felt—bitterness, anger, regret. Storms came frequently during the long winter, but even now, he was colder than ever, thought he'd never felt quite as cold as this but once.

A long, low gong sent a hush through the hall.

It was almost time for the court to adjourn for dinner, but that sound. Arot looked up, eyes narrowing. It made a lady hovering nearby start as if frightened. Arot was brighter and redder in coloring than anyone else and when he grew suspicious, as he did now, his eyes tended to flame into brilliant gold.

He did not smile to reassure her as he usually did. He kept his eyes on the door, listened to the measured tread of a guardsman leading in whatever stranger had stumbled in out of the cold, white dark, waiting for the great doors to the hall to open and a cloaked figure to emerge into warmth, dripping with slowly melting snow and frost.

“The Summer Court greets you, traveler,” said the Queen most graciously. It had always been the rule of the Summer Court to shelter those near captured by winter. “From where have you traveled?”

The stranger pulled back his head and bowed, and Arot’s breath arrested in his throat. “The north,” said the stranger in a dark low timbre that seemed to crackle with ice.

When he rose up again, he was so much more beautiful than he’d ever been before, all his melancholy lines sharpened into impenetrable mystique, eyes blue and piercing, the faint hint of his smile more honed and less easy than before. He’d become a man from the boy’s mere promise, and to look at him was to feel alive with cold and humming with power, and the word was out before Arot could stop it.

“Heresh,” he said flatly, feeling locked within his chest where he felt his heart had stopped beating years ago as his land had turned to ice.

The stranger looked over, for Arot no longer chose to stand near the royal pair, not when the woman who’d told him everything she could

remember of his father, who'd raised him as her own, and chided them both for every caper they got up to was now nothing more than an ache in his chest and heart where all his lost had settled.

Heresh's smile should have sharpened, become more cruel. Instead it softened, eyes seeming to look back over the years toward their childhood. "Arot," he answered, and for a moment, just a moment, it was as if no time at all had passed.

Arot's anger burned white hot and livid, but he did justice to his duty and turned back to the King and Queen and told them, "We knew each other a long time ago."

"Ah," said the King with cheer, mistaking his meaning. Arot did not correct him. "Then you are welcome to join our evening feast."

Heresh bowed, and Arot went out before he could see Heresh sent to a warm chamber to dry himself, before memory could do more than bite at Arot's heels as he left.

—

## Summer

Memory.

Two young boys running over the gentle sunlit forest, laughter filling the warm, soft summer air. They were at the Summer Court, not in the Lands of Eternal Summer. At some point, numb crisp air would overtake the woods, but winter was mild near the Summer Court when it came, for it was the heart of the kingdom closest to summer.

It was said the power of both the Summer and Winter Kings waxed and waned. When one grew strong, the other began to grow weak, and so the lands between the wintry north and the summery south moved from one season to the next over the course of time.

The boys felt free from this cycle for a time, caught up in the joys of youth and the long stretch of the end of a decade long summer or more. There was no end immediately in sight.

Arot, tired of swinging from the branches, fell back on the grass beside Heresh for a moment to catch his breath. It wasn't always this

easy. It wasn't all play. There was a lot of time spent learning to rule, running around and easing the problems of those who occupied this land, and hearing the stories from the Queen about his father, the former Summer Prince, whom she'd loved like a brother.

"I don't want to go away," he said suddenly.

Heresh lifted his dark head from a tree root he'd pillowed it against.

"I like helping people, being *here*, with them." Arot frowned. He stared up at the sky, unaware of the picture he made stretched out on the grass, red hair tousled, glowing like the sun itself had taken root under his skin. "The King rules summer," he added, "not the people."

It was true. The season of the prince was for living among people. The season of the king was for wielding power over the earth itself.

"You like people," Heresh commented.

Arot bumped his shoulder. "Don't you?"

Heresh thought of those who had mocked and scorned him when he was a child, little more than another manufactured container for his father's power, to keep it from overwhelming the

man's body and killing him. He rolled over and breathlessly tangled a hand in Arot's hair, drawing those golden eyes to look up at him curiously. "I like you."

---

## Winter

There was feasting in the Summer Court, meals served at frequent intervals to different guests of the royal household. The strangers within the gates partook with the royal court, but there were other cycles when those of the city were fed, when the leftover harvests of the day were carted out for distribution to those in the land.

The storm howled outside, but within was light and warmth.

Arot did not avoid the dinner table, as Heresh's presence was not enough cause to despise the court or insult its rulers. But he made sure to sit far from the place given to strangers, where Heresh sat now, dried and refreshed and still too handsome by far.

“What have you seen in your travels?” asked one of the lords, Kagos, who liked to ride through the frozen woods over icy roads to other lands and learn of tales worth entertaining the court on a winter’s evening. There was plenty of trade still to be had, despite the reign of winter everywhere.

But Heresh shrugged, disinterest in his eyes if not quite his tone. “I’m rarely away from home. I’m sure you’ve heard more interesting.”

Ha! Arot wanted to laugh. Heresh was the most interesting tale of all and a mystery to even its fellow participant.

“Have you ever heard of the Winter Court?” Kagos asked then. “Our colder mirror and the last bastion of the north where people always dwelt,” he added.

Who hadn’t heard of it? But that wasn’t what Kagos meant, and many at the table quieted or leaned forward to better hear. Surely he meant to tell what had become of it.

“I heard they stopped sending messages to our court more than a hundred years ago,” Lady Aurek said, eyes gleaming with interest.

It was enough to convince Kagos of his audience, though Heresh barely looked up from his soup.

“Ah, yes. I went up there at the zenith of the heat and sun,”—what would have been summer had they any—”to see for myself what only legend now speaks of. But the mountains were shrouded in drifts so deep, a loud cry could send snow over all the villages below. The ice was so thick, only wells in houses give forth water. There was no passable way up.

“But in the last village of the foothills, there’s a small well-established inn they say has been there since before the endless winter, and they told me that up the mountain sits the palace of the Winter Court. It is frozen solid,” Kagos said, looking around keenly at the listening lords and ladies. “The ice has swallowed it up and rises high above the walls. All the people within have succumbed to winter and died long ago, still frozen there, unburied by anything but the snow.”

“How gruesome!” declared the Lady Aurek. “Surely it can’t be true!”

But “It’s true,” a voice said flatly.

Arot stared at Heresh, suddenly dropping his silver utensils with a clatter, horror blooming in his chest.

Heresh looked back, eyes dark and unsurprised.

“It’s been there for a hundred and twenty years,” Arot whispered. From when they were *children*.

Heresh stared back for a long moment. “Yes.”

Arot didn’t even try to hold back the sudden arousal of feeling. “Were you always a monster?” he demanded loudly, too loudly.

The guests at the table stirred in unease, uncertain of what had just happened, what shifted from a mere tale to something else altogether. The King and Queen did not speak against Arot. They had generally always left him be, even when he seemed inexplicable.

Heresh put his chin on his fist and stared at Arot, as if he were drinking in a sorely missed sight. Arot had exploded on more than one occasion in their youth.

But he had lost the right to do that. Arot glared at him.

“What else did you think I was?” Heresh asked.

Arot growled and stood, barely pausing to bow to the King and receive a permissive gesture to leave, before he turned and stormed out of the banquet hall, unwilling to hear anymore.

—

## Summer

It was getting colder, the Summer King’s power slowly fading enough to let winter’s edges turn the color of the leaves, turn the air cooler.

Arot shuddered sometimes as his body began to warm and hum with a strength he had no concept of how to wield. Heresh would look at him worriedly, but Arot would wave it off. He’d told Heresh he was the Summer Prince, and this was a natural part of that.

The power would overcome the King's body eventually and as he burned out, the power would go to Arot.

"I'll have to go south soon," he figured aloud. "It'd be horrible to ascend here," he added with a grimace. The Lands of Eternal Summer were not as hospitable as the Summer Court at their edges. At Arot's ascension to the position of King, he would be the epicenter of so much heat and light and blazing intensity as to overwhelm any people near him.

To be the Summer King was to be lonely.

Heresh huffed. "You say it like it's easy."

Never that. Arot knew what he really meant though. *You're saying you're going to leave me.*

"Hey." Arot caught Heresh's hand. "I'll race you back to the palace!"

More than one hapless person had to jump to evade their careening helter skelter run that followed.

Heresh had arrived, a stranger in a storm, just a few years before when they were both fourteen years old, and now they were almost men, but for

a short precious time, Arot allowed himself to forget that and enjoy the brief days he had left.

---

## Winter

A stranger in the storm. The Summer Court had long held the rule that they could not turn away strangers in the storm. Once, that had brought Arot his truest friend, and now it brought the traitor back to him.

Arot tried not to focus on the bitterness aching inside him as he made his way to the private gardens and found the warm soil of the inner courts. The seeds had been planted already, and now he used what power he had—not enough to fight back the winter, but enough to feed the people.

He put his hands to the earth and breathed in the good scents of growing things, felt the strum of life in the land, and breathed out summer.

Seeds sprang to life, grew with their roots stretching down to the waterways built into the

gardens, stretched green and alive upward toward the glowing lamps overhead and the light and heat of Arot himself.

Fruit trees hung heavy with ripening apples and peaches and pears. Wheat filled a plot to its edges. Herbs and vegetables crowded each other and clambered over trellises. It grew until Arot gasped and lifted his hands from the soil and dropped to the stone beside.

He only had so much power. Somewhere the Summer King was trapped and sealed away behind an immense wall of winter and ice, rising over the mountains before the great deserts and the Land of Eternal Summer. Somehow the power of the Summer King could no longer pour into Arot as it poured out of his father.

He clenched his fists, even surrounded by a summer harvest to feed the kingdom for another short while. He was the Summer Prince, but he wasn't enough.

—

## Summer

Heresh hadn't planned to ever return to the Winter Court. He stood there now, breath coming out in icy puffs, the power he'd hidden deep inside his body thrumming coldly. Arot didn't know he'd been the Winter Prince, let alone...

The Court was ghastly, as horrific as his memory had served. The Winter King had not been content with tradition. Instead of leaving his child among the heirs of the Winter Court, he'd taken up residence and ruled cruelly, pouring his power into icy crystals whenever it threatened to harm him, and eventually taking his son, far too young, far too early, and pouring far too *much* into him.

Their kind did not live long. Traditions held for centuries had a purpose, but though the traditions were passed down, the purpose was not.

The Winter Prince wrestled with his father for the power and became the Winter King in the most devastating landslide of snow and ice raging from his very body that any Winter King's ascension had ever caused.

Heresh stared at the ruins of his land, his people, the ones he'd never had the opportunity to care for and rule, nor even the opportunity to learn how. He never told Arot it made him jealous sometimes.

But sentiment was wasted. His body eased into the feeling of the cold of his land, the strength of the old earth and stone of his mountains. He began to walk and let the feeling of his power returning to him change the way he walked, the way he stood. He'd associated the feeling with everything he hated, but he could not deny it felt good.

He found the seals his father had made, receptacles of power Heresh had used to anchor the cold up north despite his own flight south. They were cold, so cold, and to take one up in his arms felt like drawing all the power back into himself.

Everywhere Arot walked, summer blossomed in the earth around him, grew plants beneath his tread. He was a breath of warm sunlight wherever he went.

Heresh felt it now that he was too close to the seals, winter rooting into his flesh, stretching out from his touch, his breath, his very thoughts as the land welcomed home its king.

He swore, wrestled a seal from the ground anyway, like an icy statue in his embrace. He had a very long way to carry it, so he had best get started.

—

## Summer

Something was wrong.

Arot frowned as the quality of the cold stealing over the land shifted. There was too much frost on the ground in the mornings, too much death burrowing into the earth below. His senses rejected that winter would come so hard, so soon, and before he'd received his power.

Surely, the Summer King could either hold back the winter or pass summer into his son.

He wanted to tell Heresh he was worried, but he couldn't, because Heresh had left for a few

days to visit family. Arot frowned. Heresh had never even spoken of his family before.

He followed the wrongness with his own instincts, letting his sense of summer and winter guide him toward the sting of cold coming from the north unchecked. Had the Winter Prince come to visit? he wondered. A Prince would make it unseasonable but not destroy the balance altogether as the visit of a King would.

But Arot's frown deepened as he turned southward and felt an unnatural bastion of cold hard winter there.

South was where the Summer King dwelt. South were the Lands of Eternal Summer. There should never be winter there.

He was still frowning when surprise widened his eyes and he saw Heresh coming up the path from the southern road.

"Heresh!"

Heresh looked up suddenly, startled, eyes dark and haunted. He stared at Arot coming toward him for such a long moment, naked hunger on his face.

It was as wrong as everything else. Arot stopped walking, suddenly terrified, and started running toward Heresh.

Heresh smiled then, too sweet for his always melancholy face. He spread his arms and the world exploded into cold.

—

## Winter

Arot hadn't seen Heresh in more than a hundred years, and here he was now, spent with exhaustion in the face of what Heresh had wrought upon Arot's land, weary beyond grief.

He'd never had the chance to talk to Heresh. There had been ascension—*winter's* ascension—in the middle of the lands of the Summer Court, then Arot recovering from the sudden onslaught of power too great for him to fight, then waking to find the Court knew nothing of what had happened or where Heresh had gone, only that it was now winter.

A winter that never ended.

Arot stared at his own unaging hands. He'd never heard of their kind being immortal either, only that their life waxed and waned with their power. Arot scowled as it struck him again, not for the first time, that he knew nothing of what had happened either or why.

And Heresh was *here*.

He forced himself off the stone ground by the new harvest and made himself get to his feet, walk the distance necessary to leave the gardens, then gripped the wall and made his way down the corridor. He knew where the guest suites were.

—

## Summer

The Summer King had never met a Winter Prince, not the one who'd become King, not this barely grown youngling trudging up to his mountains with a seal of winter in his arms.

It had been a long time since the Summer King felt winter sapping his strength and fighting him powerfully. It extended his own life and reign

and how long before the Summer Prince would have to ascend. But now, something had changed and winter walked the land again, no longer anchored distantly, no longer dormant in the lands between their powers.

There used to be enough power in the Summer King to fight even this, but he'd lost enough to his child as it burned through his body that this new cold threat might be beyond him should the Winter King follow on the heels of this Prince.

"Why are you here?" he asked politely. No need to ask for a battle if that's where this was headed.

The Winter Prince looked up at him but only looked minutely thoughtful. He wasn't coming up the mountain, the Summer King realized. He was planting winter's seal at its base.

Only a King could flood it with enough power to stand against the Summer King in his stronghold, but that made it no less a threat. He sighed and drew on the light and heat of summer, pouring power into a land that rejected the seal of

winter, pushing against it and drowning it with life.

The Prince frowned at it a moment, then looked up at the Summer King again. There was no regret in his eyes as they turned cold and blue, and the sudden chill that bit through the earth was no half-gained Prince's power.

The Summer King stared down, stunned, as a Winter King, at the beginning and height of his strength, raised a wall and mountain of icy cold and thick sweeping drifts of snow right at the Gate of Summer. It was a seal, not a battle. It never crossed the mountains into Eternal Summer, nor did it continue to wrestle with the Summer King's strength when he reached out into the land. It shoved him back with an aching cold sting.

It was unheard of.

"You cannot hold back summer forever," he said to the boy, at last.

The King acceded with a small shrug. "You cannot pass this seal with what power you have."

He couldn't. It frustrated to no end, but he *couldn't*, not unless the Summer Prince came with

his power and they reached together. He couldn't help but wonder though, "Why?"

It didn't harm either Summer Prince or Summer King, but it would harm the land to have no summer. Winter had never seemed interested in ruling everything.

The Winter King turned his back and started to walk away, then paused. He murmured quietly, "He doesn't deserve to die yet."

The Summer King stared wide-eyed, suddenly realizing who and what he meant, though he couldn't fathom why. It was time for the Summer King to die soon, and once the Prince ascended, his time would be set from that moment.

Except he wouldn't ascend, couldn't—until this seal was removed.

"You can't hold the seal forever," the Summer King said, compassion softening his words. He'd loved his child. He couldn't hate someone who also loved him.

The Winter King didn't answer. He didn't have to. Just as the Summer King's power felt no battle from winter with the seal between them,

neither did winter have to fend off summer. The Winter King's power would last a very long time.

---

## Winter

Arot was neither gentle nor polite when he banged on Heresh's door and shoved himself inside. He stopped, frozen, a few steps inside.

Heresh was standing near the window, well away from the fire, breath frosting the wall. His cloak, jerkin, and shirt had all been discarded and his body looked like a mass of scars—ice burns and ice itself spread through his body. He looked frail and tired and beaten, and yet strangely, infuriatingly beautiful.

“Rude as ever, I see,” Heresh said flatly.

Arot forced his eyes upward. It could have been for staring or for bursting in in the first place, he was chiding, but it didn't much matter.

Arot closed the door and demanded, “Why are you here?”

Heresh stared for a long moment, face utterly unreadable. "I can't visit an old friend?" he asked.

It made Arot clench his fists in anger. "After what you did? After how you left?" He growled, fighting back tears and failing. "I loved you."

Heresh, the Winter King and the source of more than a hundred years of endless winter, looked up sharply and said with a scoffing tone, "How foolish."

Arot hardened his voice, demanded again, "Why are you here now, Heresh?" He had no strength, no power; he'd exhausted it all on the harvest; but he demanded as if he could force Heresh to answer.

Heresh sidestepped the question. "Why are *you* here," he asked, "instead of searching for your father to gain his power?"

"Like you did?" Arot was no fool. He knew the only thing that could have destroyed the Winter Court in that manner. "I'm *saving* my people!"

"Wouldn't it be better to save them by ending winter?" Heresh said in an overly reasonable tone.

Arot lunged, fist moving before he could even think to stop it, a hundred years of hurt and betrayal and anger boiling out of him in a moment.

Heresh didn't stop him or block the blow, just staggered into the wall, staring up at Arot with that naked hunger in his face that had never made sense before and still didn't now. "Isn't this what you wanted?" Heresh whispered.

Arot stared at him, confused.

"You wanted to stay."

It flooded back to him, that idle wish he could stay among his people instead of reigning over the seasons. Arot stared in horror, at the very idea this could have started because of him. "No," he whispered back. No.

Heresh said nothing for a long time, just studied him quietly, finally straightened gingerly, one hand against the wall. "I'm dying."

Arot couldn't find his voice, just looked again at the map of winter breaking Heresh's body. "Your son—"

"I have no son," Heresh snapped. "There is no Winter Prince."

Everything was wrong, and Arot put a hand to the icy scars in Heresh's flesh. Arot's hand hurt at the coldness of the touch.

"We're supposed to live for a season," Heresh went on quietly. "We've lived like this more than a hundred years. I have no heir, there is no Winter Prince, and the Summer King cannot pass down his power."

Arot growled. It wasn't something that just happened to them. "And whose fault is that?"

"Mine." There was no regret in Heresh's voice. "I wanted to keep you."

Arot's eyes widened.

Heresh barely whispered, barely loud enough to hear, his own subdued horror leaking out in words. "We're supposed to live for a season, and ours was almost over."

"And this is better?" Arot choked out, the enormity of what Heresh was saying, of what he had *done* sinking in.

"You're alive," Heresh answered.

"You sense-forsaken, overdramatic idiot," Arot vented and caught Heresh by the neck,

dragged him close enough to cry against his neck, crying for real this time without fighting it.

He didn't stop to think, didn't question the impulse as he caught Heresh's mouth under his and finally, finally, Heresh's stiff distance melted into familiar knowing warmth, a touch that had embraced Arot before, that trembled with want.

Time renewed Arot's power, and he took every flickering trace of it and spread his hands over Heresh's broken body to pour in summer, to hold in the brittle excess of winter, to hold death at bay a little longer.

Heresh gasped, but Arot didn't let him speak or question it. He kissed Heresh again like a man dying of thirst drank water.

—

## Winter

He stayed with Heresh that night, letting his warm glow seep into Heresh's body beside him, sated himself despite the lingering ache.

“What about your father?” Heresh asked, voice quiet in the near dark.

Their problems weren’t solved yet, and Heresh had clearly not thought everything through. Or Arot acknowledged to himself, he really was an idiot who thought the price was worth it.

“We’ll deal with that later,” he finally sighed. It would take more than a night to save them both and to right the balance Heresh had destroyed. “You should have stayed here if you hadn’t wanted to lose me,” he added.

Heresh didn’t answer.

The Winter King being here for so long would have starved the land for sure. Even so, Arot wasn’t yet willing to let go. Again.

He curled around Heresh and left the matter for another day. Exhausted but less bitter, he slept.

—

## Summer

It was early evening at the Summer Court when a child blew in with an unseasonable storm, drenched and bedraggled and miserable, shivering in his cloak. The guards took him to the court and he bowed before the King and Queen of that court with their many children.

One of the children did not look like the others. He was too red and too gold and too vibrant, and he only had to smile once before the Winter Prince blinked back at him and realized he was in love. ❧

THE LEGEND OF ROSE THE  
BOOKISH HERO

One.

"You will be my hero," announced the goddess standing in the doorway.

"Excuse me?" Rose lowered the book she'd been engrossed in just moments ago.

The goddess' divinity was clear from her golden glow, from her simply appearing by the bookshop counter, by her clear resemblance to all artwork of Asrat, the goddess of knowledge, that Rose had ever seen.

"I need a hero," Asrat repeated. "I've chosen you."

Rose sputtered. She should be prostrating herself, but her shock was too great and outweighed honor and respect. She flailed her hands in protest. "I'm a bookworm!"

Asrat smiled, unmoved. "Yes."

## Two.

Being a bookworm had never seemed like a dangerous pastime—that is, until Rose was marked with the seal of a goddess on her forehead and a prophecy in her hand that she alone would be able to take back the kingdom from the foreign invaders who now ruled it.

"Because of course, they're going to just let me waltz in and marry their heir," she muttered to herself. Let alone waltz in with an army if she knew anything about how to raise one.

She wasn't a hero! She loved books!

Rose grimaced and reached for the history books.

Three.

Books. Knowledge. Of course.

Rose stared in wonder at the answers that lay hidden at the heart of legends, stories, and myths. Ancient wonders and ruins that palace after palace and city after city had been built over the top of.

The Well of Knowledge. The Tower of Roses. The Sword of Victory. The Throne of Promise. Each established as the four cornerstones of power at the founding of the kingdom. Forgotten to all but the bookworms.

A hero didn't need to wield an army, just a sword, the right blood—and the knowledge of what to do with them.

## Four.

Rose sat down at the Well of Knowledge in the middle of the town square of a city at the outskirts of their nation. It wasn't the King's City and the foreigners had left it unguarded. She did not initially drink.

"I thirst after knowledge," she said, "and for wisdom to guard my kingdom."

"*Your* kingdom?" The ancient spirit guarding the well poked head out of the water, solidifying into a human shape. "You're no princess."

Rose nodded solemnly. "There is no princess, only one who seeks to save."

Truth. Imperative to receive knowledge.

"If you would save, then drink."

## Five.

Knowledge, the first step on the path to victory.  
Wisdom, the first gift granted by the gods.

The ancient guardian stared unblinkingly at Rose as she drank the offered cup from the Well of Knowledge and all the good and bad at the heart of man became known to her.

“Oh!” She nearly dropped the cup. Her heart filled with hope and sorrow, her eyes with tears.

“Truth is great and terrible, is it not?” asked the spirit, in a tone disinterested in her answer. “You see the ends and consequences of the roads you may take. Use it wisely.”

### Six.

The Tower of Roses stood at the distant ends of the kingdom, at the heights of its highest mountain. Rose had never practiced hiking or traveled so far. She didn't have enough money to hire someone to take her. It took a very long time to reach it.

At last, she lay panting at the foot of the tower, knowing she must climb it.

There was no door, no way in at all, but to the chosen.

Her name was Rose.

The tower of all the roses in the kingdom, beauty among thorns, ever fragrant before heaven.

She offered herself.

### Seven.

The first king of this land built a tower and filled it with roses. “Let these fragrant blooms be ever in your sight,” he offered the gods who had called him to this land. “Let them always speak of our loyalty. Let them be a perpetual offering before you.”

The gardeners had tended it for centuries before the foreigners came and conquered. They couldn’t enter the tower or break it though, for the gods had shut it up against them.

“Ah, chosen one.” The goddess of war, Sahut, reached out and opened the door. “Rose, are you? We’ve been waiting.”

## Eight.

Better a divine sword and holy goddess than an army, Rose thought to herself. She didn't have to lead a goddess nor convince her of the rightness of their cause. "I don't have to fight, do I?"

Sahut, the war goddess, laughed gently at her. "You really are a bookworm, aren't you?"

Rose would rather stay a bookworm, to be entirely honest and not train in combat under Sahut's tutelage. "I don't mind waking up the magic," she said, "but if you don't mind, I'd rather go back to the bookshop after."

"Refreshing honesty!" Sahut smiled. "I'll fight for you."

## Nine.

Now who could Rose set upon the throne? The old lineage surely still lived somewhere.

Back to the books she went, studying in the back of the cart carrying her to the old abandoned capital city and its Throne of Promise. She read genealogies and family histories until she found a branch of the royal family old enough and distant enough to not have been purged.

Minor nobility living on backwoods estates, as far as the foreign rulers were concerned.

Hopefully, they'd been taught how to rule. Rose hadn't been, and they couldn't pay her enough to make her Queen.

Ten.

He was running an estate and the nearby town when Rose found him, under the guiding hand of his ailing father, and he looked at her like she was crazy when she told him, "Oh, good! You do know something. I need to make you king."

Kastin stared at this stranger: a dusty, bookish, bespectacled prophet at best, but crazy person at worst who would surely get him killed.

“I’m not royal,” he told her bluntly.

What could only be the goddess of war appeared before him—her very image—mighty sword in hand. “Good work, Rose! He’ll do nicely.”

Eleven.

The gods, Kastin was learning, did not seem to care very much about the personal opinions of those who honored them.

“I’m supposed to bring in the harvest and stock the town granaries,” he tried yet another plea to the immovable goddess at her daily appearance.

“You wrote the steward to do that,” Rose unhelpfully reminded him.

But a steward was not an heir. “The town needs someone,” he pressed.

“How very responsible of you,” Sahut said. “Asrat will arrange it. Now your sword.”

There was nothing left to do but retrieve his sword for training under the goddess. Again.

Twelve.

Rose read the scroll again then waved Lord Kastin toward a very ancient, very dusty throne. “You’re supposed to kneel before it, promise to honor the gods and rule wisely, then sit on it.”

“And how am I supposed to rule wisely?” he asked with a hint of sarcasm that hadn’t left his voice since she’d retrieved him at swordpoint to go on her quest to take back the kingdom.

She thought back to the Well of Knowledge. “I’ll take you somewhere after you’re crowned.” It seemed promising enough that he cared to ask.

Promises here were binding.

“I promise.”

## Thirteen.

They promised many things at the old throne set in place by those who had spoken directly to the gods, tapped the power of the land, and forged implements of power to ever guard their kingdom.

Rose promised Kastin to bring him to wisdom. Kastin promised to learn it and use it to rule. They'd both promised to finish the task before them.

"You're not going to just stick me in the capital, hope Sahut will keep me alive and expel the foreigners, then leave," he told her bluntly.

"I'm a bookworm," she protested.

"You're a scholar. I'll need one."

## Fourteen.

The Sword of Victory was in the new capital city. The foreign invaders hadn't known anything

about it, besides that it was the sword of the king, and whoever wielded it in defense of this land would always be victorious.

Which meant it was very well guarded.

They hadn't taken it from the king when they'd conquered. They'd tricked him into single combat under rules that disallowed its use.

"We could try for that," Rose muttered as she read. "They like single combat."

Kastin was a trained swordsman, even trained by the goddess, but, "They're not that stupid."

"Right. Sword."

## Fifteen.

In the end, Rose asked Asrat, the goddess of knowledge, how to retrieve the Sword of Victory that only delivered its promise when used for its purpose. "It's surrounded by fifty guards who never sleep and only change shifts ten at a time."

"I could kill them all," Sahut, the war goddess, offered.

Rose looked pleadingly at Asrat.

“You could ask the twin gods of night and sleep to help you,” Asrat suggested.

“What sacrifice do they want?” Kastin interjected. An important point. Night and Sleep were generally considered fearful, not benevolent.

“I hear,” Asrat replied, “they’re partial to chocolate.”

Sixteen.

“I think we should have bought the chocolate,” Kastin complained, hot, sweaty, and fully disgusted with slaving over the stove.

Rose had the cookbook open to a recipe supposedly for the legendary royal chocolate. “Can’t afford it,” she said.

“I could,” he griped.

“Not until the leftover harvest is sold,” she said. “I checked your estate’s books already.”

“You mean my sister did,” he muttered. She had taken over as their father’s heir rather

seamlessly. He didn't really begrudge that, only her friendship by letter with Rose.

Kastin threw Rose a second apron. "If I'm doing this, so are you."

### Seventeen.

They'd bargained with gods, fed them, and followed instructions to the letter to arrive in the center of a courtyard surrounded by the sleeping bodies of the fifty of the strongest members of the king's guard. The foreign king's guard.

"We're here," Rose whispered, eyes frantic. In the heart of the enemy stronghold. She knew books, not fighting.

Kastin took her by the hand and squeezed reassuringly, but hushed her. He drew the Sword of Victory in his other hand.

It would take both knowledge and strength to take back their kingdom again. It felt right to hold them both.

## Eighteen.

A goddess went before them, the goddess of war, Sahut. They'd seen her image in artwork and depictions in statue, read of her mighty deeds and of those she'd trained to take up sword or knife or even their bare hands, how they raised up armies and conquered cities proudly drunk on the blood of those who belonged to the land.

A goddess went beside them, the goddess of knowledge, Asrat. She was as recognizable as her sister, and spoke and shone knowledge into the hearts of the people of this land. "Your time of deliverance is come."

They rose.

## Nineteen.

Rose had set all of this in motion—countrymen rising to their own defense, a rightful king in-

stalled upon the throne, the gods who had given them this land in the first place honored anew.

Now, she watched as they took the city and the palaces and toppled the monuments to the foreign power who had conquered them, watched as they put the foreign rulers to the knee and demanded their submission and obedience or their exile.

It took her breath away. She'd been buried in books about the time they were free. Now it was no longer a story.

## Twenty.

Kastin didn't entirely want the throne, but he'd promised to take it, to hold it, to find wisdom and drink of it. There was another promise he'd claimed.

He built a library and filled it with books. He built the Great Hall of the Scholars and filled it with those who'd devoted their lives to study. He

had a certain bookshop carefully uprooted and resettled in the shadow of the palace.

“You are a menace,” Rose said with certain vim, even as her traitorous eyes wandered over the mountains of books he’d gathered for her.

He waited.

“Fine! I’ll stay!”

### Twenty-One.

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a young woman named Rose—actually Ilsaia, but that name means Rose in their language, which is important—who made a bookshop her home.

One day, the goddess of knowledge came to her, needing a hero.

Rose was not in a position to refuse, so she went forth, awakened the old magic of the land, and gave the hidden prince a sword of victory. With it, he drove out the foreign conquerors and became king.

Strength conquers but wisdom rules, so he  
made her queen.

They lived happily ever after. ❧

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liana Mir reads, writes, and wrangles the muses from her mundane home in the Colorado Rockies and, occasionally, from the other side of the Barrier.

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