

ACCEPTABLE COST

twenty stories of power and choices

LIANA MIR

Copyright © 2015 Liana Mir

First Mass Market Edition

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations, book reviews, and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

www.lianamir.com

ISBN-13: 978-1522715900

ISBN-10: 1522715908

Printed in the United States

ACCEPTABLE COST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE SINGER | 3

CROSSING THE BARRIER | 27

PORTRAIT OF A BUTTERFLY | 41

GONE HUNTING | 65

DOWSE AND BLEED | 91

BAKER OF SOULS | 177

A PRETTY WORD | 185

ADDENDUM: FICLET O'CLOCK | 201

ADDENDUM: MYTH | 287

DEDICATION

To tielan. Here are some more women for your collection.

*Also to G. Jackson, my tireless beta on the vast majority
of these stories.*

WARNINGS:

This book contains references to violence, abuse, child exploitation, etc. and some on-screen censored swear words. The viewpoints of the characters do not necessarily reflect those of the author.

THE SINGER

CALINDRIA

Kaliri was a young woman once, proud in her strength, perhaps more than was her right. Even now, it took so little, hardly a thought, a slight thrumming of her vocal chords—her soul—and the teapot nudged itself onto the tray she held. Still almost unconscious, this stretching forth of power blended with thought. She hummed softly while she carried the service into the warm sitting room to lay out on a tea table between the chairs.

The visitors' cloaks spilled carelessly beneath them on her furniture. Their boots dug heavily into the soft rugs her husband had made for her—he wouldn't tell her what of. Their visages

were hardened, strengthened by a war she had once fought in; men of command they were.

She poured out. The china tinkled delicately as tea trickled into the cups and cups scraped against saucers and the men took them with nods of gratitude. She took her own teacup in hand, tested the brew's heat with a bare sip and warm breath, and then settled back into a separate seat somewhat removed from her two guests.

She was not given to the old courtesies that once guided her every way. She wore her husband's soft, thick tunic and cloak about her for warmth and a pair of loose trousers like a young man or what a servant girl might put on beneath her skirts. Her once lively conversation skills had been put to rest years prior. The only things she retained from her youth were her appearance, no easy thing to lose for one of her kind, and her restraint, impossible to give up. There was a time...

But ah, couldn't they all say that.

Kaliri took another sip of tea.

Silence stretched taut over the small room, and she made no attempt to break it. These men had climbed the highest mountains of Vas'hehr to

find her, knocked on the thick wooden door her husband had carved with his hands, fashioned in the old ways of her people, not his, and begged admittance. If only for the length and difficulty of their journey, she allowed them inside and offered them sustenance. But no more. She knew those red cloaks, stitched with the swirling patterns of the new self-styled nobility and their warriors' brooches of gold and ivory mingled together and their raw, hardened eyes that had seen the height of treachery. If they wished to speak to her, they would find the words from somewhere in themselves. She would remain silent.

“Your fame still stretches to the sea,” one said, his low voice rumbling intrusively into the space between them.

Kaliri merely looked at him and sipped her drink.

The older one frowned at the man who had spoken. He had darker hair, darker eyes than the young soldier, a face that might have remembered her himself. It was he that turned to her now and spoke with a rough, coarse voice but the smoothest of manners.

“We have no place to ask of thee.”

Ancient words. Ancient rituals. For the first time, fire flashed within her. Briefly. She squelched the urge beneath a warm bath of peaceful understanding. This man needed what she had once given so freely. He understood that she would not give it.

She tilted her head, appraising him. “You do not.” These were not the words of ritual, and he stiffened. But they were truth.

The younger man pulled in his foot and began to lean forward, but his commander stayed him with a hand, dark eyes never leaving Kaliri’s face.

“And yet, we must ask,” he rasped out. “Though we have no place, yet we must ask of thee, singer.”

“Singer?” Kaliri arched her brow and raised herself up in her chair at last. China tinkled when her saucer met the tray. She stared at him, spoke in surprised fury. “Do these old bones sing? You have come too late, commander. There is nothing left.”

The young soldier's eyes flashed surprise of his own. He looked her up and down. "You could not be old."

Her gaze snapped to his. "What do you know of age, child?"

The commander stood, turned away for a moment. Both of them watched as he took two paces to the right, then whirled back to the left. He looked at her. "You have song left in you."

She snorted her derision. "As much as you." The bitterness alone was enough to kill any power of her song. Those bright, pained notes lifted within her and died on the ache of her thoughts. "You know nothing of the old singers," she said softly. She lifted her eyes again to the dark, understanding eyes of the commander. "You know nothing of me," she whispered. And the words were too soft, spoken too well in the language of friends. She stiffened at her own self and looked away.

"I know a singer when she speaks," the commander replied.

Kaliri did not answer. She lifted her cup and sipped out the last bit of tea swirling about in the

bottom, then placed her cup on the saucer again. Finally, she met the commander's eyes again. Her voice was cold. "I will give you rooms."

His dark gaze followed her out into the hall, but only the young soldier's hesitant steps echoed softly on the ground behind her.

She put them as far back from her own chambers as was possible to go, gesturing at the low-slung wooden beds her husband had made. Fresh linens came from the great chest in the hall and she spread them over with a quiet thrumming, smoothing out the creases more easily than a simple maid could do. The commander watched her with those knowing eyes, but Kaliri knew the extent of her abilities and she did not cross that line. Restraint in manner and in power. To unmake would be deadly for far more than just herself. She left them in that distant room and let them sleep away from her dreams, lulled by the mountain winds.

Morning found her guests ready to go their way. The younger was clearly agitated, wanting to remain, perhaps, and persuade her to fulfill her duty to their people. But it was the way of hos-

pitality in Vas'hehr that to remain would be to overstay her generosity. So they gathered their things to leave. She packed them provisions so she would not have the burden of serving them again.

"They will overrun the country," the commander said suddenly.

Kaliri tightened the strap on the satchel and checked it for leaks.

He continued on in that low rasp. "Their falcons fly over the southern foothills. We have seen walking scouts down by Ráven."

Her fingers froze. Pain hissed out from between her teeth.

The younger gave her eyes of worry.

"Do not speak of Ráven," she stated icily, lifting her face to the commander's.

In that moment, he drew back, knowing somehow that he had overstepped his bounds, that he did not know, as he thought he had, just what happened on the fateful day her song broke in pieces against the mountain, and all were terrified at the loss.

“Shezo,” he whispered in quiet apology, a sound she had never been granted by a red-cloaked warrior. But it was too late now for that word to assuage her grief.

She gave them the satchel. Tears stung behind her eyes, but with the practice of decades, she could reach for peace, clasp to the Presence within her and release her anger—again.

“I am no singer,” she told the commander. “Tell them that the great singer Alakarea is dead.”

And she closed the door behind them.

—

Kaliri.

The voice was not unfamiliar to a woman once a singer. It followed her like the tender breath of a mother’s lullaby, or the rumble of a father’s heartbeat.

There was much left to her to tend in this home—all she had left of her husband—and he was the only man who had ever known her name.

“I am here,” she whispered over the soft tomatoes, past ready to be plucked. She was still

Calindria

here, still breathing, notes still humming beneath her fingertips. But it was not to the tomatoes she spoke.

I am the Great Singer, the one whose melody has formed the stars. Have you forgotten?

Forgotten the song and the Singer alike. The former birthed from the latter. The heart was prone to forget.

“I have not forgotten, my Lord,” she murmured. She had chosen the silence, what silence she could have, chosen to stagnate rather than rage in her grief. “I have not overcome.”

...

“There are rules of power,” Thea tells her over and over. “For every portion of light you would bring into this world, my daughter, that is how much darkness you must overcome.”

My daughter. Alakarea.

“I will learn,” she answers submissively. She is young, young enough to change who she is for what she would have.

...

“It has been long,” she answered now the One who made the song. “I do not know how to overcome this.”

Remember Me, alakarea. I have already taught you this.

She bowed her head submissively and wondered within when she had been taught.

—

Three days later, Kaliri opened her door to carry out the dishwater and pour it on the roses that grew alongside the steep path leading to her door, but she stood still when she saw the commander sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms around them, clearly in an attitude of waiting.

“How long have you been there?” she asked. One hand slid to her hip.

He looked up at her, then rose slowly to his feet. “Only since this morning. It was too dim a light to come upon your door.”

Calindria

She did not flinch at the words of another culture offered her with such conciliatory tones. She raised an eyebrow at him. "Where is your chaperone?"

"About twenty paces down with the danani," he said roughly, speaking of the mountain cats they rode. Smooth words and jagged voice. She wondered what kind of a singer he would have been.

A moment of silence, then he said, "The singer, Alakarea, is not Yakhweiré."

Kaliri studied him for a long moment. There was something in his eyes that had not been there before. Finally, she nodded in the direction of the glen down the mountain.

"Call him."

She served them tea, as before. This time, she first served the younger man, then she went to the commander and poured out for him. She took none for herself. It was the way of Vas'hehr.

"Your husband was not of our people," the commander rasped, almost as a question.

Kaliri stood and stared at him. "You speak as an intimate to ask me that," she chided. Fifteen

years among their people and she breathed their ways like her own.

But he was not chided. “Yet you serve us as a woman of Vas’hehr.”

“You misjudge me,” she replied coolly.

He stared at her.

The young soldier looked back and forth between.

She hummed quietly to herself, poured her own tea. The liquid swished softly into the cup, dark honeyed liquid, warming beneath the gentle song. She was never who they believed her to be. Only her husband saw her and saw *her*.

...

The singer is young, a power to be reckoned with. She cuts a long, slender figure upon the mountain into the wind, hand upraised, voice lifted. Wind cuts around her, gentling at her back, pressing sharply into an almost knife-edged point, before hurling itself before her into the thick-pressed troops of green and brown livery below.

She is the last great singer this people has ever known. The keening cries of fierce gale and the high ringing of her voice, like a silver bell chiming higher and fuller and louder until the armies of the south hold their ears against the sound, pushes back the sea of brown and green and dark hair and faces. It is an irresistible force that sends even the falcons careening out of the sky beneath its onslaught.

Wind sings beneath her hands. Mountains sing beneath her feet. Arrows shot at her are turned away. Darkness lancing slowly into twilight brightens beneath the blast, as though she can hold the sun itself in its place.

It is said that when she breathes, the army will press forward again. But it has been hours, and the song has never faltered, or she has never breathed.

...

“Commander, who do you think I am?”
Kaliri leaned back, lifting her cup to sip lightly

from the gilded edge. She settled it back into its saucer. “Do you know?”

He stared at her long with dark eyes beneath furrowed bushy brows, forehead knit into weathered lines. The young soldier beside him fidgeted nervously, but remained silent.

Finally, the commander spoke, “You are not of Vas’hehr.”

“I,” she said firmly, “am not of anywhere.”

Both eyebrows winged upward. His mouth formed a grim line. He lowered his gaze, drank from his tea, lifted his eyes again. “Your husband was not of Vas’hehr.”

“He was not.”

Yakhweiré he was, and so he should ever remain.

“But you are a singer,” the commander persisted, still so certain, so sure.

Kaliri lilted out a laugh, bright and soft like the girl she once was and was no longer. “What I am and what I was are separate things.” She canted her head toward him, considered. “You are as much a singer as I.” Yes, she could feel the light, trembling notes around him, deep and

strong. “There is something there that either was or can be...” She shrugged. “But is not.”

“Things that were do not cease,” the younger burst out suddenly, drawing both of their sharp attention. He gestured with his heated voice. “These things are *real*. They do not end.”

“What do you know of it?” Kaliri asked sharply. “Do you know the song that speaks to the depths of the rocks? That sings forth from the bright stars? That flows from the heart of the Singer’s Presence?”

He caught in his breath at that.

“Do you know the Great Singer?” she demanded. “Have you heard Him sing?”

Silence snapped between them all.

The commander dropped his hand to his knee and lowered his cup to the table beside. “We know nothing,” he finally whispered, grizzled voice, grizzled age coming together in weary defeat.

But a fire had been lit in his young companion’s eyes. “Have you?” he asked, loud enough for the stone beneath them to hear and resonate the song of reply.

Have you heard the Great Singer sing? Have you heard the song of the Presence?

Kaliri looked at him and saw in his eyes a fire she had long thought dead. “You believe I have not?” She spoke quietly, her own passion banked beneath the recognition of a familiar spirit.

He snorted and sat back, chewing on the inside of his own cheek. “I don’t know,” he said, teeth clenching, head turning. “I don’t know how anyone who has could leave it.”

Have you no other gods before me.

She closed her eyes, unflinching beneath the pain, leaned back in her seat, and let her memory take her.

...

When he wakes, he does not see her. His limbs tense and muscles clench, battle-wary and alert. He sees the strange roof of stone over his head, the hot breeze brushing against cut openings, and through them, the distant foreign expanse of sand.

But he feels her, for she does not cease in her ministrations.

“You were injured when we found you,” she tells him quietly. She dips the cloth in cool water again before bringing it back to his brow.

“Who are you, daughter of the desert?” he asks.

She guessed correctly, speaking to him in the language of the mountain people. He called her in his own tongue, *miqakarea*.

It is no wonder then she took the name of ‘daughter.’

“I am a daughter,” she says.

He reaches up to stay her hand. “I would rather die.” His face hardens. “Or kill them.”

She draws her hand away but shakes her head. “You will not die, warrior of Yakhwein.” She sets down the cloth and begins to change his bandages.

“You are stubborn.”

She raises an eyebrow at the bloody gauze but does not answer.

“They are my enemies,” he tells her, voice and expression fierce.

“The greatest victory is in loving them,” she replies softly, not looking at him when she tends his wounds.

He turns away, toward the open window. “I don’t believe that.” He sounds rough and weary, bitter at things she will not guess at.

She finishes her work carefully, then shrugs. “You don’t have to.”

He looks at her then for the first time since he awoke. His eyes are piercing, a light blue not common of Yakhweiré, the men and women of Yakhwein.

She leaves him with those words.

...

Kaliri opened her eyes and looked into the strong, weary face of the commander, the uncertain but passionate gaze of his young officer.

She said, “I will go.”

—

The mountains knew her. They remembered her name. They sang to her from deep within the hidden places of the rock as Kaliri, the commander, and the youth picked their way across old, rutted paths, long disused but by the bravest, or the most foolish, of travelers.

She held still in the middle of the path somewhere between a distant valley and an even more distant mountain. Both men stopped to look at her, but neither understood why she stood so still and shrugged her cloak back off her shoulders and let the wind blow loose through her hair. She raised her eyes to the sun and heard a pure and distant note carried faintly on the breeze. So far away it sounded, the sound of home.

The mountains of Vas'hehr sang to her from the beginning of her journey. The mountains above Ravén sang to her, a cold and riveting sound simply because she did not want to hear it. The distant cliffs of her own true home sang to her, calling her onward, reminding her of things she once told her husband.

...

“The greatest victory is in loving them,” she tells him.

“I don’t believe it.” His tone is bitter.

She shrugs simply. “You don’t have to.”

...

Kaliri remembered these things, remembered what made her walk away from those cliffs and follow after a man not of her people nor of her land.

I will be with you, my daughter, when you sing in a barren land.

“We must be going,” said the commander.

How long had it been since Ráven, since the day she stood upon the mountain and her song shattered against it? The old songs had pounded through her blood.

...

“Feel it, sing it, say it, be it—it’s all vibration.” Kaliri explains, but he does not really understand. Finally, she falls to old Thea’s words: “There are rules for power.”

Calindria

...

“It is the Rule of Alchemy,” she spoke softly into the wind. It stilled under her outstretched palm, and she inhaled deeply.

I will be with you.

Will You be my strength?

The soldiers stared at her, feeling the shift in the mountain air. Yes, these mountains knew her.

“I don’t want to feel it anymore,” she had said once, knowing in the giving up of song, at least she would not shatter the world.

“For every portion of light to come into the world, a certain portion of darkness must be overcome.” She lowered her hand, heart trembling with old pain. Over the years, numbness had become her friend and restraint her earnest companion.

The younger watched her approach. When she drew even, he asked her, “Why did you walk away?”

She did not answer at first, waiting on a still small voice.

...

“Why have You forgotten us?” the people cry to their Great Singer, cry as if they do not know the song comes from the Singer and their own hearts rise against them.

She is the last of the great singers, and she cannot help but wonder, *Perhaps you have forgotten Him.*

...

She answers him simply. “Because the greatest victory is to love them.”

—

It had been twenty-two years since she had stood upon the heights over Ráven, since the cries of falcons had scored her skies with the sounds of war, since her tears had burned her and broken her song.

Kaliri, the daughter, stood over a vast view of forest and rippling river and stone. A village had been rebuilt upon the old, but it was now guarded heavily and walled about. Chirriith foot-soldiers

Calindria

hid in the forest and sorties had been sent out before today.

...

He is not a singer first, though he has spent weeks worth of hours trying to add the discipline.

“Feel it, sing it, say it, be it—it’s all vibration,” she tells him. “Your love is as strong as any singer’s song. It is the song.”

By the time they reach Ráven, he agrees that she will be the singer and he will be the warrior—as he has always been.

...

“He was always yours,” she admitted softly, and her words were not for the forest or for the falcons crying to battle or for the Chirrith soldiers surging forward in brown and green. Her words were for the Singer that made the song, that made her husband, gave him voice, and gave him to her for such a brief time.

For a moment, she lifted her eyes and hands

to the heavens and wept with gratitude for the years that they had shared, for the love that they had received.

“They are my enemies,” he had told her so long ago, voice and face equally hard.

Chirrith, you were my enemies.

...

“The greatest victory is in loving them.”

“I don’t believe it.”

...

She opened her mouth and sang. Wind sang beneath her hands. Mountains sang beneath her feet. Darkness lancing slowly into twilight brightened beneath the blast, as though she could hold the sun itself in its place.

CROSSING THE BARRIER

VARDIN

Her parents were arguing. Rohth's voice had dropped so she could only hear a low rumble when he spoke. Her mother's voice did not rise, but it held a bite to it that it did not otherwise have.

Casal knew they were arguing about her.

She rolled off her berth on her father's ship and slipped away from the wall; her fingers trailed lightly so she could *feel* the hum of power beneath it. She remembered her uncle's lessons and reached her mind into the ship's processor, briefly *became* it, and told it not to let her hear them. Her mind uncoiled gently from the ship and she waited until

she no longer heard their murmur on the other side.

Like a junior member of the crew, she had worked her father's ship for three months. It was not hunting proper, and Rohth had shaken his head at the lack of action, but they were the guardians. Somebody's ship had to sail the Vardin waters and ensure that all was well and safe. *Somebody* had to guard the Barrier.

A commission finally came in, a real hunt—Aysha, her father's helmsman, claimed she could taste adventure on the air, '*less salt, more money*'—and then Shiloh met up with them. Casal knew the drill. Swapping parents and lives was easy when both of them were hunters. So she would miss her father's crossing; there was her mother's. But after the first comfortable reunion, tension blossomed and soured between them with nary an explanation to Casal.

Casal decided not to wait. Her hands itched with the need to hook in to *something*, and both Aysha and Kidar were pushovers when it came to their equipment. She threw her mind at the padd

beside her door, and the door slid aside. She grinned and stepped into the hall.

“Getting better at that,” Kidar commented wryly.

Casal nearly jumped out of her skin but gritted her teeth against yelling. *‘Silent hunters live longer,’* her father had told her time and time again. She crossed her arms and scowled at him.

He chuckled soundlessly, dark hair falling into his eyes with the slight motion. It was wet. He had been on deck. “That’s supposed to be a thanks.”

“Mm.” She practiced Shiloh’s unimpressed look.

Kidar cocked his head thoughtfully. “It looks better on your mother.”

“Oh you!” Casal scowled and slipped around him through the narrow hallway.

Belowdecks looked like wood, like all Vardin ships, but the walls burned with a soft radiance that came from a radically different power source than pure electricity. Clomen was the substance that set Vardin apart from Europe and the rest of the world outside. It hummed and called to her, a natural fit with her own mind.

“You’ll be an excellent cyberpath, one day,” Kidar said behind her when she had her foot on the first step aboveboard. He was following her, and that irritated her. “Keep you from getting killed,” he offered. Like it was a good thing. Everyone knew Haila lived on the borderlands and were far more likely to die in battle.

Casal stopped cold. Her face burned. She turned to her mother’s helmsman and fixed him with a look borrowed from neither father nor mother. “I am Haila.”

Shadows framed Kidar’s face, but she could see that his expression had frozen into silence. “You do know,” he said slowly, “that your father is out of Alyón.”

She looked at him. “Yes.” Then she turned around and stepped out on the deck.

—

She saw Aysha with her fiery red hair working away at her processor, probably boosting the signal out through the Barrier to the rest of the world’s computer network, a similar and controllable but

different system than theirs. Theirs was based on clomen. Theirs could not be hacked. Aysha's gift allowed her to deal with the outside world's network even more comfortably than Vardin's, and a new hunt meant scouting and research and legwork before crossing over to the other shore to utilize their skills on behalf of an employer.

Normally, Casal enjoyed the work beforehand—her uncle had trained her well in general cyberpathy, but her hands were itching and her soul was restless. She was no longer just a child. Kidar was right; she *was* getting better at her gift, and there were never enough cyberpaths.

That did not mean she wanted their life.

She moved out to stand at the prow, eyes on the sea stretching away into mist. From the Vardin side, she could not see the other shore, the domain of hunters and outsiders. The air on her tongue was still salty, but she thought she understood what Aysha meant about tasting a hunt.

She stood watch, legs spread, feet planted, as night deepened over Vardin. At her back, she knew the valley ran down between the mountains

to the cliffs on either side, and on those cliffs, other guardians stood watch, guardians old enough or powerful enough to be bound to serve. Casal was twelve and her gift was valuable enough that she might soon join them.

To be bound... she thought. She would have to choose a Household then.

A quiet tread broke the stillness behind her. Her mother stopped and ran one hand through Casal's golden hair. She had pulled it back like she always did.

"The Barrier is thin tonight," Shiloh said. They never talked about what they were thinking. Not out loud anyway. She did not tell Casal that she was growing faster than Shiloh would like, but that did not stop the knowledge from passing from one to the other.

Casal craned her head and looked up into her mother's eyes. They were both blondes, but where Shiloh's lean build was Haila heritage, Casal wore the sturdy strength of Alyón. "I can never feel it."

Her mother was among only a handful of the gifted who could open and close the Barrier. Casal had always hoped she would be the same.

“Mm.” Shiloh gave the same unimpressed look Casal had tried to imitate earlier. “We hunt for a merchant. He’s sending his goods through a war zone.”

Casal snorted. “Not smart.”

“It gives us work.” Shiloh shrugged, but her grey eyes had sharpened.

Casal held her breath.

“This is my last hunt,” Shiloh finally said. Her hand fell back to her side. “Perhaps for a very long time.”

Casal breathed out again. Her mind refused to compute the words. “But *why?*”

Shiloh shook her head and leaned forward to settle both elbows against the front railing of the ship. “I’ve ranked up. After this, I’ll be the Mother of Haila.”

The Mother was bound to the care and training of the Household and the guardianship of Vardin, and Casal knew it.

“Your father thinks you should start training with his Household more. You have the gifts for it, and Alyón needs you.”

“I want to hunt, Mother,” Casal whispered. “*He’s* a hunter.” Knowing this was the last time her mother could take her through the Barrier made her wonder if this was her last chance to become one herself. “They *call* him ‘Hunter.’”

Shiloh de Haila glanced back and fixed her daughter with a knowing gaze. “Yes. They do.” She faced the water again. “We leave in the morning.”

—

Morning light separated the crews. Her father caught Casal in his strong arms and swung her around with laughter before setting her down and reminding her again, “You are strong.”

Here too, they never talked about what they were thinking. Rohth did not tell her that she was growing faster than he would like, but that did not stop Casal from knowing that was what he meant.

Kidar followed Casal over the railing onto the other ship. She felt the hum of her mother's bond with the water keeping the two ships from bumping hard enough to cause damage. Kidar clapped her on the shoulder when they hit the deck, and Casal craned her head up to find a question written on his face.

Their last conversation had ended badly. There was no room for animosity on a hunt.

She nodded back.

Then it was all movement and loud calls back and forth among the crew as they settled into their respective roles. Kidar took the helm; Shayna with her dark, dark hair rippling about her golden face sat in the back to steady the ship and balance out Khanen's oar on starboard. Shayna was their knife in the hidden pocket, all gifts wrapped up in a single package. She would hold the ship when they called up a storm and ensure they did not pass too far before they hit the Barrier. The other shore bounded a lake, and the last thing they needed to do was run their ship aground.

Casal stayed up on deck near the prow. She felt the wind whipping through her hair, pulling at her roots. It was a pleasant pain, as pleasant as the sting of spray against her cheeks, the taste of salt upon her breath. She was *born* for this.

Shiloh lifted one hand over the waters. The crew braced themselves for what was to come. It began as a low rumbling over the water, coming from the far mists. The sound did not stay low for long, and the normally almost too-white cloud cover quickly turned a dark and hidden grey.

Casal could feel the power arcing like a thread of lightning from her mother's hand. She kept her gaze forward, waiting for that moment when the Barrier would open.

"Mother," she called over the roar of thunder and the creak of oars. "Where is the shore?"

Shiloh laughed. She always laughed with her entire body, throwing her head up and her shoulders back. "Open the Barrier, and you'll see, impatient one."

Casal swallowed hard at the words, but she turned forward again in the prow to stare hard through the roil of sea and cloud. '*Open the Barrier.*'

Her palms itched and she wiped them on her pants before lifting them like outstretched prayers. *It's a processor, just like a processor*, she whispered to herself.

The crew were staring at her but offered her no assistance. This was a test: Haila born and hunter made—could she do it? Could she *become* hunter made?

She reached for the lightning with her mind—the familiar bite of electricity mixed with clomen, but it seethed and fled her grip. She gasped, startled at the sensation. She wanted to clench her fingers against something, hold harder, but she could not and still maintain a connection with the power in the air around them. This was different, like grasping fire.

Not like a processor.

Then *why*... Bewildered for the first time about why the *cyberpaths* could open this gate between two worlds and close it again behind them. She did not understand.

She planted both her feet against the dark, wet deck. *Eyes wide open*, hands raised higher, calling to find her own.

Loud voices called behind her, but she ignored them. Her hands itched like crazy; and golden sparklers leapt from finger to finger. She had never had her gift rise to meet her, only felt the call of those elements it understood. But now, the sea, the sky, the air, the *Barrier* did not call her. *She* called out to it.

Akin, woven of the same weft, mind rising with the sea, water slapping against deck, pouring over the edge to strike her face—*Become it*, her uncle had told her. *You are the machine*.—until girl and storm were one.

More harsh cries, pulling her backward and the boat with her, back away from the black wave rising before them out of the sea. She *was* the power coursing through her. She could not fight the flood and screamed, unable to contain it.

Interminable, long, slow moments and then...

“You can do this,” her mother whispered, hand delicately brushing back her soaked hair. “You *can* do this.”

Haila born, hunter made.

Made. *Not* like a processor. This power demanded will.

She cried out with all her being and threw the power into the ground far below the waters, channeling it so she would not *have* to contain it. *Become it*. Electricity and clomen, a scattered weave, she *was* the Barrier. And finally, her hands could close and find purchase. She tangled her mind deep and deeper into the weave, then wrenched her hands apart. The storm obeyed and opened.

Beyond the mists she saw...a distant shore.

The storm slipped from her fingers, and she let it go. She felt the clapping arms upon her back, congratulatory shouts, like claps of thunder. Waves were falling away now. She felt limp, exhausted, but turned to face her mother.

Shiloh de Haila was calling orders to the crew, sending through the gap that *Casal* had made—and smiling.

Bound: Casal de Haila Alyóné, Warden.

— from the records of Household Alyón

PORTRAIT OF A BUTTERFLY

VARDIN

pesheneh

Butterfly, a rare, shy creature glowing with softly vibrant color and attracted to radiance. It is a symbol of grace and subtlety and beauty.

— from the Vardin Academy Encyclopædia

—

Paint the background well, for every guardian is built upon a strong and vivid foundation.

The Households celebrate seventh birthdays early. By what exact number of days varies: fourteen, twelve, seven, three. The seventh year may be signified by some heirloom

possession passed along as the legacy of the child's heritage—or by some story or knowledge previously withheld. For at least one House, fierce manifestation of a gift is all the legacy required.

You do not see our children during those years, between the glimmering of that gift, kahtcheset, and the binding of the Queen's will upon their necks. They are hidden away, learning, struggling to wield that fierce power or strength.

There is a word for this. It is ivrat: the will of the Household, the law of the Household, the traditions thereof.

Every guardian is painted upon this same foundation. Myself. The child. The hunters.

We are kahtchen.

—

Roth hears Aysha when she crunches over the Russian snow toward his lookout perch in the rocks. As she climbs above their hidden encampment, he feels the tang of smoldering clomen fires and electricity. Now he hears her breath bite through the chilly air of a northern winter.

“Casal is almost seven.”

Vardin

He does not answer her.

“We’ve been on this hunt for too long.”

He angles his shoulder to allow Aysha into his line of view. She is his helmsman and knows better than to distract a lookout standing watch. His senses are stretched to their utmost to feel the scattered thrumming from distant lands, his cousins, the *kahtchen*. The *māenet* people, the plain, are a sea around them, ever shifting into streams and lakes, rivulets and droplets. He can pick out an approacher well in advance of any arrival.

Rohth stares into his helmsman’s eyes, stretches himself taut and rasps, “I know.”

Aysha is red, Mereta—red hair, red radiance, with burning in her eyes. The burning goes out, leaving behind a normal brown. “Kehelen,” she finally names him. *Hunter*. She accents her words in the familiar unfamiliarity of the native Vardin tongue. He has tasted the languages of *kidayet*, the outsiders, for too long. “She’s not like you.”

He looks toward Casal, sprawled under a mound of blankets in his tent. Golden hair brushes against her chubby child cheeks. Beneath that skin, he can feel the hum of power, thick enough

to taste when he tries, thin enough to keep her a child. Her mother manifested when she was nine years old, a late bloomer; he did not until his twenties, a true latent. But Casal— Casal is already glimmering. She is dangerous.

He turns to his helmsman. “We finish the hunt.”

Aysha’s eyes light again with burning. Her jaw tightens, but she lowers her gaze in acceptance of his authority. If she keeps a double watch, Rohth declines to comment.

—

How do you sketch a hundred faces upon one span of skin? How lightly must you draw, how many nuances must be captured, to include the householder, the hunter, the rogue, the plain?

There is a voice in Vardin that is neither householder nor hunter, gifted nor plain, bound nor free. It speaks through the throats of our children, those few brief days when they straddle the worlds of all. It looks through the eyes that cannot brighten with radiance, that cannot be

innocent of the sight of it. It flows in the knowledge and skill wielded even by the very young.

Casal was born on a hunt. She has spent her life switching parents when they meet, knowing Vardin only in the heat and season of summerlight. She is hunter more than householder and maintains a professional silence as the team stands guard around an old, shambling Russian house. Freedom fighters, the clients say they are, holding a very important meeting. Rohth has stated he does not care, only that his team is here to ensure no blood is spilled this night.

An easy enough task.

Russia has myths about the *kahtchen*. They whisper in the night to their children of the immortals, the mindreaders, the fire-breathing dragons who stretch their souls under the skins of men. The Russians speak of wolves in sheep's clothing, the gifts for hire to black-bearded Soviets and Mother Russia operatives. The whispers grant

them freedom to do their jobs and let the officials laugh at reports that spout these children's tales.

It is three nights before Casal is seven. Three nights and her palms are itching. She keeps them away from technological equipment. She keeps her eyes on the southwest quarter, cannot see when those brown Alyón eyes turn green.

The not-yet-seven never manifest, only glimmer. She has heard of future telekinetics who reach for an object only to have it slide just beyond their grasp. She has heard of the future mindreaders who hear whispers they cannot make out. Small things, inconsequential. She stands watch.

Trouble comes like shadows coalescing out of the dark. Eleven operatives—no, twelve. They are live currents in a sea of electricity, a keening whine she does not understand.

“It hurts,” she cries softly to Bren, who stands watch beside her.

He puts his hand on her back, tucks her closer to his side, and silently signals a warning to his companions. “What hurts?” he whispers in her ear.

She tries to answer, shakes her head. “It *hurts*.”

Bren hears the whine then. He frowns, cocks his head, then snatches Casal into his arms and throws them out of the way an instant before the electrical wiring in the wall behind them explodes and a shower of sparks cascades out into the street.

It is a catalyst, an instant of fear thrust into those operatives’ hearts, and a sniper fires, silencer on, barely missing Casal with her radiant fiercely-glowing green eyes. A flick of wrist from a nearby hunter and the bullet never reaches its target. Rumor swells into nightmare.

Casal tries not to scream—*stay silent, stay silent*; it is the way of the hunter—and Bren tries not to frighten her, but every moment the guns fire, electricity is surging, wires are burning and exploding, and more sparks hit the pavement, the walls, the *people*, and catch fire. Bren can hardly do more to protect her when holding her hampers his ability to use his own gift.

“Kenél!” he calls Aysha’s hunter name.

The helmsman turns from her engagement in the fight—*this wasn’t supposed to have happened, but*

who can fight the manifestation of a gift? who can stop the lightning in its path but a gifted?—in time to see sparks and embers heading toward the frightened, silent child in Bren’s embrace. When the fire hits Casal’s clothes, Aysha does not pause. She throws herself toward the fire and lifts her hands to catch it, generating an electromagnetic field faster than she ever has before. The flames cannot touch her skin, cannot touch Casal.

Pictures are taken, three of them, rapid-fire, one after another, then someone goes after Casal.

A shift of electricity from Aysha’s outstretched hands, and all the surrounding air heats into flame.

—

This is the incident we fear. Not only discovery, but a record. That moment when blood is spilled or will be. We have not forgotten the foreground of the picture. Paint it vividly, yes? We are all vivid with radiance—clomen—and blood, the blood of the First Great Slaughter.

If we are human, if mænet means baseline, if the operatives and not the mothers whisper in each other’s ears,

then plain can become gifted and the blood and radiance can be painted over the sketch of—plain, hunter, householder, rogue—one span of a child's face.

The child.

Casal is crying, nestled in her father's arms, held close against his heart. Rohth is a strong man, a dangerous man, named Kehelen for a reason, but this he cannot wrestle into submission any more than a man may wrestle God.

They have left blood on Russian snow. A hunt failed and their encampment only offers temporary sanctuary when Rohth cannot stretch his sense of others beyond the fierce, wild radiance burning in his embrace. He passes tent and equipment, then tent again and watches, *senses*, the explosions of overloaded circuits, the glow and sparks and shivers of electricity and clomen run wild. He remembers another daughter, a cyberpath without the radiance, without control of clomen, and he knows this will not end. Not now, not yet. This time will be worse.

“Aysha.”

Aysha is injured, pressing a bloody leg with one hand, carefully examining the team’s back hand with the other and bandaging the burns on his body. She glances up, hesitates when she sees Casal.

“Did you destroy the camera?” Rohth demands.

She glares darkly at the question. “I fight fire,” Aysha snaps back, “not make it.” She is Mereta and burning, but she is a cyberpath and can see through the flames no better than he. “I am not a dragon,” she spits, and that is the worst thing that she could say.

His power is no easy thing, for radiance never is. The radiants are too powerful, too wild for even the *kabtchen* to be comfortable with. A radiant like Rohth, a *dragon*, is even less of an easy thing.

He stiffens but passes his child from his arms into hers. Casal has been a hunter, but now she is a little girl, afraid and dangerous, energy coursing through mind and body. He knows that Aysha can sense it, mold it if she tries.

“She is interfering with the interpreters.” He does not tell her his own senses are dampened, just waits for the mothering instinct to kick in, and it does.

Aysha tucks Casal against her body, concentrates. A wave of electrons forms around them. Aysha shapes it into a field, nestles it over Casal, adds another layer and another. The interference stops. The encampment grows silent, still. Then the sound of Bren’s dry voice speaking in the harsh hunter register of the Vardin tongue into an interpreter, calling for help.

Roth nods grim gratitude.

They call Calai.

—

You imagine that I am the painter for telling you this story of a child not mine as she crosses the boundary between childhood and youth. Perhaps you imagine I am the child, but no.

You must have light to see the portrait as it is meant to be, just as the Vardin butterfly can only be pictured in

the brilliance of cloven radiance. She is the radiance; I am the butterfly. You may never find the other without the one.

My brother calls me from the training grounds in the garden. I prefer the hidden places to train and work out the kinks in my own gifts and abilities. Jean studies my form before he sends me to Père. Later, he will give his criticisms and train me as mercilessly as the man who raised us. For now, I slip down the hallway, counting doors, and with one last glance back at the courts over the railings, I knock and enter my father's domain.

"Rachel." The word greets me like the harsh slap of a wave on the *lac* as I close the door into his office. He pronounces my name the French and Vardin way, soft on the fricative and dark on the *l*. The room is a library in style, walls of shelves of books instead of stone, and his desk standing in the center.

I step forward, take the proffered sheaf of pictures and documents passed directly from a mind and memory into machine then here to us,

and take them in with the eye of an artist. The images are disconcerting. I stare at a portrait unfolding, of blood and of radiance. I am young, but not a fool. I know early trauma-induced manifestation when I see it.

My father eyes me shrewdly from the other side of the desk. He is standing, ever patient, waiting for me to finish my perusal. Let us not imagine that I hurried the reading either; I am fourth of six children, the second daughter, fair newly bound—*fifteen*, and only recently eligible to be called hunter.

I set down the papers and look into Père's dark eyes. They are black all the way through to the edges, with golden flecks. There are complaints that he hunts, that he bears our secret so openly, but he was born in the outside world. He knows what he is doing. His auburn hair is long enough and, when outside, shaggy enough to hide what he is.

It is this that grants me hesitation, his knowledge and experience in a land not ours, the way his black gaze holds mine and approval in equal weight.

“Why me?” I ask. Why not Rose, his most powerful, or Etienne, his most capable, or Jean, the strongest? They are older than I and knowledgeable in the ways of the Hunt.

My father grins fiercely, and all my muscles tense, sensing the herald of battle. “I require a butterfly.”

—

Vardin is not the only nation in the Peninsula, behind the Barrier, though we are the only nation that hunts. Mäenet are as common here as on the other shore.

There is a myth, however, that before the mäenet and before the kahtchen, before there were creatures in Vardin, that there was radiance upon the breezes, that radiance took form and became the butterfly. I am not persuaded that this myth is accurate or true. I am persuaded that there is a little truth in every myth.

—

He takes me as his left hand. It should frighten me, knowing the strength required of that position,

Vardin

and yet, I am not frightened. We cross the *lac* through the Barrier, and the stormy water and wind surging around us grants me greater confidence. I am young, but I am a butterfly. The radiance wakens my slumbering silence, the dispassion and hidden self-control my father has told me he requires.

The journey to Russia is swift for us, but still takes days. Each night, my father bends over the interpreter and gleans what details they can give him. I sit near and learn. Rohth is not willing to risk his people retrieving those photographs, not knowing they are already identified, to say nothing of the risk trying to get her home. I understand now why Casaia travels with us as Père's back hand. She is not his usual, but she is one of our only shields.

"Why a butterfly?" I ask Père the last night before we slip over Russian snow into Rohth's encampment.

He gives me that sideways look that sees so much and my mother always wishes he would not. "You don't *know*?" he asks, and black eyes narrow.

I consider that, setting aside the morass of reactions it could incite. He is my trainer, my father, and more, the Father of my House, responsible for all my generation within the Household. To be what he has asked demands that I set myself aside and live solely within the purpose he has given me.

“She is a child,” I say, then stop abruptly. I roll the words over in my mouth, run my tongue over my teeth, and taste them. I do not even see him anymore, mind focused on a bloody, radiant portrait of clomen and manifestation and all the Russians do not, cannot know. I study the edges, sketched out in pencil of that child’s face. “They do not know what we are.”

My father nods, and the motion snaps against my reflexes. I see him once again, see the glimmer of approval forming. He waits for me to continue and ferret out this understanding for myself.

It forms as a whisper of a thought, then curls outward into a whisper of words. “They don’t yet know we’re human.”

If *māenēt* means plain and not baseline, if *kahtchen* remain the myth, the fantasy in the

child's bedtime dreams, if we are not *human*, then they will not seek to ferret out our secrets. They will not learn to slaughter their people and create us.

He answers me then, and I know I have done well. "A butterfly leaves no tracks."

—

We find our strength in restraint, in the drawing inward of power, in the sealing away of secrets. Am I a painter? No, but all true hunters know how to alter the design.

—

Rohth introduces his team by their bound names, Aysha as Kenél, meaning *flame*, and Bren as Jhedré, meaning *storm*. My father does likewise for our own. It is only after the two men draw away to go over what information their team has retrieved that opinions are cast.

"Butterfly?" The fiery light in Aysha's eyes darkens to flame red. *Odd name for a guardian*, it says. Harshly.

I have heard this before. For a girl or even a lady, they can understand—but for a guardian? For a hunter?

My father looks up sharply from the blueprints of a Russian base, the facility deemed most likely to house evidence of the attack. Rohth glances up beside him, taking me and Aysha into his gaze together.

Black eyes narrow. “You question my selection?” He is not only a hunter lead, as is Rohth; he is Calai and the Father of our entire House. His rank demands she trust his decisions unless proven wrong.

Aysha bristles but remains silent.

“I am *pesbné*,” I say softly, underscoring the tense. There is more to wings than beauty. But she is Mereta, a Household known for fire. Kenél. What lovely light there is to flame, what brute strength!

She stares at me, and I stare back. I am not shy, as the butterfly. I am not hidden, as its lovely wings. Not now. Not until I hunt. I am my father’s daughter.

Père tilts his head thoughtfully and interjects. “You are her trainer?”

She flushes and that is answer enough. Trainer, mother to Casal when her own cannot be, it is a relationship as close as family. Little wonder then that she is agitated.

I am out of my depth and step away to join my father as left hand. His needs I understand.

—

pentimento

An Italian word meaning *repentance*, referring to an alteration in a painting.

— from the Hunter’s Guild Lexicon

—

Shields also leave no tracks.

My father guides his team more silently than any flicker of flame, less noticeable than the falling of the night. He signals to Casaia and I watch in fascination as her brilliantly green eyes shift and blend a radiant blue. Her mind touches

mine, and only my training stops me from flinching at the sensation, then a layer of impermeable, almost transparent radiance infuses my skin. No fingerprints, no genetic material, no tracks.

“Yeheret,” he commands—*stay close*—then turns to me and draws me to his side. “Find the photographs.”

It startles me. He trusts that I have understood what I have seen, that the blueprints have lodged in my memory, and all my training will bear me up. No backup, no aid. A butterfly.

I nod and part ways with the team.

The facility is top-secret and very old, buried twelve stories underground under layer upon layer of security protocols that the rest of my father’s team are still dealing with. Finding my own way is as easy as breath, so long as I do not think and simply work my way through internal security programs as if I belong here to the Russian *kidayet*. I understand now what my father has taught me: that we are the outsiders and they are us.

I drop, light as butterfly wings, from the oversized vent—a relic of older times before they

learned that air ducts were a security breach just waiting to happen—and move across the floor as my father trained me, with a grace that would not disturb a petal or a leaf.

I hack the coded safe—another skill drilled into me by my father long before I understood the use for it—and locate the incriminating evidence. Three grainy photographs of a woman holding fire within her hands. I study the outline of a child's face in the memory of operatives, whisper in my mind to Casaia's radiance, *She is a child*. I say nothing more, knowing what damage I have wrought. It is new paint to the portrait, opaque and deliberate. It is that other gift we rarely use. Casaia can destroy a memory as easily as I a photograph. Casal is a child, a *child*.

They say a butterfly in China can cause a hurricane in the Pacific.

Russia has myths about the kahtchen, stories not to be repeated in an official's ear for fear that he will laugh. I sear the photographs with my own radiance, rework the image into that of an electrical inferno, fire gone wrong and target ablaze, presumably dead—operative error, then

return the safe to locked and coded and leap lightly onto the desk to climb back into the vent.

A guardian, like every hunter before me. A butterfly, flapping my wings.

—

“Kenél.”

Aysha turns toward my voice, seeming surprised. Even I have surprised myself, standing in her encampment, speaking daughter to daughter, speaking hunter to hunter without temerity.

I stand near her, still tightly furled and light on my feet, tense with what I have done and will do—again and again in the years to come. “Casal was not in the pictures.”

The weight of her team’s gazes swerves toward us. My father’s stare is heavy at my back. I have eyes only for the woman before me.

Her eyes widen. Their burning goes out. Finally, she nods in grim gratitude. It is enough.

There is no portrait in blood and clomen of a child’s face, only wingprints on an empty breeze.

Bound: Rohth de Alyón, Hunter. *Charetsë:* Shiloh
de Haila. *Children:* Rhiannon. Casal.

— from the records of Household Alyón

Portrait of a Butterfly

GONE HUNTING

VARDIN

They call for a hunter and the daughter of hunters. Her father took the name when he first came of age and was bound to the Queen's hand. Her mother is seemingly born for the Hunt, one of the best the Household of Haila has to offer. *This* hunter was trained by both. Their daughter has never known the inside of the Barrier come wintertides.

It will not go as it should.

A man has seen something he desperately should not have seen. Worse, he understood it.

Rhiannon out of Alyón takes the profile they hand her and inhales it. Name: John Henry. Age:

28. Occupation: English professor. Nationality: American.

Her mother and trainer is Haila, grey eyes, blond braid, and cool calculation. Rhiannon's gift is digits and bytes and just as calculating.

Ensuring his silence should be easy.

Her father is Alyón, radiant eyes, brutal physicality, and more *feel* than thought. Rhiannon's gift is storms and electrons and pull on the subtle depths.

It won't be.

—

She meets him at a fine restaurant, one he frequents and the venue his university has selected for their formal staff dinner. He is standing with his colleagues in the social and dancing area, discussing various things that men enjoy discussing, when he sees her. She notices the moment, feels his energy extend in her direction. She tastes its *plainness*, how very *māenet* he is. She glances up and is surprised to see his open appraisal.

There is a certain inevitability to being *kahtchen*, in calling the storms and singing the rains, in bending her neck to be bound beneath the plain Queen's hand, in dreaming her lover and knowing one day she will marry him, in knowing the laws of her Household and keeping them, in knowing the laws of the Hunt. (The kahtchen will never be free.)

Then John Henry sees her and tilts his head in almost puzzlement and smiles, as if he has known her before, as if he will know her for the rest of his life. Inevitability shifts and slides. She never expected any man other than Tracer to look at her that way.

Rhiannon absently traces a pattern on her glass with one finger. She inclines her head, acknowledging his regard. He excuses himself and steps away from his companions.

Unexpected, this. She was to insinuate herself into his acquaintance, not draw it like he recognizes her, like she is his dream lover and soulmate—*rothnen*—he has been waiting to meet for his entire life.

She raises one eyebrow as soon as he is close enough to hear her. "We have not met," she says quietly, amused. There is too much familiarity in his warm brown eyes.

He smiles at her as though he is smiling at himself, sharing the amusement, and her other eyebrow comes up. He tells her his name, although she already knows it. "I teach English here, and history." He waits a moment for her to speak and, when she doesn't, asks her name in return.

"Rhiannon." The word is accented in the tongue of her homeland. She allows him that much, knowing she must balance openness with restraint.

He smiles at her, understated, self-deprecating. "Would you care to dance?" He is a perfect gentleman.

She sets down her glass, stands, and takes his arm. There is no affection in the touch, and it is a simple thing to revive her memory of outsider dances. As with languages, hunters are taught such things early in life. It is a waltz; a minuet plays gently on piano and strings. The floor is

smooth hardwood and he proves to be an excellent partner.

“I cannot place your accent,” he admits, puzzled. She remembers he is a bit of a linguist, besides his other academic pursuits and inherited wealth.

She shrugs. “I am from overseas. Europe mostly.”

“You travel?”

His immediate interest draws her laughter. “I see you do.” It is not an answer, but he does not seem to notice.

“My brother and I prefer to spend our summers traveling. Exploring.” John hesitates and she does not prod but tilts her head just so to let him know she is listening. “He is in England now, investigating rumors of fairyland on the moors.” He says it almost apologetically, and yet, she can feel the faint tremor of hope that she will not write him off.

He has seen something he should not have. He understands it. She wants to tug at that tendril of feeling inside of him, but the stakes are too

high and her gift not so inclined as to go unnoticed.

She resorts to plain techniques, keeps her gift well-reined, and asks him soberly, seriously, “Do *you* believe in fairyland?”

Their dance steps slow. His brown eyes seem to darken as he weighs her intent. It is the strangest question.

“In fairies, maybe.” He shrugs and holds her hand a little tighter. “There are many things we cannot explain in this world. But *fairyland?*”

The answer is too close to an affirmative. She leans in close, glides back into the flow of the dance. He resumes the pace and she follows his lead.

“Do you?” His voice is soft at her temple, breath ruffling her hair.

“I believe in many things that this world cannot explain.” She maintains the balance. Openness, restraint.

He takes that in, then answers, “So do I.”

—

She revises her plan. He has changed the parameters with his openness, with his search for a like-minded soul. She is hardly that, but she can become it, breathe it in until he trusts her and will *listen* when she tells him not to speak, not to loose this burden upon the world.

A fistful of photographs and papers and other odds and ends litter her hotel room bed. A train ticket stub. His essays and papers written in the course of his work. A map highlighted with every location he visited before and after he brushed into Ryven stepping away from an accident the healer should never have been near enough to become involved in.

But even healers need to get outside the Barrier every now and then, join themselves to a hunt during wintertides when storms occasionally shred it open, when it is safe for the *kahtchen* to do their work in the outside world. Even healers can be compromised. Even Ryven.

By all accounts, John Henry stood on a street corner in Paris and saw the bloody pavement beneath a wide-eyed little girl who had not looked both ways before crossing the road. And Ryven

had stood there, his work done, breathing hard, also watching. They saw her stand up and toddle away.

Rhiannon hefts a small white business card in one palm. She runs one finger across it and stretches her mind into the building's wireless network. She can see her eyes in the mirror, see their color shift and change, feel the information slipping from digits and bytes into memory, where he is, where he will be.

Her eyes go grey. She picks up the phone and dials.

—

They see each other often over the next few days: breakfast at a small, family-owned nook, walking down the street together and going into the shops, talking about little things he cares about, that she is interested in. He finds she is an excellent listener. She finds he is comfortable in his own skin. The third day they meet, it is on the promenade by the river she expressed interest in seeing.

“You are recently from Europe?” he asks, still trying to place her.

She laughs, catches his hand in hers, and does not answer. She is not prone to answers. Instead, she takes in the view and runs her fingers through the breeze.

John Henry is a quiet man, considered unprepossessing by many, but Rhiannon finds him appealing with his mild curiosity, his gentlemanly manners, and all the many ways he is like Tracer.

The thought makes her consider. “Tracer would love this,” she says suddenly as she stares out over the water.

“Tracer?” She glances up to see him frown.

“We often travel together for work.” Both cyberpaths, both hunters. She and Tracer have been bound since birth, *resonant*, designed to be complementary. Even now, she can feel him, though he is on the other side of the Barrier.

John studies her, trying to decipher her feelings. She sees it in the look in his eyes. “What is he like, this traveling companion?” he asks slowly.

Tracer, ab. Tracer was... She tilts her head in appraisal. “Beautiful.”

He hates the way she says it, thinks it, the way her smile shifts toward softer. Uncertainty hesitates on his features; he pulls her a little closer by her hand.

“Husband?” he asks.

She shakes her head, leans it back to catch him with her most playful grin. “No.”

“So how did you meet?” he asks, as if he is only curious.

Rhiannon quirks her mouth and raises one brow. “Jealous?” she teases, yet half serious.

John shrugs, leans against the railing. He is still cautious with her, knowing she is cautious and not yet knowing why.

But she answers. “We are both excellent at working with computers. Tech, troubleshooting, programming, design, security: all of it. We work together.” As if that is all.

“Why do I feel there is something you’re not telling me?” The good humor has returned to his voice. He feels she has been open with him, whatever his words.

“Oh?” She casts him an imperious glance. “And there is nothing exciting you so much that you practically emote a desire to spill it to the first person you trust to be interested?”

He was not expecting that. His jaw sets, then he turns to her candidly. “I have a computer problem you might perhaps be willing to correct.”

She does not bat her eyes. “I would be pleased.”

—

Computers are her first love. Spreading the parts out on his desk and letting their energy hum to her, sing to her like the waters of Vardin, pleases a deep part of her soul that never quite relents. She hums their pattern to herself as she works and reassembles his problematic machine into something better than it was before.

He keeps her plied with tea and crumpets—*“I’d think you were an English gentleman,” she teased—*and shakes his head at her obvious enthusiasm.

“Indeed, you have a thing for computers.”

“Shahsh, you,” she chides, waving a wire in his direction before lovingly melding it back into the material. She is glad he is so inept at them himself. He should *know* she is doing things a plain human cannot do unaided.

He studies her as if he cannot believe he has encountered one such as her; that she is standing in his house—mansion, rather; or that she *prefers* to be here, rather than in another country on one of her adventures.

“You are like Anne of Green Gables,” he says.

She lifts a brow. She is not familiar with the name.

“Your eyes.” He gestures. “They are grey in most lights but green in others.”

It startles her that he has noticed. She tilts her head backward, really *looks* at him. It would be a leap to trust him too soon. “Perhaps,” she says cautiously. She changes the subject. “So what are you working on that wounded your computer so badly?” She pats the top of the monitor affectionately.

He laughs outright and sits beside her. “My paper. I stayed up too late on a stormy night without a surge protector.”

“Hm.” Rhiannon takes note of his poor defensive habits and rummages through her bag for some internal components that could do the job. Her hand hesitates on the tiny panels. They are of Vardin. She puts them back and asks, “Do you *have* a surge protector?”

His eyes are dancing.

She rolls her eyes in disgust and reaches for her purse instead. “I see we have more shopping to do.”

—

Shopping with him is dangerous. They talk about everything from the places they have seen to the ideas on any manner of topics that fascinate them. She likes him, and it bothers her. She is not supposed to like him this way.

He opens doors for her like a gentleman and offers his arm on the sidewalk. She winces but shrugs it off when he wonders why aloud.

“Nothing,” she says. *Tracer*. She does not explain the rothnen.

—

Within weeks, she is a fixture in his life. His polite touches—her arm to get her attention, her hand to help her with something, *dancing*—hold affection and she begins to avoid them when possible. He is not a cyberpath, *but*—

“If you are so wealthy, why do you work?” she asks, genuinely curious and gesturing expansively at his generational family home.

He chuckles at her and sips his tea. “Why do you?”

Rhiannon startles. How did he know? She throws him an annoyed look. “I like my work.”

“But you have done none recently,” he points out reasonably. “And I enjoy mine. I like words, puzzles.”

“Hm.”

“Dancing.” His eyes twinkle and she shakes her head exasperatedly.

“Am I a puzzle to you?” she demands candidly.

It startles him. He was not expecting the question, perhaps had not even thought of it. He sets down his tea. “Why would you say that?”

She fixes him with a decidedly Haila stare, the kind that is harsh and keen and unforgiving. “You invite me into your home and life without even knowing me. You try to understand and decide that all will eventually come clear if at first you don’t.”

He starts to protest.

She raises her eyebrows and he sighs.

“*Rhiannon.*” That affectionate exasperation.

She hates it. It makes her gut churn and her bond with Tracer tighten and ache. It makes her radiance bubble up and her fingers clench and her eyes want to turn blue. “Tell me,” she demands. “Am I the puzzle or am I a clue to its answer?”

“Neith—” He stops himself and looks at her, really *looks*. He smiles that John Henry, self-deprecating smile and her stomach turns again. “I suppose you know that answer, and I do not.”

She drops her gaze to the computer sitting on his work desk, runs one finger over its surface. “We neither of us seem to be trusting,” she comments wryly.

“Perhaps.” The word mirrors her own from the day he first invited her. He holds out his hand.

He *will* trust her. Now.

She feels the tense energy threading from his heart to hers, excitement flickering in his eyes, radiating through his body. She takes his hand.

It is time.

—

She listens first—for days, two of them—as he sorts out his thoughts. He has spent more time on this than she knew: interviews, hospital records, photographs, theories and ideas. He knows what Ryven looks like, that he somehow *healed*. He knows the name of the little girl and her family. He just does not know what to do about it.

They talk in his study, what appears to be his inner sanctum, where he reads and writes and

thinks on things like this. She likes it: the walls of books, stacks pulled out in front and threatening to topple; the smell of paper, ink, and leather; the globe that stands in the corner; the great chair where she sits; and him, standing behind his desk, spectacles perched, gesturing enthusiastically.

On the third day, she sets down the documents she has been perusing and leans back in the chair with hesitance blatantly displayed on her face. "This is a serious thing to consider," she says. "But you can't just go hunt down the man who did it."

"This is so fascinating," he counters, as if he truly cannot fathom her reticence. "I cannot imagine why anyone would not want to share it."

"Or send someone to kill you if you do." She says it casually, and he goes on, unheeding.

"Well, I can imagine the Russians doing that, but not any—" He falters, *realizes* what she has said, and looks into her cold, grey eyes.

Oh, mother, you have trained me well.

John closes the journal, pulls off his glasses slowly, and sets them atop the book. He comes to her then, sinks down into a crouch as he is too

tall, too very tall to meet her eyes when he is standing and she sitting, and reaches out to touch her cheek, and she closes her eyes and shudders against the touch. She cannot tell him it hurts her, physically *hurts* her when he does it.

“Is that why you are here?” he asks, softly as the falling deeps within the lake.

She wants to reach out with her mind and taste it. He is like the storm that could be, she thinks, and she could call it out like the heavens. But she does not answer. She leans forward and does the unthinkable, solely because she *wants* to. She kisses him and the agony is like a fire.

His fingers trace her jaw, and she realizes he is kissing her back. In a moment, he draws away, though regretfully. He is the perfect gentleman.

She meets his gaze then. “I am here to ensure your silence,” she says quietly.

His gaze flickers. He hesitates. “You could do the world so much good.” He knows now that Ryven is not alone.

“Really?” she asks, *must*. “All it has ever brought us is pain.”

John sighs, then stands, and draws himself away back to his desk. “Us?” His voice is weary, wary.

“Across the sea,” she answers softly, then begins like a storyteller, “There is a lake, Chaussée.”

“Passageway,” he murmurs.

He knows French. It is a risk to give him that name, but she is bartering trust for trust. She knows digits and bytes and cool calculation. She can play these odds, and so she continues.

“On the other shore are dragons. On the other shore are all the secrets you are searching for,” Earnestly, eagerly. She pauses. “But those secrets *kill*.

“We are the guardians. We promised that no other nation would ever face that slaughter again. *We promised.*”

She is a guardian, and the choices before her are horrifying, but she can sense them brewing like the coming storm. She *knows* how she can solve this problem, weave shut the Barrier where secrets have slipped through into the world of the *kidayet*, the outsiders.

John looks at her like he knows she knows this, like he is uncertain of her for the second time in their brief and all too close relationship. “You are here to ensure my silence.” Slowly, he smiles, that self-deprecating smile that shifts inevitability and puzzles out new knots in the threads that bind her soul. “But how can you ever be sure?”

—

They dance as if nothing has happened. The music is her choice, warm and gentle; the dance is his, warm and intimate. She leans her head against his shoulder, and he leans his against hers. Pain lances through her body with the reminder that she is Tracer’s, not John’s. She ignores it.

They talk quietly, openly, as if everything has changed.

“Who is Tracer?” he asks. His voice does not give away his emotions, but she does not play ignorant.

“He’s my dream lover,” she answers, foregoing the Vardin word, *rothnen*. “We dream of each other, recognize each other when we meet.”

She feels John’s body tense slightly, but she holds him a little tighter and catches her breath at how *much* it hurts.

“They say we’re made for each other,” she adds.

“And do you believe it?” Softly, anxiously.

She tugs herself back just far enough to meet his eyes, to see the way his own breath has caught, waiting for her answer. “I believe in many things that this world cannot explain.”

She *is* a puzzle to him, but this time, he is not satisfied, instead reaching up to tuck her hair behind one ear. “Can your world explain it?”

“I’m a cyberpath,” she says. “Not a scientist.”

“Cyber—” He mouths the rest of the word, takes that in. He could have guessed, but he hadn’t. He could have realized that there was nothing normal, nothing duplicable about the healer on a Parisian street. But why would she be here if there wasn’t? “What do *you* know?”

They keep dancing. She lets the movement aid her thoughts, glances in a mirror, imagines grey eyes turning green. “I know that Tracer was in my head before I ever met him. I know I feel him during wintertides when the Barrier is open, and even when it is closed, I sense *something* of him. I dream of him at night. It...” She pauses, glances into John’s listening expression. “I know it hurts when you touch me.”

He pulls away abruptly, ever the gentleman, trouble furrowing his brow. “You never said anything.”

She laughs softly and without humor, leans her hip against the piano at the side of the music room, listens as the minuet keeps playing. Nothing is funny, but isn’t it always laughter or tears? “Why would I?”

“I hurt you.” He seems bewildered. Why wouldn’t he be? He is *māenet*. He is *plain*.

Rhiannon shrugs. “I hurt myself.” She is not sure if he hears what she cannot say: I was born for Tracer, but I *chose* you.

It has not gone as it should.

She reaches for him to resume their dance. Hesitantly, as if she is delicate and not a hunter, not a guardian, not digits and bytes and cool calculation, he accepts. Somehow, she thinks he knows the truth she is only now discovering, that she is truly her father's child. A storm is brewing and she lets it come, calls it from the subtle depths as she leans against John's shoulder once more.

She could stay. She could be *sure*.

She hears his, "I love you," murmured in her ear and closes her eyes.

She feels the walls closing in. Inevitability shifts and slides into frightening certainty. She wants to pull away from the ache of his embrace, from the warmth of it, but she refuses the thought. *This is what you will feel for the rest of your life if you do this*. She has never known her own limit of pain.

She is not supposed to love him. She is not supposed to change. *It should have been easy to ensure his silence*. This should have been easy.

"Don't be foolish, John Henry," she says bluntly, harshly, allowing the fullness of her native

Vardin accent to color her voice. She wants to push him away with the words.

He lifts her chin and she looks at him, takes in his mildly craggy features, the angled plains beneath his weathered skin, the tired lines, the depth of the sincerity in his eyes. He's...

“I'm not.”

Beautiful.

It isn't.

John Henry teaches her there are many kinds of chains.

—

That night, she dreams of Tracer. They fit together and *belong* together, and everything is perfect. In her dreams, he is her lover and she knows his body as well as she knows his mind when they are awake. He has always pleased her.

She wakes with his heat still under her skin and the sense of his real nearness—and distance—from herself. He is on the other side of the Barrier, in Vardin. She wakes with memories of his quiet laugh, of their shared love of cyberpathy,

Vardin

of the ghosting of his hand over hers. She thinks of John and his self-deprecating smile, of the impression of his hand at her waist when they dance, of his insatiable thirst for knowledge.

She has loved a man. She loves a man. It is not fair to any of them.

In her dreams, she will always belong to Tracer, loving him and making love, as in her waking, she will always be John's and full of pain. She will always love them both.



It is another few weeks. A ring on her finger is warm from the heat of her skin. She has worn it long enough to no longer feel it when she writes.

I have ensured his silence. The letters are etched where once her graceful script would have flowed. She grasps for words to convey the depths of her decision to a woman like her mother, a man like her father, wrangles her heart to fit the shape of them, and etches again.

I am gone.

Gone from Vardin, gone forever.

Hunting.

Vardin

Bound: Rhiannon de Alyón, Cipher. *Husband:* John Henry. *Children:* Alexia.

— from the records of Household Alyón

We're not all-powerful. There are limitations.

— **BRITTANY RACHELLE WINSLOW, THE DATABASE**

Domse and Bleed

DOWSE AND BLEED

KINGDOMS & THORN

Rachelle waited until the restless aches dancing through her upper body turned to outright pain before she finally forced herself to quit making endless cups of coffee and fished a mottled green star out of the embossed pink tin she kept on the granite kitchen countertop. She stripped off her overshirt and held the star to her left arm, braced herself, and pressed the needles on its back into the main carrier fluid vein on her arm. A light twist—which hurt, but she didn’t wince—secured the star. Her carrier fluid flooded through the extra space, allowing the wash of genetic entries in her system to head for her central nervous system without making her want to scream.

She leaned back against the open dark wood lower shelves stuffed with spices, baking supplies, and potted vegetables. Dishes filled the shelves above the counters, and she kept an open cooler by the telephone. She picked up her coffee—the whole apartment smelled of it—and drank the rest slowly, shifting from one bare foot to the other on the heated tile floor as she cycled through all the genetic data in her body, cleaning it up and archiving the stuff she hadn't gotten around to yet.

Three years ago, cycling didn't hurt. She could do it when she pleased, throw on a star if she had to, and work through the build-up with barely a thought toward what she was doing. Now, it hurt; it *hurt* as she slammed another flood of archives on top of the overflow she already had, compressing what had never been meant to be further compressed. She didn't want to think about that, didn't want to think about the fact that the Department that made them never *would* go away for her or about the look in Sear's eyes six months ago when she gave Rachele another box of stars, arms covered in blood from doing

something they should never have had to do. How many lives had Sear taken to retrieve one more cache of the discontinued supplies?

Rachelle set the coffee mug in the sink and washed it, ignoring the way the water irritated her skin as she scrubbed harder than was necessary. Over the splash of water and ceramic, she heard the phone ring and glanced up toward where it sat on the higher coffee bar counter. Only a handful of people could keep hold of her revolving number. She never answered.

The answering machine clicked on. "*Rachelle Winslow. Leave a message.*"

Her birth name in her own voice jarred her. It wasn't her name. She drew the mug out of the sink, turned off the faucet, and set the mug in the sanitizer to dry.

"It's Ilsa."

Killinger.

Rachelle scowled and kept counting the seconds for the sanitizer to finish. Killinger had stayed with the Department and cut a deal for partial freedom. When she called, she always wanted the same thing.

The pause lingered and Rachelle paused with it, missing the beep from the sanitizer. Killinger was always calm, always spoke in the same quiet way, never hesitated at anything. The woman had seen and lived through too much for anything to ruffle her. She was hesitating now.

Come on. *Say* something.

“My informant has disappeared, and I owe him.” The line went dead. No pleas made and no reason offered that Rachelle should even get involved.

Just perfect. Rachelle yanked the mug from the sanitizer and put it away on the shelf with her others. Discomfort still crawled its way up and down her spine and over her shoulders, and she kept promising herself she wouldn’t go back.

I owe him. Killinger never owed anybody.

Rachelle bit off a curse. She knew what it meant to owe someone in this business. She knew what it meant to give, to take, freely or otherwise. She knew the hardness in her own leader’s eyes when the debt went too high and sacrifice didn’t come cheap. Shift had been a woman when she

should have been ten, and she never let her own owe too much.

Rachelle reached out and viciously hit the callback button.

“Killinger.” The pickup was quick and the ever-quiet voice had a faint undertone of...

Rachelle tasted the flavor in that voice, superimposed it over that of others she had known better... something almost frantic.

“I’m cycling,” Rachelle stated flatly. She rubbed her arms against the restless pain, hated her only weakness, the only thing that made her vulnerable—hated that she couldn’t write the woman off.

Another pause. She was beginning to hate those pauses.

“Marc and Cate are on their honeymoon.”

Her gut clenched. Cate was Killinger’s right hand and together with Marc made up one half of the standard team in Special Unit. That left Killinger with only Jarod, the mouthy cyberpath tech without an ounce of hard combat skills. The Special Unit needed him—both for his ability to

mentally interface with computers and also for his straight-up tech, warrant, and tracking skills—but he wouldn't be much help if things got messy.

Make a case for me, she thought but stayed silent long enough for Killinger to add, "I need forensics on an apartment."

"And I need a warehouse full of stars," Rachelle retorted, then sighed. Sear kept her supplied as long as there were any to scavenge and hardened her eyes at Rachelle's slightest protest. "Is he yours?"

"What do you mean?" Killinger asked slowly. She had never been a team member, only known them.

"Your informant, is he *yours*?" Rachelle had belonged to her team. They had all been Shift's, each other's. They had ruined Justus when they got him; he was the best thing they had ever made. Rachelle waited.

Finally, Killinger answered. "I offered him my protection."

If she hadn't trained herself out of swearing a blue streak, but she *had*. Justus hated it when they swore. Rachelle scowled, then carefully pressed

the skin by her star, testing it, and grimaced with the spike of pain. She pulled the star out and wiped up the carrier fluid wound with a cloth from the tin. Her body's cycling churned to a stop, and she queried through her archived entries for a self-healer to restore the vein to normal and smooth over the broken skin. She couldn't afford to cycle and work at the same time. "I'll need coffee. Lots of it."

"I'm s—"

Rachelle killed the line before an apology could be made.

—

The address was in the heart of Kishet, Rachelle's city, even if it wasn't her part of town. The Squares were located on the west end of the Core, the official name for the governmental jurisdiction that sprawled in a haphazard lump over the middle of Kishet. Old buildings for cheap living—each square was paved in yellowish bricks and surrounded by fifteen-story yardless apartment buildings in the same brick. Paved alleyways

ran off the squares into high-walled backstreets, and cement narrowly locked in each building from the pavement.

Killinger was waiting for her at the foot of a corner building, one hand holding a printed cup from the family-run café near Department headquarters, the other tucked into the pocket of her usual elegant brown wool dress coat. Her copper-colored features were softer than normal—with weariness; usually her no-nonsense sensibility gave them a harder edge. She was on foot, as expected. Kishet was made for walking and a car couldn't squeeze down these streets into the area.

“Core law enforcement made it here first,” Killinger said simply as she handed Rachelle the cup of steaming coffee.

Rachelle shrugged as they climbed the steep, narrow stairs leading up to the informant's third-floor apartment while Killinger rattled off the important facts.

“Name is Daniel Weller. He played a key role in the Sewell case last month.”

She paused and glanced at Rachelle, who nodded, familiar with the details. James Sewell

was an underground slaver, kidnapping special-type humans from free kingdoms within the city and selling them to regulars in kingdoms where slavery was legal. Then he took a Core-resident who happened to be the head of state's daughter's best friend. Miraculously, the seedy, crime-ridden Core officials who usually hated everything to do with the Department—*imagine that*—informed Killinger and her Special Unit within an hour.

“We kept his name quiet,” Killinger went on, “but he was able to pull all the information we needed to put Sewell away permanently. Enforcement wasn't pleased with my involvement.”

Which meant they were going to be a bear to work with on this case.

They reached the landing. Rachele leaned against the yellow asphalt concrete wall by the narrow wood-plated door of apartment 314 and kept sipping her coffee. Her skin was awash with more genetic drift than her body knew what to do with, and there wasn't much energy for dealing with the influx of details Killinger plied her with, just register and file—essentially the same thing

she was doing with the new entries piling into queue in a system already inundated.

Killinger frowned when the keys jangled in the lock but didn't turn. Probably law enforcement, Rachele figured. They liked to think everything in the Core was under their jurisdiction when fact was, anything involving a special-type human automatically fell under the Special Unit—thus, Ilsa Killinger, a woman who was near impossible to ruffle, threaten, or intimidate and who never bothered to explain how she got her results.

“Weller regular human?” Rachele asked casually.

“Yes.” But under Killinger's protection.

Rachele blew out a breath. It was always more complicated when law enforcement had a point. She reached out her hand and pulled up an entry in one fluid gesture, opening the lock with a telekinetic power and shoving open the door.

Her birth name was Rachele Winslow. Her *name* was the Database. Regular humans thought the Database was a government computer program tracking every person, animal, epidemic, or outbreak within the entire city. They were both

wrong and right. The Database was a genetically-modified woman in her twenties able to process any scrap of DNA that made contact with her skin. She was immune to every pathogen or drug she ever encountered and could make *very* brief use of any genetic property in her system, regular or otherwise. She had belonged to the government for most of her life. They had made her, given her to her team, then trained them all into top-secret military weapons. Unfortunately, this work came all too naturally.

“Thank you,” Killinger said as they stepped through the door onto threadbare carpet in a small square studio apartment.

It was crawling with black coats, Core law enforcement officers in traditional garb. The team wasn’t one Rachelle recognized: a clean-cut early-thirties detective in the middle of the apartment looking up with a surprised frown at the pair of them and surrounded by five or six male officers and a forensic tech, also male. Killinger’s computer tech, Jarod, hunched over his portable on the tiny rectangle of kitchen counter, seemingly oblivious to their arrival, though Rachelle doubted

it. He was far more observant than he let on.

Rachelle handed her coffee to Killinger, then pulled off her denim jacket to hand that over as well and unbuttoned her overshirt. She curled her lip at how thick the air was with pathogens—influenzas, autoimmune viruses, sewer’s plague, and a host of lesser infections.

“Killinger. Who is she?” the detective demanded, his white rank star almost glowing in the meager light of the one naked lightbulb overhead.

Killinger had a badge; Rachelle had a history. She let Killinger walk over to explain in hushed tones the way things worked.

Rachelle began circling the apartment, sticking close to the walls. The tiny kitchen ran to the left, all appliances and appliance tops and bottoms for laundry and cooking, sanitizing and incinerating, then that bit of counter. Food and food-related bacteria seemed to stick to her skin where it hit her. “It’s a wonder he’s not sick and retching,” she muttered. Incredible how immune systems in the Squares could be so hardy.

Past the kitchen, the corner and back wall of the apartment were packed with the sorts of necess-

ities that closets and pantries were designed to hold, neatly stacked but overflowing. She imagined thumbprints over all those papers and clothes and bottles of food and dishes and almost curled up on herself at all the human traffic that had marked them with genetic material. Animal entries could have been meat, strays, or pets—no telling.

She moved on in the direction of the bed and a knot of three black coats. One glanced over his shoulder and frowned before hunching his shoulders against her. She almost brushed past the other forensic tech, avoiding him by centimeters and absorbing another smattering of entries with distaste.

The entries faded here to ambience level, and not much ambience at that. Three square windows, one after another in a neat little row, were glassless but for tiny glimmers clinging about the edges. No shards on the stacks against the wall. She glanced out the window to see bits of glass glittering on the cement below. Shattered outward. Interesting.

The neatly made bed—two thin blankets over an almost clean sheet—occupied the entire right

wall up to another narrow door where the entries became intensely bacterial, low human traffic. She pushed it open to see a small grungy bathroom with shower hole in the middle of the tile floor and free-standing sink and toilet facing each other. Another window looked out from here, also shattered, but inward this time. Something different here—a special.

She took it in and focused long enough to keep the entry from cycling and ran a query instead to test the limits of information it held. Once assimilated, it would get harder for her to pinpoint the person from the usable data.

Rachelle backed away from the bathroom and returned to the middle of the room where the detective and two others were photographing and discussing two irregularly-shaped bloodstains, mercifully small, among sheaves of rifled papers, clothes, and photographs left in a mess in the middle of the floor. She shuddered at the density of the genetic information. So much of it and too many regular human patterns.

Killinger glanced at her. “I told them you were forensics.”

Rachelle nodded, watched the detective frowning at her. She studied the mess on the floor. Weller didn't seem inclined to be messy.

Grudgingly, the detective reached out to shake. "Manning," he offered.

She ignored the gesture. "Didn't know they ran them solo." Her barb was pointed, questioning his credentials the way he questioned hers.

Manning withdrew his hand. His jaw tightened. "My partner is none of your business."

Killinger's mouth formed a hard line. She passed the coffee cup back to Rachelle. "Did you get anything?"

"Improbably high number of regular-type human genetic patterns, enough pathogens to take down a hospital, and one special-type human." Rachelle glanced over the blood on the carpet.

Manning's dark eyes zeroed in on her. "A special?"

"Not your forté," she retorted. To Killinger, "I need to get out of here." Pain was starting to crawl up her back again, strong enough that she couldn't shake it off.

“We have the right to whatever data you procure,” Manning insisted, putting out a hand to stop her.

Rachelle jerked away from his touch, and Killinger stepped forward into the gap, giving him that impervious, neutral look she’d become famous for. “No. You don’t.”

—

Jarod’s mouth opened the moment they were out of enforcement’s presence and didn’t stop running until they got back to the Special Unit where Rachelle slammed her hand over his chest with a definitive “Shut. Up.”

The physical contact was enough to reassure him she meant business, so he did. He was usually good at getting that the whole united-front thing meant keeping quiet, but put him with Unit only and all bets were off.

“That wasn’t really necessary,” Killinger chided quietly.

Rachelle ignored her and brushed past Jarod

into the single office Special Unit had inherited upon formation. She skirted the peeling conference room table dominating the small space and dropped her things over the back of Cate's unoccupied chair. Only Jarod and Cate merited small desks and both hoarded that space jealously against the teetering inbox trays and organizers stuffed with files, reports, and paperwork. Everyone else got to stand around the table and leave their things on the long back counter or the short side one. The only clear patch of wall was a blue-grey strip between the glass door and the glass window into the rest of the building.

Jarod ducked into his back corner with his portable, becoming nearly invisible behind the overflowing countertops. His work often demanded that he haul his computer to every street in the city, and Special Unit didn't really have room for a desk computer anyway. He started unpacking samples and packages from his portable's carrier bag and brought a scoff of appreciative disbelief out of Rachelle.

He glanced up. "What?" he demanded. "I am good for something."

“And something just happens to be Core’s forensics?” Rachelle shook her head and let him get back to work.

Killinger stood in the doorway for a moment, studying Rachelle with that same impassive expression she had given Manning.

Rachelle retrieved a spinal star from one of the cabinets and unsealed it from its sterile packaging. She bent over the table to carefully twist it into the small of her back, wincing as she did so. The churn started up again and she struggled to keep her older entries out of the extractor. Just the scene was all she needed.

It was different from cycling, in that cycling meant taking a bunch of gathered entries and essentially archiving them. Processing allowed her to actually replicate the genetic patterns in her own body and analyze them with her special ability or external tools like stars. Processing took more out of her, required her to focus and work—like scratching an itch under her own skin.

She spared little attention for Killinger, but did notice her draw over the small recording unit that normally occupied the center of the confer-

ence table and hover one hand over the play button.

“Jarod,” Killinger said suddenly. “What do you have?”

“Some forensics, some records to pull, phone records tap.” Jarod’s head appeared from his corner in the back. “Got a few warrant requests pending. Anything particular you want?”

Killinger didn’t answer directly. “Let’s start with the basics.” She waited until she had their attention. “Core law enforcement received a call approximately four hours ago from Daniel Weller’s apartment with a publicly filed time-stamp to establish jurisdiction. He is also a registered regular human who regularly earns money by being an informant to almost any law enforcement body that asks him.” She took a deep breath. “He called me fifteen minutes later.”

“You got to help me, detective lady. I helped you, and he’s coming.” Static. *“I gotta go.”* Dead air, then dead line. Killinger flicked off the recorder.

“Likes to cut off your ankles, doesn’t he?” Rachelle demanded viciously.

Killinger didn’t answer.

The kingdoms cities had become forcibly independent from the Thorn Republic through no fault of their own when the teams of special-type human operatives, including Shift's, finally rebelled against their makers and trainers. Since the teams made no special effort to install government in Thorn's place, eventually smaller jurisdictions—counties, districts, quarters, and communities within cities—took up the slack. A single city could consist of anything between a handful and a dozen or more nations. The Department was a holdout, good enough at what it did to maintain a presence in the cities whose kingdoms were willing to hire it.

Rachelle realized the difficulty Weller had placed them in by playing the field. Personal interest did not establish jurisdiction in a kingdoms city like this—especially not for the Department, allowed its tiny foothold only grudgingly.

She started worrying at the problem mentally while physically zeroing in on the forensic entries from the crime scene: forty-four forms of bacteria and counting, twenty-two human genetic patterns and counting, one canine genetic pattern, three

feline, one bovine—definitely food, three plant-based, and one special human. Something about the whole pattern was bothering her.

She straightened and let the shift in her body go ahead and ache. “We have a special on the scene. Weller probably knew that, figured the guy was special. We can claim.”

“You’re positive we have a special?” Jarod asked from his little corner of the room. “‘Cause once I file, they’ll hang us if we’re wrong.”

“How do you think they shattered those windows like that?” Rachelle retorted. She couldn’t quantify it yet, but she hadn’t been working forensics since childhood without learning something here and there. She shook her head in disgust, leaned back down on the desk, and nearly scalded her fingers picking up one of the coffee cups she’d gotten on the way in.

“They don’t hang anyone anymore,” Killinger said quietly.

Jarod accepted the chiding for what it was and tapped a panel on his portable, likely navigating to file.

Rachelle puzzled and teased out the mashup

of entries she was working, tried to figure out what didn't make sense about them. "So who was Daniel Weller anyway?" She had heard of him before. He was a regular enough informant and she was a regular enough consultant for that.

Jarod's hand snaked out into view, holding a small clear bag with hair samples. "Surprised you couldn't tell who was in there most."

Killinger brought over the bag.

Rachelle thanked her with a nod, set down her first cup of coffee, and took a sip from the second. She worked open the bag and compared its contents to the entries she already had, feeling the duplicates and comparing. "He's three different people." She rolled her eyes and closed the bag.

"Wiry build and short," Killinger told her. "He has light brown hair—curly, and hazel eyes."

"And fidgets as much as he stutters," Jarod added. "You've really never seen him?"

"No." Rachelle leaned on her elbows on the table, kept processing, worked her fingers through her thick, auburn hair. "Mixed ethnicity?"

“Purebred mutt,” Jarod quipped. “About the color of your latte.”

“It’s not a latte.” Rachele thought he had paid enough attention to her when she was in to know *that*, but she was only lightly bothered. She kept sorting through the regulars, taking more time to check for melanin-producing genes. It was a strain having to dig in deep like this, spinning her processing paddles and feeling the constant sharp pain of holding the data in place.

She could almost hear the eyeroll in Jarod’s voice when it came around again. “Seriously, you ought to get a guy.”

The words surprised Rachele enough to snap her out of processing and make her notice the world outside her body, see Killinger raise her eyebrows, and nearly have a flashback of her last conversation with Justus. “I. Should. Not.” She shot a quick glare in Jarod’s direction before snatching back at the entry she’d just released.

“Could be good for you,” he pressed teasingly. “Love’s a powerful thing.”

“Love isn’t just romance,” Rachele retorted,

back in control, churning through regulars. She drained the last of her second cup, noting the amount of sugar was off but not enough to render it ineffective. Romance. The comment wasn't as offhand as he let on. She worked one hand through her hair and pulled it tight enough to hurt, one pain offsetting the others.

"Never said it was," he agreed breezily, fingers tapping panels at a ridiculous pace, "but you could use some softening up."

She laughed at that. Love was blood on Sear's arms and Meld's fragmented memories when he poured his life into hers, Shift's wounded eyes and the scars on Shift's back. Love was *sacrifice*. It didn't soften anything. G—, she'd been *angry* when she realized Justus had fallen in love with her, and he'd seen it coming but even then not understood the point. She never wanted him willing to pay that price.

"I don't think soft is what the Unit needs," Killinger interjected quietly, silencing Jarod before he could speak again.

Rachelle agreed with the sentiment but said nothing and instead withdrew into herself, away

from memory and love, and immersed her mind in the ache of fluid carrying DNA, RNA through her vessels, back and forth, in and out, like a breath. Her fingers worked open and then tightened into a fist as entries broke down into component parts, searching, querying. Don't focus on the pain. Don't *think*. She found him.

It was an ache to uncurl from the table, stretch just a little, let something cycle out of her system and into her permanent genetic structure, and it hurt and felt good at the same time. "The blood was Weller's." She slid the bag across the table toward Jarod's side of the room.

Killinger took a deep breath, then turned back to Jarod. "Warrants?"

"Nothing's come in yet," he admitted, "but I'm pulling up record matches for Core's forensics. Could really use Rachele's."

Rachele sipped from the third coffee cup, leaned one hip against the conference table. "Patience is a virtue, Jarod. Learn it." To Killinger, "Who would be after him?"

Killinger crossed her arms and leaned back against the side counter. "He had contacts in sev-

eral circles. Any one of them might have had a bounty out.”

“He ran with specials?” Rachelle asked skeptically. She moved to the one special-type on scene and began mining it for information. Specials didn’t hang in large groups unless they were teams like Rachelle’s. She still saw Shift, Sear, Justus, Meld, and all the others on a regular basis. They didn’t get too social with regulars, at least not if they were in the business—above ground or under it.

Killinger sighed and stepped forward, spreading her hands expressively. “I felt his terror.” She was a situational empath and the first thing she did on any scene was take a read of the traces left there. “This is someone he knew and someone who could do him serious harm. If the blood was his...” She frowned.

Rachelle followed her thought. “Then the special injured him.” Initial analysis of the special’s DNA seemed to agree. She shook her head, not liking what she was getting.

“A special he knew was coming, though that begs the question how,” Jarod added, noting her

words aloud but clearly otherwise preoccupied. He made a small sound of frustration. “Which we could answer if we could get a warrant. Core’s blocked us out.”

Killinger glanced over sharply.

Jarod called out an update. “Okay, I’ve run everything we’ve got, and our missing boy’s not turning up anywhere the Department can track him. The blood on the carpet is Weller’s,”—he nodded towards Rachelle—“so no leads on how it spilled from that. The apartment was broken into and rifled through, but from the time fades on the stuff Core got, the guy was already gone. I need some forensics, girl.”

“I’m not your girl,” Rachelle bit out. She worked her way quickly through the last of the string, marking off here, there, this aspect, that. The room went out of focus as she internalized again.

“Do you even *know* what a good romance can be like?” Jarod suddenly asked, snapping her attention back hard—and with it a leak.

She snatched after the power to check it, but Jarod’s mug still rattled and the liquid in it sloshed

mildly with the force of the aborted telekinetic shove. Rachelle lashed out verbally to cover the spasm spiking angrily through her vessels, “Give, take, and a bunch of lies to smooth things over. I know what love is, and it isn’t romance. I’ve got your man.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” All back on business, Jarod tapped a few panels and paused with his fingers over the keys. “Fire off an ID.” He kept a running database of every entry she, or any other reader, had previously processed for the Department.

Rachelle stared at him, at the instant shift from one mode to another, then let it go. “It’s new,” she told him, straightened from the table, and twisted the star attached to her spine to loosen it. Careful business that. She tried not to wince—and failed—then slipped around the table toward Jarod, handed him the star, and rattled off a bunch of numbers in the ID format he preferred. “Have at it. I doubt he’s registered.”

“Everyone’s registered,” Jarod replied.

Killinger raised her eyebrows again; Rachelle laughed silently to herself. Special Unit’s job was

to handle any investigation that turned out to be related to special-type humans, and special-type humans were rarely registered. Killinger wasn't because she'd struck a deal with the government to use her situational empathy for law enforcement. Jarod was because he was a good law-abiding citizen whose parents were delighted when he was born a cyberpath—even though at that time, few had even known specials existed. Rachelle was a team member registered in a database Jarod would never have access to. Registration in the standard database was simply not applicable.

“Anything helpful?” Killinger asked Rachelle quietly.

Rachelle shrugged and settled into the absent Cate's ergonomic chair before propping her feet up on the table and tasted the last bit of coffee in her cup to find it cold. She grimaced and tossed it in the can under the desk. “He's a dowser. Recognizes fluids through a few feet of layers and can draw them up with the right call. Sizable range but it cuts out after ten yards or so.” She picked

up the fourth cup, felt it—still warm—and started drinking.

Jarod stopped and looked over. “You mean he could draw blood from a victim while standing across the room.”

“And draw air through windows.” She spun the coffee cup idly in her hand, worn out and aching like she’d been pummeled inside and out.

“Air is a gas,” Killinger reminded her.

“And gas is a fluid.” Rachele closed her eyes and let her entries start cycling again instead of processing. It was slow work without a star to shove more of them through, but she had to do something before the abilities hovering at the edge of her internal working queue became more than just shadows and a stream of available options.

“Jarod.” Killinger said the name slowly, thoughtfully.

Rachele opened her eyes and took in the canted angle of Killinger’s head, the faraway look in her eyes.

Jarod rolled out from his corner as far as the chair would go in the tiny room.

“Why do the time fades show that Daniel had left the apartment before the break-in? If it was his blood, then he should have been there.” Killinger’s frown deepened. Her gaze came back into focus as if she were seeing Rachelle and Jarod. “I think our special wanted something in those papers,” she stated quietly.

Rachelle thought that over and started to piece together her disconnect. *He’s three different people...* She almost swore. “Bring up Weller’s registration,” she demanded.

Jarod grabbed his portable and tapped a few panels. “What am I looking for?”

“You’re not.” Rachelle came over and glanced over the screen. “Does this go by something I’ll recognize?”

“If you speak guanine, adenine, thymine, cytosine.”

“Lucky for you, I do.” Rachelle skimmed down the identification codes until they broke into something she understood, then read over the genetic signatures.

“Is it the same one you identified?” Killinger asked.

“Weller’s a shifter.” Rachelle shook her head in disgust and straightened. “We have jurisdiction.”

Killinger’s intake of breath was soft, but loud enough to sound in Rachelle’s ears. Jarod snapped his mouth shut, then read the look on Rachelle’s face.

“Have something against shifters?” he prodded with genuine curiosity.

Rachelle shut down her emotions, off her face, out of mind. This accomplished, she raised an eyebrow and answered, “Quite the opposite.” She knew more about shifters than anyone else alive, even shifters themselves. Rachelle had absorbed every single shifter genetic pattern known to exist, sliced and diced them open, and compared them to each other. *But*— Shift was a woman when she should have been a kid, and she could manipulate almost anyone into exactly where she wanted them. Rachelle had never had a taste for that.

She aimed her next words at Killinger with a mood shift so rapid that she surprised herself. “You still want to save him?” The change was there, right under her skin where she hadn’t

expected, and she found that professional operative inside her waiting to take over. She covered her coolness by stretching against her irritated muscles, tilting her head from one side to another to release the pressure in her neck and shoulders from a blockage. What she wouldn't give for Justus right now to break up the kinks. He had learned the pattern of her vascular system more quickly than she had and mastered the work of massaging it into a smoother flow.

She glanced back over at Killinger, whose mouth had tightened into a grim line.

Killinger uncrossed her arms. "Yes. File the appropriate breach reports, Jarod, and we'll take this from the apartment." She moved to the cabinet to gather up the things they would need.

From the apartment. A reader run. Rachelle scowled as anger provoked painful twinges down the vessels in her body. No reader cared to walk a path from a scene like a sniffing terrier.

Jarod seemed surprised but went promptly to work, tapping, filing, then snapping together his own essentials, starting with the portable.

Rachelle tossed her last empty cup into the

trash can and threw on her missing layers. She heard what Killinger hadn't said. Killinger had promised Weller protection, never mind whether his sorry hide was worth that promise. Rachele had heard it from her leaders her whole life, *I never lose one of my own.*

"And Core?" she asked, even as she scrounged around for her own first aid kit— instant coffee packets, sugar, creamer, small bandages, bioreader, biosupport patches, an emergency medical star still sealed in its packaging. She didn't want to do this.

"Manning needs to close this case," Killinger stated without inflection.

Rachele glanced up, interested. Jarod paused just inside the door, waiting for the two women to catch up.

Killinger shrugged. She never was given to explanations of how she knew things, not even to her own people. "He can't do that without us."

—

Manning may have needed to close the case, but

he wasn't particularly happy to see them—or the report Jarod gave him on informant fraud breach and confirmation of the involvement of special-type humans. He barely refrained from gritting his teeth in irritation.

Rachelle grimaced when she immersed herself back into that cesspool of drifting genetic material and scrambled hastily through her entries. Two shields had already cycled past, fourteen more in queue. She found a suitable entry, pulled it into focus, and overlaid her skin with a thin, invisible shield that locked out the drift, then let go of the ability and let it slide back into the churning database. Two seconds. She had three seconds left to unshield when she needed to.

She leaned with some relief against a wall. Manning narrowed a questioning glance at her, but she disregarded it.

“What do you have from the case so far?” Killinger asked politely, calmly.

Jarod waited at a small distance, hand tapping arrhythmically against his portable's case.

Manning's techs had wrapped up and it was just him finishing his initial report against the

countertop on a clipboard. He weighed the question for a moment. “What do *you* have?”

“The Database, man,” Jarod interjected, then fell abruptly to silence beneath Killinger’s chiding look.

“We need each other, it would seem,” she answered Manning indirectly. “The Special Unit’s purpose is to handle special-type humans, but we don’t need to redo whatever footwork you’ve already done.”

“And Core’s *purpose* in this?” Manning demanded caustically.

Rachelle honestly couldn’t blame him. Who wanted their case snatched away if they actually cared about this sort of thing? She pushed off the wall, drawing the gazes of the Unit and Manning as she stretched her back just enough to unkink it. Cycling was sluggish, slow. It would take her ages to finish at this rate and running entries wasn’t going to help.

“Core’s law enforcement,” she bit back with her own characteristic harshness. He could have figured this out. “You’ve interviewed the neighbors, paid out informant fees, and have some sort

of theory going on in that detective head of yours. You do arrests. I don't."

Killinger's eyebrows came up. Fact was, the Special Unit *did* do arrests, but without Cate or Marc here, bringing in a special would be difficult at best.

Manning frowned at her, also uncertain at her conclusion, realizing perhaps that Rachelle wasn't a member of the Special Unit. "Killinger's handled arrests." He had read enough files over the years since the Thorn Rebellion.

Rachelle rolled her eyes. "I'm the brawn of this outfit unless you call in a team, and I do not do arrests."

Killinger slid her gaze back toward Manning, apparent acceptance of Rachelle's point. Jarod coughed slightly to cover his laugh. Working with specials for real wasn't something law enforcement generally did, so they had little in the way of experience with the different set of rules under which those specials operated. Oh, there were a few branches here and there that had some. Justus had taken up law enforcement in Riving. Protector took up with militia. It wasn't unheard

of, but the Core didn't have specials. They had the Special Unit, and the Special Unit had Killinger and Cate who had people like Rachelle in their personal economy of debt, love, and sacrifice.

"I handle the arrest," Manning repeated, his stare aimed straight into Rachelle's.

She laughed. "If he doesn't end up dead."

"You have a suspect." His attention shifted back to Killinger.

"You have a theory," she answered evenly.

He had a theory. He just didn't have the facts. There wasn't quite as much choice as they were all letting on. The Special Unit had the jurisdiction and Core had the information the Special Unit needed. Handing over the arrest rights was simply a faster way to get Manning to give up the data that Killinger frankly had the right to.

"The neighbors reported hearing glass breaking approximately seventeen minutes after the call to Core." Manning tapped his pencil against his clipboard as he spoke. "Nobody reported witnessing anything, though the apart-

ment overhead reported more breaking glass about ten minutes after that. Core arrived on the scene at thirty-four minutes.” Seven minutes too late.

Jarod’s face went as stoic as he could make it and Rachelle figured he was biting back a drop-down list of comments on the poor response time.

“It’s Core,” she retorted. “Cut them a break.”

Streets in the Core were a tricky proposition. Backstreets made for walking only, front streets broadening from thin alleyways as narrow as three men standing abreast to open thoroughfares that could accommodate three or four cars driving parallel—travel took multiple forms for a single nearby destination, and black coats were already spread thin enough responding to the densest crime rate in any of the western cities.

Puzzlement flickered in Manning’s eyes at her defense. Rather than respond, Rachelle moved toward the stacks of paper under the windows.

Manning kept talking to Killinger. Killinger responded in low murmurs. The case for Jarod’s portable unzipped, followed by the sounds of

fingers tapping and panels pressed. Rachelle studied the papers. Nonsense rhymes and riddles. She glanced back toward the unit and heard Manning say much the same thing.

Nonsense rhymes and riddles and Weller a shifter. D— it. This was going to hurt.

She leaned back and forced herself to uncross her arms, uncurl, and toss her hair back and out of her way. The database in her body cycled backward as she focused and, combing through a few dozen entries, found the shield she'd tossed aside earlier. Sliding it off was like diving into a swimming pool of needles. She slid off her jacket, opened her eyes from half-shut concentration, and studied while she processed. Pinpricks of genetic drift washed over her. She watched dust—*dead skin, wasn't it?*—floating in the meager window light as she searched for the dowser in the morass. He had to be there. He'd had a reason for coming and it was somewhere in these papers.

Ten minutes. He'd probably expected longer when he came to pick up Weller and took off

when he realized his target had called for help. It had been six hours since Weller went missing.

Killinger was standing at her side. She hadn't noticed her approach, still didn't take time to do more than that.

After a pause, "What are you thinking?" Killinger asked.

Thinking? Rachelle could have laughed but instead shook her head. This wasn't thinking, running pins and needles under her skin in an urgent rapid rush—*the dowser, the dowser, the dowser...*, RNA, DNA, in and out like a breath. She backed up, shook her head again. "He didn't find what he was looking for." She tightened her nails into her bare arms, abruptly realizing she'd gone to gripping herself somewhere in there.

Manning held out the clipboard, flipped open to his techs' analysis of the scattered, bloody papers and photographs in the middle of the room. She didn't take it, just read it.

"Forensics, huh?" he asked, tone dipped in suspicion.

"Told you we have the Database," she bit back

sharply. "I need to contaminate the scene."

Manning's jaw set. "Look. This evidence hasn't been catalogued—"

Killinger cut him off before he could continue. "We'll give you ours." A blunt offer. She had promised Weller protection and time was running long.

Jarod was mercifully professional as he slipped Rachelle a data reader.

She bent down and tucked it under her pant leg, pressing it into her skin. "Got me?"

The cyberpath narrowed eyes at his screen, then nodded, expression clearing. "You're on."

It was snatching at the entries passing as quickly as she could send them. She reached into her jacket pocket and tore open a coffee packet with her teeth.

"You drink entirely too much coffee," Jarod quipped.

She glared at him, opened the creamer, the sugar—just the right ratio of each—and treated it like medicine when she tossed the ingredients into her mouth and swallowed. Careful business to thumb through the stacked papers and pull out

those the dowser had touched. Still running through entries, dragging the whole thing to a slamming, aching halt as she grabbed the one she wanted: Shift. Her leader. She ignored the flashbacks, the memories of every time she'd taken on these particular genes, let them split open her own double helices, and five seconds to snatch up the papers in the middle of the room and *shift* them, into her body, out again, and into whatever they were really supposed to be.

Rachelle shuddered, power spent. She handed the papers over into Killinger's gloved hands—no new entries there, she was grateful—then scrounged through the entries one more time for another shield as she pulled on her jacket. “I hate this,” she muttered.

“You're a special,” Manning stated, voice unreadable. His stare was fixed on the papers in Killinger's hands. They frowned over them together.

“You think?” Rachelle straightened the lengths of her hair with her fingers, then braided them swiftly. If she didn't have to fight today, then she didn't have to cycle. She made a small noise of

disgust in the back of her throat. How many times had she told herself she wasn't going to do this again? Reviving her combat skills, playing coverage, overloading her own vascular system, dirtying herself with the Department one more time and one more time whenever Killinger called her because Killinger was Cate's and somehow Rachelle had never learned to quit caring. She tossed aside her braid and didn't flinch at the way it hurt when her hair fell back against the skin of her neck.

Manning looked up at her then. "Caffeine addiction?" he asked quietly, with neither acceptance nor condemnation—still genuinely curious, reserving judgment until he understood.

She laughed him off and Jarod too, who was staring in unabashed curiosity in the hopes she would answer. "Can't. Someone made me addiction proof before they figured out the side effects." And that was it, all she was willing to say about what the Department had done to her body when she was still a child and the kingdoms were still a part of the Thorn Republic. "You caught it?" she

aimed at Jarod, turning her body toward him and cutting Manning out of the loop.

Jarod skimmed down his screen again, tapped a few panels. “Your body went crazy, but the pictures are good. Shipping the catalog to Core.” Then he settled in to start reading himself. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

Crazy was about right. Her body was going crazy now, hectic patterns of heated rushing fluid pushing and shoving and tumbling through too little space in those vessels under her skin. Spider aches and little breakages. What did it matter if the database bled?

“What do they say?” Rachele looked to Killinger, who had finished reading and was now on the photographs. Once family photos, now they were gritty backstreets and gang-marked buildings.

Killinger sighed. “Nothing good.” She straightened the papers and laid them carefully on the floor again.

Manning shrugged it off. “Power suppression is supposed to be impossible, but if this kidnapper

thought it wasn't, it could be cause for this." He gestured at the ruined windows, the glass, the papers and went back to scribbling his report.

"Genotype reversal kills the subject," Killinger corrected him quietly, making Rachelle want to flinch with *those* words. There was no undoing what had been done. "Not suppression."

Manning looked surprised at Killinger's upending of his knowledge about specials. Rachelle could see the thoughts whirring behind his eyes as he considered the implications. She could almost hear those thoughts and she abruptly realized she was running a telepath.

She shoved the entry to silence before it broke something that couldn't be fixed. Don't go there. Don't talk about this. Rachelle wanted them to shut up before this leaked some information none of them had any business leaking. "What do those papers say?" she ground out between gritted teeth.

"This"—Manning waved a sheet of paper—"is the bill of sale for two hundred power suppressors to be used on special-type humans."

Jarod looked back and forth among them.

“But power suppression is *impossible*.”

“And who told you that?” Rachelle scoffed. “Thorn?”

Manning’s eyes darkened. “You’re a rebel?” He recognized the difference between how a former Thorn Republic citizen referred to their one-time country and how a former operative did. The operatives had *bated* Thorn, a country willing to experiment on its own children to create the perfect warriors. Former citizens never knew why they no longer were.

She spared him a glance and pulled up a cyberpath. A spark of white light at her fingertips. Five seconds. She flung her mind into Jarod’s computer and through the files he had read off her while she shifted those papers: power suppressors, real ones—black market, Department issue and the type all team administration had worn and some team members used for medical reasons. Only there was no way in Kishet that Rachelle would believe these were purchased for medical use. She lost her grip, and the entry slid out into her database.

“You still want to go after this fish?” she

demanded of Killinger. He had information on something he knew perfectly well was beyond illegal. “*This* was how Sewell was holding his specials and Weller *knew* about it.” This was how they were able to trade in the lives of special humans and enslave them. It was part of how the Department had done it then, and it was how the slavers could do it now.

Killinger closed her eyes, pained expression furrowing her forehead. She had promised Weller protection in exchange for the information he had given, but he had held this back. “We have a duty to go after the kidnapper,” she said at last, opening her eyes.

“But we’ve got enough here to lock away Weller too,” Jarod pointed out.

Killinger shrugged. “He is an informant. I will leave that to Core.”

“An informant who, according to your own analysis, profiled himself fraudulently.” Manning glanced around, frustrated. “But we don’t have much to go on as to where they went. Unless we look at everyone tied to Sewell.”

“Wouldn’t matter,” Jarod disagreed. “The dowser’s not registered.”

“Not even in the Database?” Manning frowned.

Rachelle moved closer to the counter to remove her emergency biosupport patch from her pocket and apply it to one arm, letting it throw some healing power and energy through her muscles. She couldn’t really afford to move to a star right now, and she wanted to skip out on this conversation if possible.

“He’s in the Database,” Killinger replied evenly, “but without a name.” She glanced toward Rachelle. “Physical attributes?”

Rachelle only handled genetics, but even that had salient points. “Five foot eight, white male, brown hair if it’s not dyed, carrier for sickle cell anemia...” She trailed off. Invisible trait. “Sorry.”

“Not everyone sees the world through a microscope,” Jarod teased.

“Not everyone mistakes reality for a chip,” she said, sharply again. “Medium build, high cheekbones, somewhat pronounced if he’s not

fat, blue eyes, body hair light. Anything else?”

“If he’s not fat?” Manning’s tone was flat, but his eyes provided the question mark. “Old picture, then.”

Rachelle shrugged.

“Jarod. Run these through and see if you can bring up a location.” Killinger handed the photographs to Jarod, then shot Rachelle an apologetic glance. “I think it’s time for a reader run.”

Manning didn’t know what that was, but he stayed quiet and watched intently as Rachelle shoved off the counter and ran the entries she had tagged for this ten minutes ago. Jarod kept an eye on the reads from her chip. Rachelle focused on processing the incoming data from empathic, telepathic, thermal, and genetic reads. Five seconds, but it was long enough to map the entire apartment inside her mind and confirm what she and Killinger had both noted earlier.

“Bathroom,” she commented tersely.

“The window in there was broken inward,” Manning reminded her. “More likely, it was the entry point.”

Rachelle stayed quiet. Killinger glanced at her

then seemed to realize why Rachele wasn't talking. No need to clue Manning in as to exactly who and what the Database was. Like Rachele didn't have enough complications in her life, she really didn't need that one.

"The dowser can only draw fluids toward himself," Killinger explained. "He can't push them away."

"Fair enough." Manning gestured at the door. "After you, ladies."

Killinger shook her head. "I'll meet you outside."

Jarod followed on Rachele's heels. Manning stood near the door of the tiny room as Rachele sized up the exit point.

It was a trip through the window and she pointedly ignored the flashbacks from her work before the Rebellion as pointedly as she ignored Manning just behind her. She had always been picky about who watched her back.

Jarod gave her a leg up. She accepted not because she couldn't flip through the thing on her own strength, but because she didn't want to pull an entry, run one, send another RNA command

screaming through her system. She angled herself just so and held herself by her hands in the near-empty window frame, palms grinding into the last remaining glass. She paused for the wash of more entries, more data, but G—, where was she going to put them?

“Tell me she’s not intending to go through,” Manning said when he realized she wasn’t angled right for returning to the ground inside.

“Regular,” she bit out through pain-gritted teeth, then tossed herself through, somersaulting down three stories of yellow brick toward Killinger, standing on the pavement, staring upward. Rachelle hit with the acrobatic landing and somersault rebound that had been hammer-trained into all her team, letting the impact flow with her and out of her body.

Killinger searched her gaze with restless worried eyes.

Rachelle grimaced. “Exit point.” She glanced up.

Jarod and Manning stared out the bathroom window. Jarod gave a nod at her word and

disappeared back inside; Manning followed hard behind him.

—

The backstreets of the Squares reminded Rachelle of too many crowded narrow streets in foreign cities on other continents, but the genetic detritus was undeniably of the Core—its typical plagues, diseases, and ethnic groups.

Killinger stared down those streets, eyes narrowed, reading if Rachelle wasn't mistaken. Killinger's genes had a different taste when she was using her empathy, and Rachelle could feel it, along with the wash of Jarod and Manning approaching from behind: the snap of cyberpathy and a regular who had walked through too many places in this city. Too many entries, too much data flickering through her body. Rachelle shuddered and forced herself to pay attention. She had zoned out upstairs and that was the sort of mistake she couldn't afford to make again.

“You’re absolutely crazy,” Manning muttered, his voice a low rumble.

Rachelle spared him a brief glance. She had no desire to answer the accusation veiled in his words.

Jarod opened his mouth to—what? Defend her? Rachelle shut him up before he had a chance to say a word. “I do my job.” This wasn’t her job, but Manning didn’t know that.

Killinger turned to face the group. “It comes in snatches. Nothing is... complete.”

Another one of those things where an interpreter would come in handy. On a good day, further away by weeks from needing to cycle, Rachelle would have run Killinger’s entry and figured it out for herself. Today she was bone-weary, over-stretched, and wanting to hook into Meld long enough to get healed—even if every bit of life he poured into her came from his own.

She shuddered, altering her wish. The last time he’d healed her, he had barely pulled away soon enough to remain alive. Don’t go there, don’t go there. She jerked her head and ignored Manning’s concerned glance. Let Jarod do the heavy

lifting on this one, reading Killinger through his computer, and nodding as if he understood.

“Going in and out of consciousness maybe?” Jarod suggested.

Manning frowned at the portable’s screen, clearly more lost than Rachelle.

She didn’t like feeling lost. Killinger was studying her, waiting. This was a reader run, wasn’t it?

Rachelle could have closed her eyes, but she had long since mastered the art of falling inside herself with eyes wide open. There was a river inside of her, the serpent biting its tail, turning around and around and getting longer every time she added new entries onto the end. Rachelle did not reach out with her hand to that cramped maze of backstreets and alleyways, grime and dim sunlight, because the river was already there. She opened up and let the world come in. Truly becoming her power instead of merely using it was immersing herself in an entirely different way of seeing, feeling, sensing, *thinking*.

Genetic drift weighted the air heavily toward Killinger, Jarod, Manning, herself—but there

were other entries awash in faintly moving currents in the air. Brick walls layered decades-old material under years-old under days-old. The ground was a scattered, profligate map of every weed and animal or human foot that had ever passed. There was Weller and there and there in so many shapes and forms. This was his home territory after all. She held out a hand as she walked, coming close to brushing the brick walls, the sidewalks in the more densely covered areas, seeking a moment of transition and the entry which would allow her to run Daniel Weller. She didn't find it.

“Don't think I've ever seen you do it like this,” Jarod commented, almost breaking her concentration.

She shrugged him off, held onto that tight immersion. Entries flickered in and out at the edges of her vision, her nerve endings, endless possibilities to use this special human ability or that or some of that unthinking intuition a normal—*Justus*—might have.

She abruptly switched gears and went looking for the drift and impacts of the dowser, followed

the directional flow as best she could, marking it off in her body. She let herself feel the taste of his various entries: initiating dowse, dowsing, pulling, releasing, winding it down, leaving it inactive. Once she was sure she had collected it all, she let it all go and shuddered as her body struggled to swallow the new entries she had dumped into queue.

“Snatches will have to do,” Rachelle snapped. She was gripping her arms again and *that* hurt, tightening down the space her vessels had in her body. She had stayed thin all her life, never cared that much for food, but now she wondered if she should have put on weight to lengthen those vessels and gotten some more room for the DNA, RNA breathing in and out like a series of zeroes and ones. “I can’t do that again,” she said abruptly.

Killinger nodded, eyes concerned but face unmoved. The woman took stoic to a whole new level.

Rachelle shook herself, ignored the keen narrow-eyed stare Manning was sending her, and straightened. “The dowser dampened his fall here.” Right under the window. “He pulled on

the air to cushion them.” She gestured down the second backstreet, opening leftward. “Took that south, second right.” A seer entry flew into position with a sharp spike that made her catch her breath, and she kicked it right back out. “Weller could be awake or not, no telling. The dowser was messing with him but then quit around the first corner.”

She was climbing the walls, spider pains crawling up her back, but she let that be, fell into step behind Killinger, glanced over at Jarod’s screen while Killinger read all the empathic signature snatches she could down the second backstreet south and around the second right.

Killinger and Manning took opposite sides of the streets, knocking on what few doors were in view of the exit route. Manning’s brief note to Jarod on security cameras was that the whole area had been swept already. There were none.

Jarod nodded at that and ran his own sweep, eyes unfocused, mind stretching out for anything he could possibly hook into. Precious few security systems were impervious to a cyberpath, even fewer invisible. Rachelle knew of only one and

possibly a second that were able to consistently skate below notice, and both had been designed by cyberpathic former team operatives.

Both sweeps came up empty. Jarod's computer made a pinging sound as they huddled together in a likely corner.

"Got something?" the detective asked, gesturing at the portable.

Jarod held up a finger.

Killinger shook her head and rubbed her arms with her hands. "Nobody seems to have seen anything helpful."

Rachelle felt that itch of wanting to know what was going through Jarod's machine and mind, but she too settled for rubbing at the irritation in her arms and focusing her gaze outward into the maze of backstreets. Let Killinger do her job and Rachelle be the coverage Cate wasn't there to be. Could the woman have picked a worse time to get married?

"Restaurant," Jarod commented abruptly, breaking the tense silence.

Killinger leaned in to read over his shoulder. "Auspin."

Manning shook his head. “I don’t know the name offhand. Send it to Core.” He aimed this last at Jarod, who merely continued tapping away on his panels.

A cool, stale breeze wafted through the stony corridors. Rachelle felt the faint drift and scolded herself but snatched at it anyway. She shrugged her hair to one side to expose more of her neck and angled her face into the faintly moving air for better access.

“Silas Auspin isn’t coming up with a lot of cross-references.” She could hear the frown in Jarod’s voice. “I’ve got an application and license in Silent Kingdom for the restaurant from a little over two years ago and not much after that.”

“Not much or nothing?” Manning demanded.

Jarod didn’t answer right away. He kept tapping, then paused and drummed his fingers against the side of the portable while it hummed merrily. Rachelle was certain his cyberpathy was running overtime. “Core’s got nothing. Silent Kingdom isn’t exactly what you’d call hackable.”

Rachelle narrowed her eyes. Silent Kingdom. That was the taste of it. A difference in the gene-

tic ambience in this corner where the dowser and Weller had passed beyond her scan.

Manning came out and said it. “We need to check this out, but how do we know we aren’t chasing wind here? This is a photograph our suspect *might* have been after. There’s no guarantee this restaurant has anything to do with him at all.”

“Medical records,” Killinger ordered Jarod. “See what you can bring up under 7th Ward at the Burdown Hospital.”

“Get right on that.” Jarod’s hands quit drumming and got typing. “What am I looking for?”

“Sickle cell anemia,” Killinger answered. “Carrier.”

Rachelle glanced back from the wind at that. Manning’s expression registered surprise, but also that he remembered what Killinger was pulling from. If Auspin was a carrier, their evidence trail had just gotten tighter.

Jarod’s eyebrows rose. “I got a Jameson Auspin for sickle cell. Brother to the Silas Auspin who opened our restaurant.”

Killinger looked to Rachelle for confirmation and Manning followed the look, knowing that

Rachelle was forensics, but not *knowing*, not like he was about to.

She just couldn't keep some things quiet forever. Rachelle sighed. "Hang on a sec," she muttered. "Running a normal."

The words drew sharp glances from the rest of the Unit. None of them had seen her do it, assumed there was nothing valuable in a regular-type human genetic pattern for her to run, just query, but he gave, Justus gave, and she hated him for it as much as for anything he took.

She settled on the ground, bent her head to knees, and tangled hands in the lengths of her hair, messing up the braid. He had always liked her hair. "This won't be pretty."

It wasn't. It was a mess of color, sensation, memories gained from every time she read him with a hundred different abilities, every time he touched her when she was cycling—she hated that his was the only touch that could actually make it feel any better—shuddering through her body with the results of more reads than just her own. Becoming another person *hurt*. Harshness melted into self-loathing, crisscrossed with a moral

standard far too high for all the things they'd done, the sharp taste for blood and violence bleeding into tender, brutal intuition—intuition that ran in his family. She grasped for it quickly, no time limit on her own power, and there. She had it. It was hers.

She threw back her hair and sat up, clenched hands, clenched teeth to hold onto a pattern that could only last but seconds, and there it was: the way her teammate could read a dozen variables and find the thread that made them hang together. All those photographs she'd read with borrowed cyberpathy, the papers, the genetic ambience from another kingdom hanging in the air, the images in her own mind of that same kingdom gone silent once the Thorn Republic had been taken away.

Rachelle nodded at Killinger. "It's Auspin. He's keeping his specials in the basement of that restaurant."

Manning frowned. "The basement?"

"Steps," Killinger said, pointing at the screen as Jarod flipped through the thumbnails for her. "They lead below ground." She continued to

study the pictures, then gestured again and Jarod brought up the documents. She said slowly, “Putting Sewell out of business would have locked down the power suppressor supply, but they are no longer being manufactured and we confiscated everything in Sewell’s warehouse.”

“Including a bunch of suppressors that nobody bothered to investigate?” Rachele demanded.

Killinger shook her head. “Evidence hasn’t had time to deal with much of anything that’s already locked up and closed out. Most catalogues go into storage if we don’t have a reason to sort through it.”

Jarod looked incredulous. “We could have found evidence of a slave-trade ring for all we know.”

“Same happens in Core.” Manning leaned back.

“It was already catalogued,” Killinger replied flatly. “Small printless black boxes don’t help us find related suspects.”

Jarod didn’t argue the point, but did bring up another, more salient one. “So how are we going to do this in *Silent Kingdom*?”

Silent Kingdom was, to put it mildly, a problem. It used to be the bad area of town when Kishet was still a Thorn city, but now it was an isolationist nation without law enforcement or judicial system beyond the hero and villain vigilantism that had sprung up there. Neither black coats like Manning nor the Special Unit were welcome within its borders—with or without a warrant.

Rachelle looked disgusted. “We get a team and we get out there.”

“If we could arrest him and get Weller out,” Manning countered, “it would be better to get a team out to bat cleanup later.”

Killinger disagreed. “This is an act against a citizen of Core. We have jurisdiction whether or not Silent Kingdom wants to grant it.”

“Are you suggesting war?” Manning asked, exasperated.

Killinger’s face hardened. “I’m suggesting heroism.”

Weller wasn’t exactly a worthy candidate for heroism in the old vernacular, but Killinger wasn’t using the old vernacular. She was referring to the

right of a vigilante hero to take back what was stolen or defend what belonged to their own side. A vigilante villain was not so much someone intent on wrong as someone who would steal or destroy what another side should not have—or go into a place like Silent Kingdom to deal with a slave trader.

“Keep the slave trade out of it,” Rachelle bottom-lined it. “We’re going in to get Weller and that’s it.”

“Which doesn’t require a team,” Manning pointed out again.

Jarod was sitting back and watching. He knew the conclusion Killinger was working toward.

“No, it doesn’t,” she said softly. “But Rachelle doesn’t do arrests.”

“I’m climbing the walls,” Rachelle admitted to Killinger, who looked over impassively, proving she had already known that. “There’s going to be collateral damage.”

Jarod snapped his portable shut. “It’s a vigilante state,” he said. “There’s *always* collateral damage.”

Rachelle exhaled sharply. And wasn't that the truth?

—

There wasn't going to be a later. There wasn't going to be a cleanup. This was the Department and even though the Special Unit was a step removed from the Thorn Republic and the old laws in the black book that was above the security clearance of almost everyone high up enough in government or military to "need to know" almost everything, some things fell back on old school when there wasn't anywhere else to fall back to. Rachelle wasn't Special Unit; she was an operative, and she and Killinger both knew how to play this so everything stayed legal where it mattered.

Jarod supplied the passes into Silent Kingdom out of his portable. Killinger asked Manning how good he was with his gun.

"Good enough to take down a hostile," he stated and, for the first time since Rachelle had

met him, earned a second look. He wasn't an operative and she didn't need confirmation to know it—the Database was the only operative who had been personally introduced to every single team member there was—but he used their words and the hardness in his eyes was all too familiar.

They stopped off before heading in to let Jarod make sure they had all their red tape taken care of. Rachele had her own preparations. She would have to hold on tight to make it through this without destroying something.

“How do you know Killinger?” she asked Manning as she slapped on her second biosupport patch and downed another round of coffee at their stop-off point, a small, friendly little restaurant the Special Unit frequented. She would have asked Killinger, but Killinger was near the door making a phone call for some medical backup, something Rachele didn't want to think about.

He shrugged. “Ran into her a few times the usual way.” The ‘usual’ meaning she took his case out from under him. Killinger did her work well,

but she had never cared if she made friends or enemies along the way.

Nevertheless, it wasn't a real answer. Something about it bothered her, and Rachelle hadn't been in the business since she was a stolen six-year-old child without learning some instincts along the way.

"You normally talk like an operative?" she retorted, more to the point. Her gaze raked over his black coat, white star. She tilted her head in question and drained another cup. She didn't have to say there were none of her kind in the Core.

Jarod didn't even bother looking up. He was used to her harshness and probably knew Manning better than she did.

Manning's jaw set, then he shook his head. "Not normally, no." He finally met her gaze and shrugged simply. "I've known a few."

Rachelle nodded, gathered her trash to dump it in the incinerator by their table. "Good enough." She had always been picky about who watched her back.



The restaurant was next to deserted, a small island of clientele in this corner and that and a couple laughing beneath the window sign over their plate of cobbler. People walked the street in front, but traffic was low enough to be acceptable. The operation probably wouldn't raise a fuss. Rachele stretched out with a borrowed mental power and felt the faint hum of dozens of minds below—trapped, worried, guarded, *pained*. That would be Weller. She nodded to Killinger.

Jarod entered through the front door. The tiny bell overhead tinkled wildly. He smiled as he went in, as though he were a normal patron and went up to the back counter to order. His ability didn't require him to be downstairs. Anywhere with electronics or data processing ports would do.

Killinger led them around the back of the building. The view that met them matched the photograph: under graffiti, a rusted set of stairs led down from the grey brick backstreet. One tiny

security camera poked out of the corner above the door. Manning looked grim.

Rachelle stood back, waiting for the ping through her consciousness. She only had so many mindreaders, so many telepaths to catch Jarod's message. There. "Security's down."

"People?" Killinger prompted.

Manning undid the safety on his gun.

This time, Rachelle didn't fight off the wave of familiarity from another time when she did this sort of thing regularly. Muscle memory and habit as old as she was took over. She was playing coverage, querying her internal database through the pain to find the first power that would do. She slammed a wave of unconsciousness through the entire basement and waited for the aftershock of minds falling silent, tumbling into dreams without warning. Five seconds passed. She dredged up a biosensitive and located the remaining wakeful forms.

"Just one." She sighed wearily. "Auspin. Weller's in there. Alive."

Killinger nodded, and they moved in.

Amazing what Department overrides could do to a building's built-in security, but they had to wait for Jarod to undo the layer of custom internal security. She was running through cyberpaths—ten, twenty, thirty, thirty-four endless seconds; she only *had* ten entries—then finally, the entire computer network winked out from Rachelle's awareness. "We're in."

Manning stepped up to guard the left side. Rachelle breathed relief and slid to the right, leaving room for Killinger to take point and open the door. A narrow, cramped hallway ran down the back of the building with rows of doors on either side. There was absolute silence and tension hanging in the air. Auspin knew they were here. About how big *were* those rooms? Rachelle narrowed her eyes, estimating and comparing to her mental scan, then gestured noiselessly at the second door on the right.

This time, Manning turned the handle, but they didn't get far.

Auspin met them instantly, shoving out of the room, firing an automatic and shouting obscenities. Instinct had Rachelle throw out a telekinetic

wave against the bullets and yank the weapon from his hands with the same power. Manning fired twice, but Auspin clearly had learned how to manipulate projectiles by pulling on the air around them.

Auspin's hand reached out toward the Unit, and Rachele felt it with her own power, the slide of genetic triggers into place to dowse for their blood. She didn't give him the chance. She threw herself into the gap and pummeled him to the ground.

He writhed under her, muttering curses, and grabbed at her, flailing wildly. Blood churned in her arteries and veins, but he didn't know that her blood was never her weak spot. She didn't bother with elegance, just grabbed his power from the stench of his breath, the hand on her shirt and yanked with her own mind on the blood in his body.

He screamed, blood welling up through his skin, and the five seconds were over and she shifted to the next entry, and he sensed the carrier fluid churning through its system. He was trying not to die, but it was too late for that. He pulled

on her database, gurgled his last breath, and her world exploded with an endless agonized scream and hundreds of unleashed powers.

Climbing the walls could destroy a city, but he had *shattered* her walls. Dimensions that shouldn't have existed flickered in and out, the walls of the room melted, air glowed then hardened then reverted to air again. Manning's arms hauled her up from behind, and she cried at the agony of twelve more entries—four bacterial, two human genetic patterns— Stop it, stop it, stop it. Fires burning, ice sliding out of nothing, minds screaming as she woke them, the in and out of comm data overhead—

“...healer in here,” Killinger's voice over the dispatch. “...should be...outside.”

Rachelle struggled to hang on, to stop the madness, but she couldn't stop rocking and screaming. No, no, no... Not another healer. She'd nearly killed her brother. She'd nearly killed him. There had to be an entry to shut this all to silence. No!

Reflex found what mind could not, a cold

slap of darkness hit her, and she fell into it with relief.

—

The healer woke her. Rachele knew the taste of a healer: the plead for trust, the life and memories and emotion swirling on the other side of their skin. She knew it even through the blinding pain and everything she could see swirling around her in blurs and flashes of color. She heard moans and knew they were hers.

“Come on. Let me in.” A young woman loomed over her, hand pressed to the center of her chest just below her collarbones. “Come on, Rachele.”

Frantic memory, Meld’s pale face, feeling him dying on her—no, no, no, no...

The world snapped into focus and she bit down hard on her scream at the pain of the entries filling up more space than she had vessels to put them. She pulled together every shred of

distrust she could muster and shoved them into the healer.

“She knows how to shut me out.” Frustration flooded between them from the girl to Rachele, but she kept trying, kept trying just like... Meld.

She’d broken the walls before. She’d nearly killed her brother. No.

Long ago, she used to cycle without the stars, without the discs. She had room and knew how to do it. She could shove her own entries through her own vessels to their own processing centers to be assimilated into her final genetic makeup. She could do this. She could do this.

So she did. She screamed and cried and held on and used up every entry she had that could help—telekinesis, healing, self-healing, regeneration, everything she could get her mind on and throw through her own system until shuddering and still crying, she could open her eyes and the world wasn’t spinning.

They were back. Her walls were back and she *had* vessels again to hold the data.

Rachele fell back on the floor, still crying, but forced herself to take in the scene around her.

The healer was a young woman barely out of her teens, blonde and rounded edges, cursing fluently in another language. “Stubborn, stubborn processor,” she muttered.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” Rachelle found her sharpness and used it to shove down the remaining weakness.

“You should be more worried about yourself,” Killinger said quietly.

Rachelle turned away and ran a quick query through her own body. She had maybe a dozen usable specials left—more flooding in through the stale air: red hair, red skin, heat vision, heavy bones, down syndrome carrier, electricity energist...—but she had patched up all the broken places. She’d be okay. She breathed hard. If she went home and cycled, she’d be okay. It would buy her another couple months before this happened again.

She looked around at the ruined room crowded with people moving in and out between melted doors. Conversation rolled around her in a dull murmur. There was an emergency medical team and at least a few plainclothes law enforce-

ment officers that Rachelle knew perfectly well shouldn't be dressed as if they belonged to the hospital. Typical. Absolutely typical. She rubbed at the aches and pains in her body and mused that at least they would get out of Silent Kingdom alive.

The formerly captive specials were being allowed to walk away, dazed but free. It was Silent Kingdom. They couldn't legally be questioned. Black coats boxed up the evidence and the power suppressors, not realizing the Department wouldn't let them keep it. They were on to wrap-up now, getting out of the scene, calling Killinger over to tell her the situation was under control if not resolved.

"Auspin's dead." Rachelle demanded, "What do you mean, 'Not resolved?'"

Only Jarod was near enough to hear her. "Weller's loose without a statement, and our arrestee will never testify."

"You think?" she retorted. She reached down and massaged her ankle, realized that the blood douse *had* done something. "I hate this job."

"Well, I like you in it," he offered.

“Jarod. Shut. Up.” Rachele glared at him, holding her ankle as she called up her last relevant entry, regeneration that normally took three days, not five seconds, and paired it with a time-accelerant. She watched and felt the ankle heal, tendons knitting back together, blood pulling back from ancillary tissues and back into the vessels where they belonged. And now she was down to ten.

He stared at her. “Rache—”

She shook her head. One hard jerk to the right. “Been there, done that.” Give, take, and a bunch of lies to smooth things over because the truth of that give and take was too raw and terrible to leave alone. “Never knew what the big deal was.”

It wasn’t a lie and it didn’t smooth out anything between them, just drove his mouth into a hard line and let her stand up and walk away.

“You shouldn—” the healer started, but Jarod waved her to silence and followed, near enough to help if needed.

“I’m. Fine.” Rachele was tired of biting out another truth, tired of all of this. She kept promis-

ing herself she wasn't coming back.

She was almost to the Unit's car and there was Killinger, intercepting the two of them before she could climb in it and drive away.

"We all need the ride, you know." Killinger's gaze held sympathy but no give.

Jarod glanced back and forth between them.

Rachelle shrugged, leaned one arm against the vehicle and rested her head in the crook of her elbow. It smelled like car metal and rust and her own stale breath, but she didn't care if she didn't have to look at anyone else for a little while.

"Manning's filing the report about Auspin," Killinger said quietly. "Killed in the line of duty." Collateral damage, as expected.

"Good for him." She was tired and cross and awash with genetic drift from more than a dozen specials.

Silence stretched for a moment. "Seems you have a ride," Killinger said at last.

Rachelle pulled up her head and craned her neck to see over her shoulder.

Night had gathered over the crooked cobbled

streets, and only a single gaslight shone on the man standing at ease, a mere white t-shirt over jeans against the evening chill. Justus. Justus who she hadn't seen or spoken to in three months because he'd been fool enough to fall in love with her. Should've known it wouldn't matter if she needed him.

"Who dragged you out?" Rachelle demanded.

"Battery Acid." The simple handle said more than any retort. Rachelle was caustic but indispensable. Justus had always preferred to call her by that name, as if it were affectionate.

Jarod coughed and she glanced over at him. He had never met Justus and his eyes said he wasn't sure whether to protect her or to realize he had lost a battle there was never a chance of winning.

She laughed, just a little, and turned to Justus. She was tired, but it was good to see him anyway. "Who?"

He nodded at Killinger, then held out his hand for hers, not touching her, testing her well-being. Just to spite him, she took his hand and curled her fingers around his on the way to his

car. Let him guess what had happened from that.

—

They didn't talk. He drove. She rode, shoe balanced against the glove compartment, head leaning back, one hand tracing abstract patterns on the glass window. Don't focus on the pain, she told herself. Justus followed her to her apartment and locked up behind them, watched her strip off her jacket and kick off her shoes and go over to the tin on her counter to fish out another star.

"That bad, huh?" he commented dryly.

The spidery aches crawling up and down her back agreed.

She shot him a look, then focused on hooking the star into her left arm. "I hate you."

"Shut up." He pulled her hard into his arms, ran his hands over the right places on her back—every ache, every hurt. He knew her body's system better than she did, the first to realize all that pain was a lack of circulation.

But she stopped him, even though she knew it would help and it was exactly what she usually

wanted. She pulled him after her into the living room and settled beside him on the couch. He leaned back so they could lie down. His arm wound around her waist, and she tucked her head against his shoulder, letting his familiar warmth relax her. No giving, no taking—just being, and for once she could let herself breathe again.

Justus held her gently against him. He always knew what she needed. She was just so tired of the sacrifice.

“Sometimes I do hate you,” Rachelle said softly. Her fingers idled against his arm.

His hands flexed against her hips, stopping himself from gripping her tighter—she didn’t want to imagine the words he wasn’t saying—then just as softly he answered, “Sometimes you don’t.”

She closed her eyes in the darkness and let herself fall asleep. ❧

BAKER OF SOULS

BREATH

Senetha had never lost a soul. As one of three bakers in the Old King's city of Elerys and far fewer babes being born than ever in Senetha's long memory, her reputation earned her brew and broth, and powers help the other bakers who did not have such a blessing to gift them.

Senetha sniffed the warm dough as she kneaded it. There were few scents in all the five cities she liked better.

There is nothing more precious than the task of the baker, her mother told her softly, keeping her breath from the dough while guiding her tiny daughter's inexperienced fingers. There is nothing more important than your task. Knead well.

Senetha's fingers were no longer so inexperienced. With joy she kneaded out the dough until it was just the right amount of ropery, then settled into a bowl to rise.

Good smells filled the small cottage home she lived in. Senetha chased a white cat out of the kitchen, only to be met by a grey mewing at her reproachfully when she stepped just down the hall.

"Ah, hungry? Yes?" She chucked the big grey under its chin, and it meowed back at her. "Soon, my love. I must first put the bread to bake."

She sidestepped the grey, passed three doors on the right and the tall window out onto the porch, and turned in at the basin. She washed her hands carefully, searching out every tiny bit of doughy residue. Then she pulled down a clean, white towel, fresh-washed in whiteness to retain its emptiness and patted her hands dry. This was the most important part of the process, and she must not get it wrong.

She held up one palm close to her mouth and breathed upon it until the skin just tingled, then the other. Satisfied, she turned away from the

basin and crossed the tile again into the kitchen, stepping down into its warmth and comfort.

The dough had proved itself, and she punched it down. Gently, she separated one handful and drew it into her palm then shaped it carefully into a roll, making certain to coat every side against her open palm. This she did with each of the thirteen.

“Breath and air and bread,” Senetha told the calico cat purring before the open oven. “That makes the finest souls.”

The cat did not disagree. Nobody ever did.

—

The faint scent of blood and mother’s milk greeted Senetha just inside the door of the birthing home. She hummed lightly and kept her mouth shut. One hand protectively patted the basket over her arm. Thirteen fine souls today. Thirteen.

The ladies at the desk smiled at her and let her through. Almost everyone in the city knew Senetha. Even if they had never met her in their memory, some vague familiar sensation stirred when they caught sight of her. She had breathed

into each one of them before they were born. It was good to be a baker.

Rounds were easy, as natural as the heart in her breath. Senetha smiled over a new mother and slid a tiny roll of bread into a tiny mouth of a still and silent infant. With a gentle knead to that tiny throat, the child swallowed the bread. It breathed. Its legs and arms began to squirm. Milky blue eyes opened and stared upward at the child's mother. Senetha moved on.

Ledí had birthed twins, as hoped, and Senetha knew she would dispense of all thirteen souls in her basket. It was a great and terrible thing to leave a soul untended to wither away and die, as terrible as it would be to leave a vessel die without offering the child a soul. It lifted a burden from Senetha's mind.

She ended her rounds at the last door. The door was painted the color of yellow sunshine, not a blessing, but Senetha was not one to discriminate against a young unwed mother. There were many reasons a girl could end up behind a yellow door, from brigands to improper wedding from an abusive man. Senetha rarely thought the worst: fooling

around before proper arrangements had been made.

This girl had dark, damp hair troubling her against the soft blue pillow. She kept trying to touch it, pull it back. The child under her arm also had dark hair and was still and silent as any newborn babe.

Senetha reached into her basket under the towel for her last, most precious bread. She put something extra in every last soul, that the child receiving it may have an extra blessing in its life. Senetha clucked comfortingly to the girl, but the girl seemed feverish and not to hear.

“The child?” Senetha asked.

“Healthy,” the nurse replied. “A girl.”

Senetha smiled and put tiny roll of bread to that tiny mouth and kneaded the tiny throat. The child squirmed, breathed—and spat out the piece of bread.

The nurse and Senetha gasped in horror. The child stared up at them with dark, almost defiant eyes, but it did not see them. It looked at this strange world and let loose its first, soulless cry.

Senetha stumbled backward. She had *never* lost a soul. Never. The child was kicking her feet and her tiny curled fists. She *wouldn't* take— But the baker had to try.

She leaned forward, scooped up the bread, and tried to put it back in the baby's mouth, but the child would not accept it. She closed her tiny eyes and scrunched up her face and lips against it. The nurse stepped in to help. Senetha struggled with the babe. In the end, neither of them could do a thing.

—

The baker of souls returned home weary and with unwept tears behind her eyes. She had failed. She had cared for a little lost child who had tasted her soul and rejected it.

The small cats usually converged upon Senetha the moment she opened the tall narrow door into her home. Those with souls would not touch the bread, but those without them were drawn to them more intensely than even to milk.

But none of them came close.

She set down her basket and called a kitten to her, but the kitten meowed piteously and fled. The grey came closer, carefully avoiding Senetha's basket, then settled on the baker's lap to offer comfort.

Senetha wept. She had never lost a soul. Never. Sacrilegious, the practice of feeding the unused souls to cats. But small cats were never dangerous with a soul. If anything, they were sweeter, kinder. They wrapped their paws around Senetha's shoulders and washed her face and purred as though they could assuage her grief. But the soul had been tasted, and no one would touch it again.

"My soul!" Senetha cried. "My lost, little soul!" The child would grow up heartless, incapable of feeling or conscience. The child was lost. The soul was lost. The baker was lost.

After a long while, the baker of souls got to her feet and took the soul into the kitchen. She placed it in a jar with honey, oil, and a rust-red spice to preserve it forever. She closed up the jar and placed it carefully in a high cupboard.

Then, Senetha turned and went up the step into her house, past the doors and the windows

and turned into a small room. It was furnished simply—her needs were few—with a small wooden stand, a squat oil lamp atop it, and a pallet rolled out beside it. A cupboard occupied the far corner. From this she took her good cloak and her warm robe. She replaced them with the apron she wore for baking.

The grey meowed at her in agitation. Senetha paid the cat no heed. She reached under the clothes and pocketed a chain of colored stones, worth a small fortune. She went back down the hallway, past the doors and the windows to the front door of her house. She ordered the cats with souls to care for the cats without.

She walked out into the night, out from the city, and baked no more.

A P R E T T Y W O R D

B R E A T H

She was a dangerous sort of writer, the kind who was sought out in back alleyways and offered thick marble rods as long as her own hand to just write a word, any pretty word, to comfort a poor lost soul. Lost from family, from friends, from work—it didn't matter. The requests were the same, interspersed, of course, with the occasional visit of a plain-clothes watchman in disguise to make sure she did not breathe on any of the words.

As if the words were the issue.

Kindia snorted out a steamy huff of disgust into the chilled alleyway. Breath of a soul, the skin of a human vessel, something tangible to make it take... These were the tools of her trade, the

implements of her power, and it was an easy thing to keep her hands full of breath without a soul suspecting.

Keeping the wrong folk unsuspecting meant her life now that the Old King was dead. She walked the back streets of the city where people tended to forget she and the other powerful existed if they just stayed out of sight. The rebels hated the powers, hated the powerful. Well, except the bakers—kind of necessary, them—and the former enforcers of the Old King's guard who could raise the war again if they were forbidden.

They offered service enough for folk like Kindia, who had no other way to earn a coin, but she had seen the heartless, the downtrodden poor who sold off their passions and feelings for enough coin to feed their children. She sold her own banned power to save herself from such a fate.

Just write a word, any pretty word, to comfort a poor soul on a cold, dark night, lost from any other comfort.

“Madém?”

Upon hearing the honorific, she looked up from the brick back wall of the service shop she'd staked out earlier in the evening, before the city lights had been glowed. A street man, he looked like—could be just poor—stricken with age and bent-bone disease: dark skin and knobby hands, bundled up in thick mismatched coats and leggings under boots hardly thicker than night-time socks. Kindia could read the empty lostness in his muddy brown eyes.

“Cold?” she asked, ever the caustic.

The man bobbed his head, implored with those knobby fingers, wrapped in thin scarves he'd ripped tenderly in two. “Write me a warm?” His voice was dry and husky. The old man may not have been long for the world with a rasp like that.

Kindia nodded and settled into a crouch, still leaning on the wall. Crouching left her more options if a watchman should decide to try bludgeoning her for the craft. She rubbed her hands together, as if for warmth, breathed on them, and looked up speculatively at the old man. “You got coin, frít?”

He showed a gap-toothed grin, pleased at her naming him a respected patron. Pleased enough to flash his coin. Pleased enough to not hurt her when she snatched it in that flash.

Paper.

A scrap from the alley would do. For merely malachite, not quite a meal, she would not part with the sheets she'd bought down the front streets three weeks back. One malachite coin wasn't worth enough to line her own fingers with carefully ripped scarves tied about the palms. But it was enough to write.

Warm your hands; you'll never thirst. Warm your heart; you'll never hunger. Warm your soul; the vessel conform.

Price: something back street people rarely thought about, something front street people never thought about, though she wrote the price in every line. She could write in power, but few would ever receive the blessings of her breath.

"Take it," she said and flashed him a smile when she passed the paper.

The old man frowned. Her smile faltered. He knew she hadn't breathed on it. An odd clarity glittered behind his eyes.

She scowled. "What? You wanted a pretty word? You have one." Not a word that would come to life, not a *breathed* word, the heavens forbid. She hadn't breathed on the paper, and he would never pay the price she wrote within those lines and know that it wasn't the words that mattered. He would never guess she was a powerful. "Take it," she shoved the words at him angrily.

His eyes darkened—not muddied; she cursed: the man must have taken strong power to have escaped her discerning eye—and he backed away from her, one hand lifted shakily in defense. "Scuse, madém. Thank you." That gap-toothed smile, the shuffling step out of the alley.

Kindia comforted herself as she gathered her things to move on. A precaution, some would say unnecessary. Perhaps, he was not a watchman—her inner cynic snorted at the idea—and she likely had little to truly worry about. He would never pay the price.



Jaspen was the sort of washed up fellow that years and years of ranking service turned out as soon as the skin began to sallow, the joints to stiffen, or the hair to turn empty as the white of milk. He was assigned to street watching. Every coin paid out from the rebel council was earned by another poor washed up man or woman being put away or destroyed for daring to keep the powers alive.

Ah, they weren't the sorts of things that could be easily played with, or even done away. Powers kept the children alive; powers breathed into every soul; powers brought life; powers maintained life; powers were from birth within the vessels of the men and women who wielded them. To destroy the vessel of a person was death. To scrub the power from a vessel was all but impossible.

He stared down at his own vessel now, weak and stiff, wrapped in any scrap of powerless cloth he could find to keep himself warm. And in his hand that bit of castaway paper with a neat, scrawled

message. He needed food, and he'd only get that by turning in a real, unlawful powerful in exchange for his weekly pay.

Warm your hands; you'll never thirst, read the note.

Jaspen glanced up and looked about him. The Taken City was beautiful; its shimmering buildings on the main streets glowed with magnificent arrays of taken colors—effective colors, fraught with powers such as strength and illusion. The less fortunate streets, but still respectable, lined their glass windows with gold and silver and stacked the walls with brick. Other streets, more hidden and dangerous, darted like snakes past shimmering marbled steps and between comfortable, prosperous little neighborhoods. They hissed with the steam of heating and cooling vents and the vented curses of the poverty-stricken residents of their city.

He knew he could beg his way into a warm cookery and order a pot of broth to eat. It would warm his insides and his hands, but it cost stones he did not have. As it was, the malachite provided

to pay out to the suspect were barely tinkling in his pocket when he shook them.

The alleys then—hidden as his own demise could be for daring to walk them.

Jaspen did not often know fear. It was hardly the friend of the watchman, nor was it the bedfellow of a former warrior. But age struck the fearless and the fearful alike. Few wanted his sorry old person, and he counted that to work in his favor.

He picked his way carefully through the gentle motion of a shopping throng. Delicate ladies and quiet, shy children clinging tightly to their hands, out to sample the delicacies of the cookeries and the sculptors. Down past the shop of a Collector; he did not allow himself to look beyond the glass at the buying and selling of hearts, but continued to a turning of steps toward the heart of the city.

Into the side way he went and found heat billowing out of the back of a small brick shop. Wide, circular—he judged it a glass sculptor's abode. Others had come before him, a scrawny old woman and a thin, young man, not old

enough yet to be cast out, but Jaspen questioned not. He stepped into the heat and lifted his hands.

Feeling slowly returned into the gnarled fingers. He gasped, opening his mouth—his companions flinched away from the breath—and felt the heat dry his throat until he choked.

Thirst. He stumbled away, stumbled hands into the wall to hold him aright. He was thirsty.

—

Warm your heart; you'll never hunger. Few in all of the Taken City did not know the meaning of *heart*—the heartless had seen to that: the seat of all feeling, entirely divorced from memory or moral compass.

Jaspen found what he wanted barely a step up from the twisting behind street where he had warmed his hands. A young girl with a soft cloud of pretty auburn hair whipped her head back and forth as her young green eyes searched for her lost parent. The child could not have been older than Jaspen's youngest granddaughter, who had passed her fifth year this summer.

He approached the little one, smiling and hesitant, as befitted the bideless man he appeared to be. "Where you hale, midíam?" He addressed her as the daughter of a high lady.

The girl lifted her head and looked at him. Her straight back befitted the daughter of wealth. She clearly recognized the form of address. Servants in her household then.

She placed two fingers on her chin, bewildered. She shook her head and auburn sparks went flying. Jaspen reached to smooth her hair, but halted himself before he violated her vessel by touching it. "Come now, midíam," he said instead. "Let us find your lady mother."

She trailed him politely, pointing out whatever shops her mother had entered. At last, a sobbing woman dressed in sweet pale blue scooped up the girl into her arms and thanked him. "You have no idea how much she means to me!" the woman cried, all decorum forgotten.

Jaspen smiled, bobbed his head with proper hesitance. He did not hope for a coin, though it would have been appreciated. The nobility may be grateful to such as a servant, but they were not

in the habit of paying them. But somehow, the lack of potential reward made his deed seem sweeter. The girl clung to her mother and he thought he could see his grandchild, who he had not seen since the watchmen moved him to the streets. He felt warm pinpricks in his heart.

But as he passed the next cookery, his stomach growled. He was hungry.

—

“Jaspen, my fellow!” The chief watchmen of the night slapped Jaspen’s shoulder so hard that it hurt his shaken bones. “You have been out too long this night. You *must* be cold.” He offered his own spiced brew to Jaspen. It was clearly warm and smelled strong and pleasant.

Jaspen shakily shook his head. No. He was saying no to a brew that would almost serve as a meal if he sipped it slowly. “Thank you, chief,” he answered quietly. It would not do to displease the man, but it would be far worse to accept a favor and then not deliver. “I found only a scrip writer.”

The chief put a frown on his pasty face. Scrip writers were powerless. They offered pretty words, yes, but powerless words. They did no harm, for certain.

“Ah, well.” The chief slapped Jaspen’s shoulder again, as if in camaraderie. Jaspen winced. “There’s always tomorrow night,” the chief assured him.

“Yes, chief.” Jaspen bobbed his head. “Always tomorrow.”

—

He went out into the cold night with nothing to warm him, save for the cloths he had wrapped around his hands and stuffed in the layers of his coat earlier. He felt cold inside as well. He had not put effort toward proving the third phrase of the note: it was impossible to warm a soul, that long-swallowed bread of the newborn child.

“Ah, you young ones,” Jaspen murmured as he looked out across the city. “You will understand when you are old.”

The hours had deepened and night grown cold. There were dangerous men and women about now. The former enforcers and wranglers, the former warriors and assassins, the former thieves and guardsmen, now in whatever occupation could hold them glided silently over the streets with their hooded eyes and armored coats, on their ways to whatever comforts drew them, home or cookeries. What did it matter? They were young. They had work. Or at the very least, they could take or sell their heart.

Jaspen would not let himself fall so low until he had no choice. And so he made his way slowly across the street toward his own home, settled beneath a cookery eave, where it was warm and watched by the younger watchmen, where safety and the occasional bowl of broth awaited.

A cold prickle ran along his spine. He stopped, all the old senses from wartime coming alert. There were too many people about to know what had set off his trigger.

But no... Jaspen took off with a burst of speed he did not know he still had toward the corner of the street, turning down into steps,

where a black-coated wrangler held a young woman up by her scruff and flung her toward the hard brick wall of a nearby cookery.

Somebody cried out, but Jaspen could not hear it. He launched his entire old gaunt vessel between the woman and the wall and caught her in his arms before his back hit the wall and exploded with pain. The agony intensified and he gasped. He felt the skin break, the pooling of blood. Surely, his vessel was finished; his path over.

What better way? He would die for the blessing of another.

A sudden warmth startled through his limbs. He stared wide-eyed and frightened into the wide, frightened eyes of the woman in front of him. The *familiar* woman. The scrip writer.

He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped at the shudder through his frame. His thirst quenched. His fingers ungnarled. His stomach filled. His vessel filled with a sense of wholeness and well-being that should have been impossible..

And then it hit him. No scrip writer, she. She was a powerful. The words *breathed*.

“Madém,” he stammered.

The woman flinched and drew away.

He could exchange her for stones, buy food, maybe find a place better than a mere eave.

Jaspen smiled and bobbed his head. “Thank you, madém.”

She stared at him, gaping.

He turned, pleased with the ease of motion, and flexed his healed fingers. He laughed and walked out into the night.

Warm your soul; the vessel conform.

ADDENDUM: FICLET O'CLOCK

ACCEPTABLE COST | 203

THE COMMERCE OF HEARTS | 215

BLOOD OF DRAGONS | 219

VELOCITY OF RAIN | 229

IKSTUARPOK | 237

DON'T SAY A WORD | 249

ITS OWN ABSOLUTION | 253

BENEATH THE ICEWOOD TREES | 267

DREAM THE DANCE | 275

AS THE RIVER BREATHES | 281

ACCEPTABLE COST

KINGDOMS & THORN

Alaine Shaever woke to the wail of an alarm through her personal comm. She bolted half upright, tangled in sheets, and dug and scabbled for the phone unit buried somewhere in bedclothes. “D—,” she swore aloud, then immediately repented when she imagined what her mother would say.

There was the comm. She yanked it out from under her pillow, chivying loose the corner of a sheet, and slapped the green button. Message received. A line of block-letter text across the screen read, “8th and Main.” She had ten minutes to get there after she’d pressed the d— button.

It was Alaine’s first call as an emergency medic, student class. She tripped over herself

three times getting out of the knotted covers and into some clothes. She hastily yanked her hair through a band while nearly stumbling out the front door. She didn't have time to pause for her father scowling, arms crossed, beside it.

She was seventeen years old. Alaine scowled as she slid into her driver's seat, jangled the key in the slot, and coaxed the engine to life. "Come on. Come on." She was old enough to make this decision for herself.

Eighth and Main were in the heart of the Thoroughfares, a central kingdom with broad avenues linking other kingdoms within the city together. The primary income there came from toll roads and transit taxes. She could take her car and make it in the nick of time.

Crazy, crazy. Chasing after mirages and fleeting nightmares in the middle of a dark city night, stark shadows and aglow with street lamps and blinking car signals. She didn't feel as old as she claimed herself in her head, but no time for regrets.

The wheels squealed as she pulled out onto the concrete street, running straight south. Her

comm beeped, and she glanced at it. Another call, but it bounced back since she'd already accepted the other.

Traffic was moving fast tonight and Alaine picked up the pace, still muttering to the car, to herself, tapping her foot on the gas with nervous energy to help herself wake up and make the drive go faster.

“Eighth and Main. Eighth and Main. *Come on.*”

The best thing that ever happened to her driving record was the Thorn Rebellion, which handily removed federal power and national speed limits. The Thoroughfares gave broad exemptions for *everything* to medical personnel, even student class.

Ten endless minutes after she'd slapped that green button on her comm, she pulled to a halt behind a whining emergency vehicle, scrambled out, and ducked under the green tape to head inside a square red brick retail and office building, flashing her badge on the way.

“Tenth suite,” a woman told her, catching Alaine's arm and nearly yanking her to a halt or

stumble.

Alaine pulled away. “Heard.” Tenth suite. She glanced at the right door, read off eighteen; left door just up ahead, read seventeen; and started running, knowing now where to go through the milling crowd of black coats law enforcement and green-banded emergency workers.

Student-class. She was student class and her heart was pounding because she was on the scene with a healer badge that outranked half the professional medics here.

Tenth suite’s door was splintered open and bloodstained, and she sucked in a breath as she slowed to a fast clip, then stopped just inside the door, tiptoeing to see over the orange tape and the workers and officers—looking for a body.

“Killinger.” Alaine rolled back on her heels in surprise, then darted forward toward the copper-skinned, professionally dressed woman standing by a cubicle wall. Ilsa Killinger headed up the Special Unit, a city-wide law enforcement body that Alaine’s older sister often consulted for.

Killinger looked over when her name was called, surprise registering in troubled brown eyes.

She frowned, but nodded in acknowledgement. “Our primary witness is going into shock.” She spoke quickly and quietly, walking Alaine down a couple cubicles.

Inside, a girl hardly older than Alaine was holding her bloody torso, arms crossed, teeth gritted, and rocking back and forth.

“Five bullets. Severe blood loss,” a male medic with dark brown skin and close-shaved hair commented from beside her. He’d obviously cleaned up the worst of the mess and done what he could.

Death rattle setting in.

Alaine didn’t waste the seconds she had. She heard that sound and dropped to her knees, wrapping the girl in an embrace to press her palm into the girl’s back.

Trust me, trust me. No time to think about the craziness, just push into the hazy dreams and nightmares, *trust me*, push, *I’m here to help*, bullets flying toward me, fiery pain and blooming blood and..., *trust me*— She fell in with a daze, diving into another person, minds melding in a mish-mash of dying and can’t breathe and pain

blooming through her entire body until she was screaming and holding on and *live* and *My mama's going to kill me, but she'll never get the chance and trust me, don't die, don't die, don't die*—

Alaine fell away from the girl with a start, torn loose in a shock that rattled her as soon as she realized she was Alaine and she hadn't been shot.

The medic's eyes were inches from hers. "You can't hold *on* like that." Worried voice; he'd pulled her off, she realized suddenly.

She felt sick, nausea hitting her at once then crashing through her belly and throat, but she was too limp to do anything about it. She started to shiver with something other than cold.

The medic muttered as he pulled her back and helped her lean on the cubicle wall. "Stay with me." He shook her arms until she nodded, got a grip on herself.

She kept nodding. Breathe deep. Slower, slower. Just like that. Good. "I'm okay." And she was, slowly coming back to herself and a stable if bone-weary state. She didn't think she could move. She looked up at the girl.

The girl was staring at her. Healed. Completely healed. Mouth open in wonder, blood still on her clothes, but perfect unbroken skin and five shattered bullets scattered on the floor.

Healed. Alaine leaned her head back as the medic checked her badge and realized she was a student when he'd thought she was a professional and *knew* when to stop and not to dive in like that, and all Alaine could think was: Healed.

She took a shaky breath and accepted a glass of water from Killinger, sipping as she had the energy. She had never come so close to death. She had never come so close to life.

They left her alone as they kept doing their work. Almost. The medic—"It's Devon,"—came over and pressed a bioreader behind her ear, making her grimace, and shook his head as he checked her vital signs.

"How long have you been taking calls?" he demanded.

Alaine sipped her water, leaned back her head. "First time."

Devon stared at her, mouth moving, but no sound came out.

“Gotta start somewhere,” she added, not shrugging because she had absolutely no energy to do so.

“They didn’t tell me they were sending a student,” he responded, clipped and angry.

Alaine decided not to point out that he had to be listed as accepting student-class medics or she wouldn’t have gotten the alarm in the first place. Instead, she asked, “You work with a lot of healers?”

“I know when you overdo it,” he stated.

His mouth formed a straight line, and he leaned over to scribble something on his clipboard. It was the medic’s job to file the report. Alaine hoped that was a good thing.

G—. Her parents were going to be worried sick.

She grimaced and started moving her limbs into position to stand, but everything felt sluggish and clumsy and then a wave of dizzy nausea rolled over her and Devon was pressing her by the shoulder back to sitting. Acid reflux burned in the back of her throat.

“Stay there,” he ordered her. “I’ve got to sign off on this for them.” He left her then.

She stayed.

—

“They always saddle me with the rookies.” Devon had been muttering non-stop since they put her car into a locked carport for emergency workers and Alaine into the passenger seat of Devon’s hospital-owned medical car to drive her home.

“I can drive without you,” she shot back at him, glaring because he wouldn’t clear her to go home unsupervised and then had the gall to complain about it to boot.

Devon laughed. “Sure thing. I’d like to see you try.” He kept both hands tightly on the steering wheel, his gaze fixed on the traffic in front of them, but nodded as if he was gesturing. “Keep on drinking that. Get your strength up.”

Alaine sighed disgust and took another swig from the water bottle he’d handed her earlier. Whatever the drink was, it tasted awful, but it was

supposed to help replenish her body of whatever she'd lost pouring it into the girl. They called it biotransference, but nobody had actually qualified *what* life was just yet.

"How old are you?" Devon asked suddenly.

She scoffed at him. "That is none of your business."

"You act like a teenager."

Her mouth opened, and she was a half-thought from lighting into him for that one, then snapped her jaw shut. She just needed to get home, tell her parents she was still alive, then fall into bed before another day of classes and afternoon work at the bookshop.

"You're killing yourself, you know, if you take this job," he said suddenly, but before he got any further, Alaine slammed her palms down on the armrests, hissing between her teeth in anger, and looked at him with the first genuine attention she had really paid him.

"Save it," she said. Stay quiet. Slam the lid back on your temper, d—. She shut her mouth, worked her jaw, looked out the window, then thinking again, snatched the bottle from the

holder and guzzled the rest in one go. “I know what I’m doing.”

Devon shook his head. “They all say that, Alaine.”

He must have read her name off the badge.

She signaled when they reached her neighborhood street, and he pulled over to let her out.

Alaine gave him one last look as she stepped out. “Some things are *worth* it.” Then she got out of the car and forced her wobbly knees to keep her upright as she walked down the street and up the driveway to home.

THE COMMERCE OF HEARTS

BREATH

The woman who enters my shop is young in body, but she is not young. I have seen battle; I know the scarred.

Her eyes are pale, wounded, weary. She moves as though every muscle in her body aches and glances away from the delicately carved stone bottles nestled among swaths of fine fabrics. Instead, her gaze lingers on the circular glass slabs set beside with gently calligraphed names: *vredé*, *inul*, *boshult*. Selflessness, duty, peace. Fingers glimmer out to touch, then rapidly withdraw.

“You have been to a collector before?” I ask the needless question, needless as I am Mavren, a

collector, and recognize the faces of those I have laid waste.

Her gaze flits upward, shuddering past the old uniform of an Enforcer, that remnant of my former life as the hands and will of the King, then onto my face. There it stays.

She strides forward abruptly in a rustle of coarse cloth and sets her small bag of yet coarser weave beside the one tilted stool I retain, where she proceeds to sit. Her eyelids drift shut. "Leave the duty," she says.

Ah, have mercy on us, powers, we who deal in the commerce of hearts.

Her clothes, almost more slender than she, betray her humble means, her figure declares her motherhood, and her eyes are the eyes of the heartless, lacking much of the spark of humanity. We are much alike in that.

My palm closes neatly over the skin above her heart. With my flesh, I feel the sharpness of her intake of breath, but with my soul, I feel the acrid potency of her love. She has children who need food and clothing and shelter in these hard days. She has a husband whose work does not

bring enough to give it to them. I hunt through the welter of emotion, its vibrancy, and little wonder she is wounded. She has sold her fear, resentment, joy, gratitude, wonder—everything. Everything but duty, love, and the pain they cause her.

I could take the duty. It would fetch a handsome price, enough to keep her a few months before she swept the path to a Collector again. I leave it, yea powers, I leave it.

Love. Pure, undiluted, potent love. It warms my soul and fills me, then I step away and breathe it out into a bottle, stopper it with a black clay infused with implacable.

The mother's eyes open and are cold, but she has a duty to her family and will care for them. She chose well.

I pay her enough to provide for a family of five for more than a year, long enough to bring new work or much enough to educate the children to care for themselves. She nods her head and walks past the shelves of hearts, unheeding and uncaring when hers joins them.

BLOOD OF DRAGONS

VARDIN

Akena was a slender, black-haired shadow slipping through the House of Britak, down stone passageways and through the book-walled rooms of their Household's seat. She was sixteen years old and unbound. She had mastered not even one of her gifts and sometimes a tiny flame of wonder burned in her whether her parents felt shame at the fact.

Sixteen years to make a woman from a child. Sixteen years and she should have been a guardian. Sixteen years and she should have lowered her neck beneath the Queen's hand and be bound to service of her nation, Vardin.

Dusk made the House quiet. It suited Akena's purpose, for though she moved with grace and silence, there were others in the great families who needed no ears or eyes to sense her passage, for she was of the *kahtchen*, those gifted with various abilities: to see with their minds, to hear thought, to sense the passage of another kahtchen, to exert their will over common elements, to pass through time or space, to bring forth fire and not burn.

She paused above the corridor overlooking the training courts but did not step into it. Instead, she reached out with her kahtchen senses and felt the flicker of clomen, that element of giftedness, burning within a single body. One. Akena licked her lips in concentration, reached again—straining. Her father. Her father who was fire, who had bound himself under the name Burn, and who had named her *born of flame*.

She stepped out into the corridor, but turned out of it to a small side door leading to the stairs that went below. She would join him.

—

Burn, as every other guardian, trained with and without his gifts. He trained with fire, burning and leaving unburnt the things he wished. He trained with staff, sword, and his own hands as weapons in the dances which taught a guardian how to protect the plain.

Akena stayed in the shadow of an awning, where garden vine flowers trailed up the side of the House and she could watch her father before letting him know her presence. She had heard the stories since she was a little girl—stories of how the dragon households of the mountains of Rothnarak were once brothers in arms of the households of the valleys of Vardin and stories of the great wars fought between them over who had the right to live: those who could kill a plain human with a thought or those who were the untainted creation of God. And in between stood the guardians, the gifted kahtchen who had promised to keep both alive by sacrificing their own freedom to do so.

But Akena wasn't bound. She was still a little girl for all she was a woman.

Like a shadow, she flew out from under the awning and her father met her, stroke for stroke. She lost herself in the training, in the idea that she too might one day be a guardian.

He broke off when she stumbled the third time. She didn't look up from the ground at him, kept her eyes on the rapidly darkening ground and heard her own breath ragged in her ears.

“Akena.”

Akena. A command. She scabbled herself to a standing position, ignoring the pain of overworked muscles and screaming bruises. She brushed the shimmering black hair from her eyes and stood before her father. His own eyes stared back, almost hurt within them as he tried to read her.

“You've been quiet lately,” he finally said then looked away and hung his staff on the wall in its place. He held out his hand and she took it to go in beside him. His fingers flicked up unconsciously. The torches in the stone stairway lit.

She could not do as little, to burn only what was needed. Her hand clenched on his before she could stop herself.

He turned to her in surprise and realizing the futility of saying nothing, she went on while she was still brave.

“I’m a dragon, father,” she said, chin lifted, daring him to deny her. He was so very Vardin with his dark blonde hair, his mastery of his normal gifts, and she looked like her mother, Shayna, who was powerful enough to claim abstention, the right to simply abstain from using her gifts unless life and blood were at stake. Akena looked like a daughter of the mountains with her golden skin and black hair inherited from Shayna. She breathed fire. She felt the burning rolling out from under here skin whenever she felt anger, joy, anything. She sensed clomen as another heard sound. She was a dragon like the dragons of the mountains, their enemies, and unbound. By law, that made her rogue.

Her father’s eyes seemed to burn into her, even in this shadowed passageway. He reached out and brushed her long hair from her face himself, hand lingering gently. “You are my daughter,” he said at last. “You are a daughter of Britak.” He shook his head. “Even Alyón has dragons.” His

birth House and one which produced the guardians most favored for national service by the Queen.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to be told that he too breathed fire when he was not feared by the very people he had sworn to protect. It wasn't enough.

She shook her head, opened her mouth to speak and—

Voice sharpened, he silenced her. "Not all dragons are rogue." He turned his back and continued on.

After a moment, she followed.

—

Mother found her in the morning. Akena stood leaning over her sword, palm pressed against the hilt, hilt pressed into the warm earth on the hill looking up toward the mountains. Akena did not have to turn to see Shayna Casal out of Britak, the most powerful kahtchen they had ever known, approach behind her. She could feel that hum of power reaching out to embrace her. They called her mother Universe, for she could destroy one.

“Mother,” Akena said softly, staring into the swirling sigils etched into her steel. “Am I wrong?”

Silence stretched. She had expected as much. Shayna never answered before thought. Akena had long practice in patience and she exercised it now, waiting until at last her mother came and settled on the ground beside her, traced one finger lightly over the symbols on her sword.

“When I was four, I glimmered,” Shayna began.

Akena turned sharply to listen, for her mother had never spoken of how she gained her gifts or control of them.

“Sometimes, the most powerful gifteds glimpse their power before it is theirs,” Shayna went on. “I did that. I touched my mother and she grew very pale and very sick. When I was older, I learned I could never touch anyone again without taking away their life.”

Akena knew it. She had touched her mother and been amazed at the strangeness of how it felt to be healed and drained at the same time.

“But—” Shayna stood, taking up the sword out of the earth and wielding it knowledgeably. “I

also learned that mastery, hard won, is worth much.”

Akena watched her mother take up the dance where Burn had left it the night before, watched as her mother put her sword back into her hand and bid Akena continue it again. So Akena did, until her muscles ached and her bones were weary enough for the sun to be sinking in the sky, though it was not yet noon. She questioned Shayna with her eyes for she had no words left to ask.

“I am also a dragon, daughter,” Shayna said.

It took Akena aback, but could hardly be denied. Shayna may have been born with one gift, the gift to use another’s life and strength and power, but it had granted her all else. Shayna was all gifts, even the dragons, and though she was the Abstention Line, she too guarded their Household and their nation. She had taught their sons and their daughters to guard, taught them the histories, taught her own daughter the laws of the Households of Vardin.

Akena lowered her eyes, accepting her mother’s word. She raised them again and stared

into dragon fire in her mother's eyes. She would guard, no matter who looked into her eyes and saw the enemy.

VELOCITY OF RAIN

I met you when I was five years old, and you grabbed my hand with your sticky fingers, laughing as you pulled me toward the other children.

“She’s on our team.”

I asked you why after we were both lying on our backs on the grass after kickball, sides still heaving from running our hardest in the game.

You grinned as you tossed the ball up in the air and caught it again. “You’re fast.”

I wondered when in the world you would have noticed.

—

I was ten years old when I raced home from the library in a surprise rain shower, and suddenly realized I heard feet thumping the concrete sidewalk behind me. I didn't stop, but I did turn, still running and caught the sight of you behind me, your body grown lanky over the last summer.

I stopped around the corner, palms grinding hard into the stone wall.

You drew up beside me, panting.

"How long?" I asked. I had to take in a gulp of damp air to go on. "How long have you walked this route?"

You cocked your head at me curiously as if not understanding the question, then your face split into a wide grin and you laughed some sort of rough chuckling sound. "You're fast."

You ran to the next sheltering doorway. I was fast. It took me only moments to catch up.

—

You lay on your back on my bed, studying the ceiling or the trajectory of the ball you were tossing up and down in your hand. I thought you

would be crazy to play baseball for a living, but I understood the skill that made you think of it.

We were teenagers then, and the only things I was certain of in that stuffy little room with its excess of books and pencils was that I was studying anything I could learn, since I didn't know where I would end up, but that I wanted to be sure I ended up with you.

"You're crazy," I finally said, breaking the silence that settled in the weight of your declarations. "You can't blow off college for baseball."

"They let you do both, you know." You sat up on the bed, tossing the ball to one side.

I watched where it rolled off in the corner. You didn't.

"What do you think I ought to do?" you asked quietly in a serious voice I didn't recognize.

My gaze stayed steady in the direction of the ball, but I didn't see it any more. I was too focused on the stillness in the air and the gravity in your tone. I wondered if you would take it in your head to do whatever I answered. You were that kind of crazy.

I sighed and sat down beside you. “I think you should go to school and try things and then decide.” It seemed safe enough to say.

You nodded after a long moment and leaned your head on my shoulder. “Okay.”

—

You hated school. I knew that. My gaze would wander after your stooping shoulders as you walked drearily along campus grounds. I watched you wrestle with books you declared dead and steal time with me to read the ones you declared alive.

“They’re all books.”

You rolled your eyes at me and slid a textbook across the library table. “I hate the rain here,” you said out of the blue.

I glanced up at you without moving. You didn’t seem to notice, hands tapping restlessly on your homework. I picked up the textbook, propped it open on my own, and started reading.

Your hands went still and you listened as I read.

I understood what you meant. Rain was only alive when you and I were running in it.

In the middle of the second year, I was turning down the other guys who noticed me. We hadn't talked about anything or where we stood, but I never thought we stood anywhere. We belonged to each other in motion, and the choice to move together had always been both of ours.

You noticed when you found me in the library, smile stretched thin at the history major who didn't want to hear 'no.'

You stepped forward and dropped your bag on the table, so we both looked up. You grinned. "It's raining."

I took your hand and followed you outside.

You hated college, and we both knew it. We stood under the eaves of the outside entrance to the campus library, watching water soak into the grass.

“I could get a job,” you mentioned offhand. Your hand played with mine in the absence of something else.

I turned into you and spoke honestly with a bravery I hadn’t known I had. “I don’t care what you do as long as we do it together.”

Your head came up, eyes widening in surprise. That broad grin split your face and you tugged on my hand.

We ran through the rain from the eaves to the little copse of trees to the gazebo further down the grounds. There you stopped, your weight arresting my speed and pulling me into you like a planet spiraling toward the sun. I laughed, and it felt unfettered for the first time in weeks.

“I’m slow,” you said and kissed me breathless. “I don’t hate the rain.”

It took me years to understand you would have gone anywhere and done anything to hold

me. It took you years to realize I would follow you wherever you went.

I laughed and kissed you back. “I don’t hate it either.”

ikstuarpok (Inuit) **n.** *The frustration of waiting for
someone to turn up*

Ikstuarpok

IKSTUARPOK

KINGDOMS & THORN

She'd been waiting for days at the edge of the rendezvous, switching hotels twice and losing herself in the crowd of Volgong tourists. She slipped a native sarong around her waist and purchased henna to decorate her wrists and ankles. She used it to dye her hair and tan her skin a slightly different hue. Another morning, another dusk, another shift from one room to another, this time the serious visiting student with her camera and knot of white hair, bleached with peroxide bought for a visible scrape. Her names changed, her laughter altered tones; she went from husky alto to trilling second soprano then climbed an octave again into a girlish falsetto.

Slow and steady, slow and steady. Breath followed breath, feet pounded over the long track outside of town when her high black ponytail and athletic gear replaced the tourist. Slow and steady—another door, another key. She knew this dance like she knew her body, her mind, the coil of tension waiting for her partner to arrive.

Names shifted like desert sands. She bought fruit in the markets as Gadena, Yolon, Cass, Metrish. She put on a glittering dress and accented her eyes, wore a darker tan as she visited a dance hall and played the coy, neglected daughter of executives. Lang, she called herself, and waited, eyes bright for a man who never showed.

After, she danced alone in the house she'd rented in the upper garden district, swaying to the tune of the sounds of the night. That night, she would cut her hair short and exchange the temporary black dye for a plain brown, put on glasses, go mousy, and find herself a corner of a local bookshop to curl up in. Patricia Donner would do.

Her fingers slipped a sheet from the thin dossier in her bag. She studied the neatly printed facts of her existence. She should burn them.

She didn't.

—

Her birth name was Jenna. That simple fact bothered her far more than she let on.

Her name varied by days and moods and seasons, but her best names, the ones that fit no matter how many times she slipped them off and on, were Retriever, Take, Shockwave, and Ricochet. Her team had named her over the years, one after the other leaving their mark on her soul. Quake had given her the first, Lightsculpt chose the second, Hidden came up with the third, and her own leader, Brushfire, had been commenting dryly and unfavorably on her behavior when he applied the last.

Every single one of her team members had names they wore more often than others when they were assigned a cover and a normal history to give to others. Hers was Jenna. *They* had known. They had taken her, made her, and taken even the

significance of her birth name from her. Little wonder her anger was a bright sharp edge whenever she saw it on the file.

Patricia Donner curled up on the edge of the retaining wall bordering one edge of the town. The road was gravel and asphalt in equal measure. Her blue eyes seemed unearthly, as though she wore tinted contacts, and her doll face and creamy skin dimpled as she smiled and hummed to herself.

Her mind skipped along the streaming crowd of cars and wagons and transports into town like a smooth stone across the lake. Slow and steady, slow and steady. She breathed in the morning air like it was a precious gift just for her and swung her arms out as she tipped her face to the sun like a delighted child. She was pleasant to look at it. She fit in this mecca of tourism, religious pilgrimages, exchange students, and clashing, blending cultures. She fit when she slipped into the bookshop and found herself a cup of dongiru tea leaves to swirl under milk. She fit, laughing and bantering in the

Guri tongue as though she'd spent a year here finding herself.

Slow and steady. She couldn't feel him. Her faintly drifting scans turned up empty.

—

As a little girl, she looked like a doll. Her face and features were perfect, her hair a brunette shimmer to frame them. If only she could have been like the others, slow and steady, she would have been the most underestimated covert operative they had.

She was nothing like Thought, nothing like Hidden. She was a ricochet of careening anger and hunger and pain. She sparred like she didn't care who got up afterward, like anyone who dared to let her slam her fists and feet and elbows into their body was one of *them*: their administrators, handlers, and captors. She fought like a hurricane. She fought like she knew that when she shifted the power inside of her and swung her arm outward, she could slam a shockwave into a target that would level a building. She fought like she

knew she could steal intentions from another mind like they were a book.

“Careful that,” Brushfire used to caution her, before he learned she was not susceptible to caution. “Take is not the same as read. Only take if our lives depend on it.”

Retriever had never been cautious, but she obeyed—even when the bonds chafed.

—

She slept fitfully in a high hammock. It was the eighth night before morning, and she woke with a start minutes before the sun began to rise. Her eyes fluttered open and shut with weariness. She was wired too tense, but she could do this. She could slide on the slow and steady aura of the dancer she was playing today. She could wait for her partner and friend, Lightsculpt, to arrive and get her out of there.

Her team only had one jet and the job had been done nine days ago. He should have been here by now.

She opened her eyes and stared into the unfolding light.

Memory was a sharp edge of knifelike pain. Retriever slipped past it like a shadow when she could. It always remained, dogging her steps and dancing with her dreams.

"She's the only one left from this batch."

First words bit her in anger, the first words she ever remembered hearing. Whenever she heard them, her limbs ached with heaviness and an understated ticklish, hot agony under the skin. Whenever she felt a pain like it, those words came nipping back again at her thoughts.

"She's the only one left from this batch. She's alive at least, even if she won't remember."

She had lost her stomach after that, a small girl bent over the edge of a too-large medical bed. She lifted feverish brown eyes to the corner of the room where a little golden boy sat watching her. Months later, she would watch golden light spill from his fingers and name him Lightsculpt. That first day, she merely watched him watching her.

The sports girl, Addy, with red hair and thick freckles crouched with the old-timers near a beat-up transmitter, listening to their team's ranks in the last third of the game. Fuzz broke through the scores, grizzled old men grouched their displeasure, and the small boy sprawled beside them beat one fist against the top of the dying equipment.

Words slipped sideways. "Coup... Thorn Republic..." Fuzz and static.

Addy's heart pounded in her chest and her skin burned hotly. She stretched out her fingers, curled them into a fist, and pounded against the transmitter with a shock she shouldn't have known how to create. Thank Brushfire for making her practice. Thank her leader for forcing her to learn a lighter touch.

"All transport to and from the Thorn Republic has been shut down. Rumor has it—"

The voice cut off to dead air. Addy didn't know what would cause that, but the woman beneath the girl's false skin did. She grouched with the old-timers and jogged over in the direction of a better transmitter group. Before she reached them, she broke off and climbed up a jagged

stairwell to a cheap hotel with no security and accommodations that extended to basic roof, plumbing, and little more.

She stepped inside and closed the door.

—

Slow and steady, slow and steady. She hovered at the edge of a precipice. This was her war and she belonged in it. She unzipped her bag, changed up her clothes, and went back through the last few days to figure who owned a private aircraft she could borrow.

Her mind peered over the edge of an abyss and took the plunge.

DON'T SAY A WORD

ALLIANCE

Casey was eleven years old when the captain of the Good Heart changed everything again. They'd been forced to stop by the only space station handy for supplies, Yeldeht, a ratty little port at the corner of a backwater star system. What supplies could be had.

The captain brought back Casey's requested jar of engineering oil, two large barrels of beans and rice instead of guaranteed sanitary ration packets—and a boy.

He dumped the food off on Scroggs with a gruff, "Make sure that's not flea-infested," then instead of the oil, put the child's sticky, dirty hand

in Casey's. He was maybe four or five and crying quietly. She eyed the captain skeptically.

"Name's Kade. His parents died today. The locals wanted to eject him with their bodies," ejection being what passed for burial among spacers.

She could have asked for details or sent the kid to Tracian or Delli, older girls with some hint of motherly instinct to their personalities, but that would take time away from needed repair work, so Casey scowled, snatched her oil, and turned on her heel toward the ducts, tugging Kade behind her.

He put up little protest, just some muttered ramble of what were probably swear words. They learned them young at places like Yeldeht.

They reached the ducts quickly. Casey ducked into the outside hall-way running parallel to respiratory duct B-210, shoved the oil into Kade's free set of grubby fingers, then pried open the duct hatch with her own free hand. Kade took one look at the gaping maw into darkness, planted both feet, and hollered at the top of his apparently well-functioning lungs.

Casey huffed in frustration and let him go. “Scaredy.” She started to shimmy in without him and was promptly startled by his immediately grabbing her and trying to bodily yank her back out.

She stared at him. He was yelling at her in the Yeldeht gutter dialect, one she wasn’t conversant in, let alone fluent. The only word she could make out was ‘no’ in all nine conjugations muddled between the rest.

G— she realized with a strangled curse. They didn’t eject bodies at ratty, little, resource-poor space stations like that. They recycled them. In ducts that looked like this one.

She let him yank her away from the duct hatch and then sat down, scowling, and took him into her arms. Kade squirmed terribly, but Casey was strong and held him tight.

There was a reason she scowled all the time. She remembered—*remembered*, d— it, when all she wanted to do was forget—and began to sing in a voice so clear and sweet that Scroggs, trundling the potentially flea-infested beans down a near corridor, stopped his grumbling to listen and wonder who it was.

*“Hush, little baby, don’t say a word.
Sissy’s going to buy you a mockingbird,
And if that mockingbird don’t sing...”*

Kade stopped squirming, and Casey kept singing the entire song over and over until eventually, he stopped crying.

ITS OWN ABSOLUTION

KINGDOMS & THORN

Despite sharing a single underground military facility, the four teams stationed twelve miles south of Kishet rarely interacted. Team members from different teams might meet up through medical or greet each other in passing from the airfield, but otherwise, they had separate living and training facilities and interaction was discouraged. Leaders had more reasons than most to run into each other.

Shift was surprised to get the call down to Team Eight's section, but she met up with Chandler, her team's handler, reminded herself not to gut him, and shifted to baseline.

Her natural hair color was actually fiery red, despite almost never wearing it, and every bit of her looked like a honed, lean-muscled weapon. She always threw on the curves when she wanted masculine attention. Her natural looks were indiscriminate mixed ethnicity with a dusting of freckles and interesting more than beautiful.

Chandler let his disgust show on his face—he never trusted the genetically modified humans under his charge; wise, since they hated him fiercely—but led her to the Team Eight admin area, a wide bay with a sensor light at the top of the room, currently shining blue to indicate the presence of GMH special-type humans.

Storm was half-sitting, half-leaning against a desk, much to the chagrin of the secretary behind it. He was Team Eight's leader and someone Shift had worked with before. He was also nearly six and a half feet tall. She came to a stop beside him, ignoring Chandler.

“You rang?” Shift leaned one hand on her hip, the one without the holster.

“Shift.” Storm straightened and got her disgusted look for that. He knew she didn’t like looking that far up to him.

But he gestured to the redheaded man standing beside him that she had barely noted on entering. Shift sized him up in a glance. Strong, compact, tense all over but confident. He had the look and feel of a team member though she had never seen him before, and that thought gave her a small jolt of suspicion, then that familiar hot anger burning in her gut. She met Storm’s gaze.

“Red Wolf,” he said, gesturing with a tilt of his head. “Or Alpha.”

“Alpha.” She moved her gaze from the known variable to the unknown. “Who named you?”

He considered whether to answer. She could hardly blame him. Shift was the kind of woman you trusted if you were hers, not the kind you turned your back on.

“Whisper named me,” he finally said evenly, meeting her stare with a keen assessment of his own.

She nodded at that. “Give her my greetings.” The two women respected each other for their abilities. Shift was the only one on her team that did assassinations, but Whisper was ranked first in the Department for that particular skill. “So his rank?”

Storm paused until he had Shift’s full attention. “I promoted him to first.”

First. Shift stared into Storm’s unrepentant eyes until she was satisfied that there was a good reason for the change. “I expect to have no difficulties working with your team in the future.”

Storm shrugged. “No more than usual.”

There were always a couple of firebrands that didn’t get along. Shift’s team was brutal. They had to be. Storm’s team was bloody. They were a strike team. They had to be. Storm had a conscience. Shift didn’t.

She nodded once, curtly, turned on her heel with a shift blurring herself into softer lines—her dark auburn form with just enough curves to be interesting, the dress she could fight in, more muscled, less acrobat. Seeing another operative *made* when that had been illegal for years, it made

her want to kill something. But she tossed out a, “Welcome,” over her shoulder, as if this was any kind of life to welcome him to.

—

Justus found her on the mats, running the series of stretches and katas and maneuvers that turned into strangleholds and broken limbs on a battlefield. Hand to hand combat was one area in which the teams particularly excelled.

“Kilter said you wanted me,” he commented cautiously. She could hear it just behind the casual tone and at-ease position.

Shift spared him a glance. She had considered questioning him but rejected the idea. He didn’t need that from her. She didn’t really need that from him. A quick hack through the files yielded enough data to conclude that Justus and Red Wolf arrived at the same time. One was processed; the other was offered to her. And she thought her own history was messed up.

“You’re fourth,” she finally said, naming the rank she had given him weeks ago. “Do you know what fourth does?”

“Sear’s been filling me in.” Sear now occupied third rank, but she had been fourth not so long ago. It was complicated, fourth—like any of them weren’t—but Justus had the temperament for it, brash aggressiveness and protectiveness wrapped up in cautious reason.

He looked and felt like a team member, but a team member who remembered. They were rare. Twelve percent. She had trained him to do what he had to do anyway, but he *remembered*.

She shifted then, from cool, lean acrobat back to the dark auburn. She’d been wearing the skin when she trained him and Justus always reacted instinctively to his conditioning. He did now, tension flaring as he realized she intended to *use* that conditioning. In fact, she threw herself toward him and nearly swept his legs from under him. Reflexively, his hand caught her wrist and he rolled with the punches, literally, then caught her on top of him, knife inches away from his throat.

Neither of them were out for the count, their tight pinning and hold of the other a farce when both of them could send this sort of position back into lethal combat at a moment.

And Shift had the advantage. He had her arm twisted back, knife arrested, but she could shift her molecules and body fluidly out of his grasp if she wanted to. She didn't.

"When this is all over," she said quietly, fiercely, "you will make yourself a life again."

"What—"

"You're mine, Justus," Shift cut him over, caught his gaze in hers. "I never lose one of my own. I will not lose you."

His jaw set, eyes hard and unyielding. "You have no idea—" he bit out, but she cut him off again.

"I don't care." She thinned her wrist and pressed the knife that much closer. "You *will* make a life for yourself. I don't care if you fell from heaven's purity to become the worst of sinners. You. Will. Not. Stay there."

He stared at her, uncertain and uncomprehending of why she had him down on the mats, why she was forcing the issue. "That's my choice."

She felt that sharp, dark amusement bubble up, lift her brow. She wrestled herself back up to

sitting, and he warily let her go. “Do you really want to owe *Shift*?” she demanded lightly.

She heard his breath catch, knew then that he realized she was pulling rank, weight, and a whole lot more they most days pretended didn’t undergird their entire trainer and protégé relationship. But she was also offering him a way out, the very choice she had given to him when she accepted him as her own. *Do you want my protection?* she had asked. She had told him then there would be a price for it, that no matter what she had to do for it, she would not lose him. It was never a small price to be paid.

He set his jaw and she knew he had accepted this, however resignedly. “No.”



Red Wolf was professional. The more Shift dealt with him, the more it became obvious that he was exactly like she was, in that he had never known anything different. But she hadn’t really expected Justus’ reaction the first time her top five were assigned with Team Eight’s top three for an operation.

She couldn't fault Justus' composure, but there was that stony pause before he settled into his rank behind her. If Red Wolf noticed, he gave no indication.

They continued. Red Wolf quickly proved to prefer Kilter's methods than her own. Shift's second had always been steady, been the one to do things by the rules—he had a sense of right and wrong that Shift had long since found impractical.

“You're suggesting we destroy the entire cell in combat,” Storm commented dryly. It was one thing to incapacitate terrorists; it was another altogether to slaughter them.

Shift shrugged from her seat, ignoring Kilter's grinding teeth or the bland indifference in Whisper's eyes. “I've done it before.” She had bloodied her hands enough.

“Destroying the cell is fine,” Red Wolf interjected, “but detonation would be a thousand times cleaner.”

“Where's the fun in that?” Shift's grin was sharp.

Red Wolf's recoil was well internalized, but something in his face and eyes closed up and his tone went cool. "I agree that we should wipe out the entire cell."

Maker, his fourth, disagreed. "We're talking about potentially having families with them."

"As a blind," Justus pointed out. "They want to keep their base a civilian target, but footage shows their children are learning the trade already."

"We did," Whisper said so quietly she might have been whispering, but she wasn't, and the entire group fell silent at that.

Red Wolf leaned back a little from the table, looked at Shift with that keen gaze she had already figured out tied in with whatever special ability processing had given him. The man took intuition to a whole new level. "You're brutal." It was a plain statement, unadorned, unjudging, but absolute.

Shift bared her teeth in a razor-edged smile. "You just now figured that out?"

Justus shifted his weight from one leg to the other and shook his head. "You're bloody."

Nobody seemed to have expected the rejoinder, but Red Wolf contained his startlement in an instant and dispelled it with a matter-of-fact nod. “We’re a strike team. Our targets have earned death, and we deliver it. It’s as simple as that.”

—

Shift watched the interplay between the two throughout the mission. It was not so pronounced if one wasn’t looking for it, but she was.

Justus was hers, completely; it showed and anyone who had a problem with her methods would likely have a problem with Justus. That was something she would have to mitigate. Shift was the most respected and feared team operative of all, ranked first in the Department. Even Kilter knew that half of his job was to sit on her so she wouldn’t simply walk a trail of blood and destroy the entire organization. She didn’t care if she lost whatever goodness a person could be fooled to think she had left, but there were other issues involved, especially now that Shift was a team leader.

Red Wolf was a strike operative. It showed in the way he killed cleanly with no compunction and led his team well. Storm had been his own leader once but now took instructions with full confidence that those instructions were good. Whisper was the best assassin in the Department, and she trusted Red Wolf's commands.

Neither like the other's approach. Too brutal. Too bloody. One cared. One didn't. They both did what they had to do, but only Justus did it because he had chosen it.

And how in the world was *Shift*, who to stay sane had embraced what they'd forced her to become, supposed to help him with *that*? She needed to push him towards others on the team, those who still cared as much as Justus did. She glanced at Storm and let him catch her meaning behind the look. Red Wolf was on him. Whatever had once been between those two, they were no longer a packaged deal.

—

“Shift. Kilter. Sear. Justus.”

“Wolf.” It was Justus that nodded curtly back.

Parting from one team to another, unraveling like a strand of RNA to go to their respective places, done transcribing their work.

Sear nodded respect to Justus. “Keep your count. You’ve eighteen verified from this one.”

A shadow passed over his face, but he nodded.

Shift waited until the two of them stood alone in the corridor.

Justus looked her way expectantly. “You rang?”

The words that started all of this, from her own tongue to Storm’s ears, she could hardly help but chuckle darkly. But she had. She had ordered him with her look to stay put. “What do you have against Wolf?”

He raised his own eyebrows in amusement, and the bitterness of that humor struck her like a slap that he could share her own brand of seared conscience. “Nothing,” he said. “He did a good job.”

Shift tilted her head, waiting for the rest of that.

The shadow returned, storm clouds brewed up in his now closed and hard expression. “Forgetfulness is its own absolution.” Justus didn’t wait for her dismissal. He turned his back on the woman who had trained him, someone no one but a living weapon or an innocent child could safely turn their back upon, and walked away.

BENEATH THE ICEWOOD TREES

FAEOLOGY

The small cottage grew in the deep of the damp woods, where native trees towered in ever thickening circles. Permanent snowdrifts covered the ground, but the cottage panes were heated glass, and the cottage door was heated alloy from the old ships. There should have been no snow there on the roof of that cottage nor frost across those window panes.

Ice hung in latticed patterns over the glass. Abomination, the villagers whispered to themselves. Barbarous.

But Fae was one of theirs, once a little girl trotting through the frozen streets from her family's grand house alongside cook or governess,

smiling at each one she passed, playing with their children, asking innumerable curious questions of every man or woman she met. They still liked to think of Fae as theirs. She was a pleasant young woman, who still had a kind word and smile when she wandered through Surrey village in her pretty blue cloak and with her pretty manners and her crown of auburn hair. One must make allowances for eccentricities.

Outsiders from Shipper's Field and the outlying villages never heard the whispers about the cottage up the way in the deep woods. No one wanted to admit to it, for who else could be blamed but those who raised the child? No, they put on their week's end best and their finest, thickest cloaks and went out into the light swirls of snow to purchase their goods and disparage and praise each one their neighbor and exchange news of the other villagers with those who passed through.

Eried was a bulky, dark-haired man of the Black family, founders of his village and one of the largest settlements on their icebound world. It was said he even knew the instruments of the old ships and could take measurements from the other side of the night. When he came and spread his wares on Surrey's steps, bits of metal and glass, maps and copies of old journeys—"From the settlers," he claimed—the villagers came out and looked and admired and discussed among themselves.

The men asked him questions.

"Is it true you've measured the night?"

"Half span the world and fifty lengths," he replied.

"Is it true that Black village has felled a native tree?"

"They are our most important, vital resource, to block the snow and icefalls. We have not felled a tree," he replied, not answering their real question—was it even possible to do so. Some called them icewood; they were too frozen to saw open.

“Is it true you’re engaged to the daughter of Allistair?” That was the family up Shipper’s Field and in control of most of the wealth that had not passed to magic families.

“I have not engaged a wife,” he answered, grinning for he could have and he wanted them to know it. Eried was not a proud man, but he was not humble. He took great pleasure in knowing his own strength.

No one knew how he ferreted out some meaning from the packed drifts among those dusty with snow and loose. None even noticed him later, after he had carefully packed up his unsold goods into cases for carrying, when he noticed those drifts and followed them out of Surrey and into the deep woods. No one knew that the sight of that barbaric ice on her heated window panes angered him.

Magic was not to be used as a trifle, not to decorate the glass in lacey patterns, not by a family not granted magic. He knew that the cottage belonged to no Surrey, for the great man named Surrey had turned his back on Eried, had sniffed at him and his ideas of what the villages

could make of themselves if they tried. He had seen Surrey's house and that of his sister, met their families, for as a son of the Blacks, he must needs offer his greetings or else give insult.

Eried trudged up to the front of the cottage through the snow and stopped in front of a window. He walked to the left, then returned to the right, his shadow pendulous through the unnatural frost. Magic it was. He was certain of it. Magic cast over the glass in abominable waste. He strained his eyes to peer through it, but saw only the faint darkness of a dimly lit cottage.

“Looking for me?”

He whirled, then scowled at the slender, tall woman with her thick auburn hair trailing over radiant blue cloak. Her eyes were silver-grey and silver jewelry gleamed at her throat. Alloys and metals were precious, too precious to spare for jewelry. His scowl darkened and he glared at her.

“I am Eried Black,” he said, “and you use the magic falsely.”

The woman lifted one brow and her delicate features shifted from one unreadable expression

to another. “Do I?” she asked, and the air trembled with the tension between them.

“Tell me you are a Surrey, and I will trouble you no more,” he said, offering her at least that. Apostate mage she may be, but if the magic was rightfully hers—well. The magic itself could exact a vengeance.

She laughed at him then with a sound like bells and silver and the shaking of the icewood trees when snow and icefalls rattled the giants. “I am Fae,” she said, and her eyes sparkled with silver. “And Surrey gave me my magic.”

“You bought it for such a frivolous purpose?” Eried gestured at the windows. It was obscene. “Magic is dangerous when handled improperly, and you are not worthy of it,” he roared and took a step toward her.

Fae looked at him, tilted her head, and shifted from one unreadable expression to another. He heard the tinkling, as of glass, and she said very softly, “It is not frivolous at all.” A cloud of silvery magic shimmered around him, engulfed him so it stung his skin, and passed into her hands. She wrapped them full of it, let the magic

cover her like a glowing aura and brighten the sparkle in her eyes. "But of course, you would not wish to harm me," she said softly, peeked up from underneath her lashes, looked innocence and warning in a way he could hardly fathom.

"What *are* you?" he whispered, suddenly horrified, suddenly realizing that this was no pinch of magic bought and told to obey her first command. This was *her* magic, obeying her will, as surely as if she were of Surrey blood.

He lifted his case as though he could wield it as a weapon.

She smiled, almost sadly. "What is magic?" She breathed the words and let loose of the silver in her hands.

It reached out to him with unfathomable, frightening embrace, and he stepped backward with a cry, turning to flee, but the magic engulfed him and dragged him into darkness.

—

No one in Surrey saw Eried Black leave, so when frightened messengers arrived from Black village

the following week, their questions were received with bewilderment. “Where is Eried? Have you seen Eried?”

Only the great man named Surrey frowned over his chopping block and said, “There is no magic for what you seek. Not here.”

And out in the snow of the deep woods, far beyond even the small cottage sheltered by overhanging limbs of icewood trees, a great big bear of a man with black hair and frown lines already set in his weathered skin awoke with a start in the dimness of day beneath such ancient trees. He looked about him, uncertain, unremembering, but his skin had not frozen and his cases contained tools and maps that might guide him, could he but decipher where he was.

He gathered his things, stood, and glanced through the woods again before choosing which way to walk.

DREAM THE DANCE

KINGDOMS & THORN

She dreamed of a chill wind. Her hair was long—longer than it had ever been—and she wore a red dress with streams of red silk spinning out from it. The wind danced around her, cold and damp beneath a grey blue sky misted with sea and salt. Her hair and dress danced around her in that cold, damp wind, warmth against her skin, and everywhere she danced life fled out like rivers from the earth beneath her feet, the small green plants beneath her touch and fled into her, leaving only ash remains. She dreamed the dance of death, and though she had never dressed in finery, never worn her black hair long and beautiful and flying, she had danced that dance before.

And then she woke.

Ashen's eyes opened on a plain small city apartment bedroom in the city of Bellyn, so far inland that were it not for overseas assignments, she would never have tasted sea mists before. Her sheets were warm, tucked under her arms, which in turn were tucked under her head. Everything around her was plain and simple as she was—simple furniture, simple cotton nightshirt, simple glazed wooden plaques with a couple of quotations she liked hanging on the walls. Even the window was small with plain white casements. She kept no plants and she drank no life from the bed.

Shivering, Ashen sat up and slid out from under the covers, uncertain of why she had dreamed this now. She rarely dreamed, rarely remembered what she did dream. It bothered her more than she could say. She glanced down at her finger, at the only piece of jewelry she had ever worn besides a pair of earrings. Oh, she had had other proposals, but she had never accepted one before last night, and—

Something cold washed over her as she thought of something she had never had cause to

consider. Ashen's ability was deadly and everyone who really knew her knew it. They knew that she could steal their breath and life with a single touch. They also knew she only transferred life when she wanted to, but she had never had that tested while she slept.

A self-healer. They were rare, and she only knew one well enough to beg such a favor. To ask his life— She stopped herself cold again and yanked down clothes from her wardrobe, simple ones favorable to a night passage on the tram. Storm did not live in Belly. Perhaps she should take the train.

Edyll was the next city over and not far distant enough to make the journey not worthwhile, but it was far enough for Ashen to find that fear did not keep her alert. She found herself dozing and dancing death in a red dress. Disconcerted, she stepped off the train into a chill breeze, not unlike the one she dreamed of. She paid tram fare and let it drop her off at the edge of Storm's neighborhood. He had chosen an area of small houses rather than the ubiquitous apart-

ment complexes so many of the team members had chosen.

It took three knocks to rouse him, longer to wait for him to let her in. Storm had been her leader once. He had raised her and helped her where he could, but as a child, she had never known anything other than war; he had remembered everything—his name, his family, and what it meant to not be master of the storm. He let her in now without hesitation because he had been her leader once and because she was his in a way still. He had named her Ashen.

Once inside, she paused, unable to speak her terrible, formidable request, and Storm waited for her. He had a birth name, but even in her thoughts, she could not call him by it. Finally, she simply said, “Storm.”

“You’re afraid,” he said quietly, a statement. He was not like Red Wolf, the man he had passed his leadership to. He did not ask questions, did not soften blows.

Ashen nodded helplessly in the face of the truth of his statement. “I need to know if I dance death in my sleep.”

That took him aback for a moment before understanding dawned. They had called her Dancer once, Wings of Death, Breathless, Ashen. They knew why.

He made her up a bed on the couch, and she did not ask why he would do such a thing, did not ask when she knew he would die for any of them if it were required. This could demand much of him, possibly kill him for a time, but his ability included self-healing—of a kind. He would live.

It took a while for her breath and heart to calm, for her to feel sleepy again under his watchful gaze as he poured himself a cup of tea and settled down in the chair nearby. She had slept under his watch before, as a child, as a woman when they were assigned a mission in hostile territory. Eventually she slept.

She dreamed the dance of death in a red dress and her hair longer than it had ever been. She danced in a chill night wind that blew off the sea and felt rich, warm life drain from everything she touched and give her strength. She had never dressed in finery and never bothered to be fierce rather than matter-of-fact and sensible, but she

had danced the dance of death so many times before.

Ashen woke to morning light, to Storm sitting in his chair nearby and looking at her. She sat up and looked into his face intently, trying to see if he was too white, if she had taken anything from him.

He shook his head.

She breathed. She nodded curtly in gratitude, gathered her things, and left. There was time to take the tram to catch the first morning train back to Bellyn. There was time to call her fiancé, to hear his voice, and to put away her fears.

AS THE RIVER BREATHES
KINGDOMS & THORN

As the river breathed, so did Spirare. She slid down the gritty tunnel wall and watched the brightness of the kingdoms city, Bellyn, swallowed up overhead as she passed out from under the manhole and landed with a weak splash in the bottom of the river's channel. Bellyn was built over the long, enclosed throat of a river when it was still a Thorn city, belonging to that republic, before the rebellion, before the period of anarchy, before the kingdoms rose up from quarters and communities to establish rule in various parts of the whole.

Then, as kingdoms are wont to do, the eastern Merchants Kingdom raised import and export taxes to the horrified and almost reflexive reaction

of the western kingdoms and a brown-cloaked man of the High Land of Bellyn showed up in Spirare's disreputable little apartment at the center of a little-known, ill-lit plaza and hired her to crawl into the underbelly of the city and find out why the river no longer flowed.

Water flowed from faucets opened in the western end of Bellyn; they did not in the eastern side. She didn't think there was much mystery in who was responsible or why.

It was dark, damp, dirty—nothing she wasn't thoroughly used to. "All boys learn to drown. All girls go up and down," she sang to herself in an odd, half-rhythmic tune as she'd sang to herself from the time she was a too-skinny, stringy-haired, blonde waif shimmying into dark and dangerous places as if she wasn't a dangerous place herself.

Oxygen murked about the stale air. She could feel, feel it *spirare*, and way far down the sightless tunnel water leaked from something and with it oxygen, oxygen trapped with hydrogen molecules, oxygen trapped in metal ores. She did not know what metals held it, only the water because she

could hear it dripping and feel it pooling under her feet, but she was a special—a human for sure and a monster by half, created at the pleasure of the Thorn Republic in her own memory era of blinding, unforgettable pain.

“All boys learn to drown.” She snatched the free oxygen about the tunnel and tumbled in the flow it made around her, let herself bounce about in a river of her own making. “All girls go up and down.”

Sometimes Spirare wondered if she were half-crazy to go with her half-monster, wondered if the men on the street above, waiting for water, knew that she had sucked the oxygen from rooms far larger than this one, far smaller, that she had left men gasping for breath and helpless to find any. It was never a pretty way to go.

She stopped singing, hung suspended in the air of the tunnel, felt serious and grim. G—, she was a monster and she hated it. But the people needed water.

They’d taught her to kill. She would learn to heal. *I promise, I promise*, she thought in a harder, firmer prose than her singsong madness. She

reached out her hand and felt the oxygen in the world around her straighten at attention, felt it feel her, and willed it under her command. Loosed from the metal first—to *weaken it*—loosed from the water—to *pull it harder*.

“Breathe,” she breathed the word, calling the water, the river to come, to breathe and let the power of its breathing do the work for her.

Metal creaked. Tunnel walls groaned with tension. Pure oxygen sprayed through the blockage and struck out with a force that should have sent her flying, but she was buoyed in her tightly woven oxygen bubble, her river of her own making.

“Breathe!” She pulled again and harder and then the water came. Upheaval and darkness and floating spiraling rushing water, water, hydrogen, water, metal, oxygen—Oxygen. She gripped it and flew upward through the manhole, landed in a wet and coughing heap on the pavement.

“You are a strange sort of woman,” the brown cloak of High Land told her. People were gathered in crowds beyond the pavement of the street, peering from storefronts and sidewalks.

Spirare laughed at him and loosed the oxygen bubble from 'round herself, drank in the dirty, dingy air of the overcrowded Downtown District. It was good to taste that air and know that under her feet, the river breathed.

ADDENDUM: MYTH

NIGHT BRIDE | 289

THE CALLER AND THE DRAGON | 293

THE GREAT CAT AND HIS SOUL | 297

INTO THE TEMPLE OF THE SUN | 305

NIGHT BRIDE

BREATH

Night cast his nets over the desert, and darkness murmured over the low limestone huts upon the desert floor. At every window, a small candle burned, and there the night was stopped.

He searched high and he searched low; he passed a few dark windows and looked in, but then he came to a house taller than most with no candle to keep him out. Sitting in the rocking chair was a lady with a warm, friendly face and soft white hair. Night was delighted at the vision and went in and sat down.

The old woman was startled when she saw him. "Why are *you* here?" she demanded.

“You had no candle in the window.” Night smiled charmingly. “That is an invitation.”

She snorted her disagreement. “Shouldn’t you stop at the house of one of those foolish young girls who do not believe you seek a bride?”

This time *he* snorted derision. “They *are* foolish young girls,” he protested. “They would run away and leave me for the desert wind, and I would still be lonely.”

“I am old,” the woman told him. “I am not lovely.”

“A bride,” said Night, “is not merely for looking at, and you, my dear woman, are excellent company.”

Rather exasperated now, “Don’t you want children?” she pressed.

“Bah!” Night scowled deeply. “I have had my children with Day before she left me and set them between us. They are my only comfort.”

“Hmph!” The old woman did not seem to know what to say.

Night’s eyes gleamed as he leaned forward. “And you?”

She laughed. "I have met no man to suit me, and my nieces and nephews were children enough."

"I would build you a fine and shining palace," he said. "I would shower you with gifts. I would listen when you speak."

"The last is most of interest," the old woman admitted. "Very well. I will come and be your bride."

Then Night was delighted and took her by the hand to lead her into the heavens. He built her shining palace and introduced her to his children.

Day visited the desert. Night returned. And with him, the people saw a new shining light, the light of her palace. Moon, they called it, and slept without their candles.

THE CALLER AND THE DRAGON

VARDIN

There once lived a strong and powerful dragon named Rathor. He breathed fire through his mouth and through his wings, and all of his skin was hot like a burning furnace. He could sense when any person drew near to his lair. If they did not have any light of fire within them, he would burn them to ash if they did not run fast enough and far enough.

Now Nira, the Caller, decided that this state of things must end, so she took her dark hair and braided it tightly, and took her bright, golden skin and worked in a lotion that would not let her burn, and took her dark eyes and let them call to fire.

She had no light of fire within her (she was brave). She called with her eyes and could only call one thing at a time (she was reckless). She stood on the shore of her lake, ready, and imperious to flame (she was wise). And Rathor came.

The dragon came with a roar and with fire burning from his lips and cast her way. He hung in the air above her and blew and blew a mighty gale of fire through his outstretched wings. Nira's skin grew hot and her eyes stung, but she did not burn to ash. Rathor blew and blew, but she stood beneath him, unharmed and waiting.

Rathor bellowed his frustration and flew downward to the earth to fight her directly, for her call held him fast and he would not leave until she had been destroyed.

But when he fell, she glanced away. Her dark eyes called to fire. She turned them toward the storm.

Rathor could not see what she was about, but he struck her with his wing and she fell against the darkly scorched and barren earth. Still, she called. He raked her with his claws, and she gasped, bleeding brightly, but still, she called. He

opened his mouth and burned her blood where the impervious skin had broken, and she wailed with the pain.

But there.

The clouds began to boil. The waters of the lake began to seethe. The dragon, too caught up with his prey and intent to destroy, did not heed what Nira had wrought. The waters rose and the thunder met their roaring, and lightning and furious wave mingled to cast Rathor to the darkly scorched and barren earth. Nira stood, and again it struck. She lifted her arm, and again it struck, and there was lightning in her eyes.

At last, the dragon lay dead. Nira knelt beside him, panting and ragged with blood, for he had hurt her terribly. She turned her dark eyes and let go of the storm, the wind, the water, and lay down on the shore to sleep.

THE GREAT CAT AND HIS SOUL

BREATH

Here in the land of the five cities, long before the king and the princes, the queen and the princesses, there was an emperor and empress and a little empressina. Now one day, the empressina wanted to go see the other cities of her father's empire, so she left their great house of marble and silver and wood, standing at the very heart of the city, and walked up one street and down another and up one street and down another until she finally reached the end of the city.

Before her stretched an endless desert. She looked to the right and saw more desert. She looked to the left and saw high, impassable mountains just beyond the sands. She did not see any cities.

Also to her left, however, was a fine set of stables with marble walls and a silver porch in front of it. Lying on the porch and looking out into the desert was a great cat. His fur was a golden orange and his magnificent ruff had been brushed until it shone. At the sight of the little girl standing at the edge of the city, his round ears flipped forward in interest. He rose on his four paws, padded over to her, and butted her gently with his head to get her attention.

“You are far from home, little *empressina*.”

The *empressina* stared at him with wide eyes. She had never heard a great cat speak before. “Who taught you how to talk?” she asked.

The great cat grinned at her, showing his long, white teeth. “Climb up on my back and I’ll show you.”

So the *empressina* climbed up on his back and buried her hands in his ruff, and the great cat loped off over the desert. After a time, she saw a city rising from the sand, made all of marble—every house and every street—and gleaming, and she gasped. But the great cat paid her no mind. He went into the city and walked up one street

and down another and up one street and down another and up one street and down another until he came to a comfortable, medium-sized house, the house of the baker of souls.

Then the empressina climbed down off his back. The great cat sat on his haunches and watched her lazily out of his yellow eyes as she went up to the little door and rapped lightly. When bade enter, she did.

The baker of souls was a large, comfortable woman, and her house was very clean. It smelled of bread and sugar and was colored in soft blues and pale purples and a creamy, welcoming sort of white.

The baker looked the little girl up and down and, seeing only a little girl, said, "Kaltan must have brought you." She said it pleasantly, like this was no bad thing.

The little girl asked in return, "Does Kaltan have golden orange fur and a magnificent ruff?"

The baker's cheerful expression turned serious and grim. "Be careful, little one. The great cats are not meant to have souls."

At this, the empressina grew frightened and

went back outside where the great cat was sitting on his haunches in the sun.

“You would never hurt me, would you?” she asked the great cat.

He blinked his great yellow eyes and stood up on his four great paws. “No, my *empressina*,” he said, as if surprised. “I would never hurt you.”

Much relieved, she climbed once more onto his back, and they left the city that was made all of marble.

The great cat loped over the desert until they saw another city rising from the sand, this one all of silver—every wall and every roof—and glistening.

The *empressina* gasped. “What kind of people would build all of silver?”

The great cat stopped and let her look. The streets were narrow there and very busy. And silver... Silver was the stone of flattery and false glitter. Silver, the emperor had said, hid the blade behind its beauty.

At last, the *empressina* shook her head. “Let’s not go there.”

So the great cat loped over the desert until

they saw another city rising from the sand, this one all of brick. The empressina thought this looked welcoming and they went into the city. The great cat walked up one street and down another and up one street and down another until the girl, seeing and smelling a cookery, told him, "I'm hungry," at which the great cat stopped and let her down and sat on his haunches by the door.

She did not ask him if he would come inside with her but opened the door and went in alone. She closed the door behind herself, for she was a very tidy little girl. And this was where the trouble began.

The empressina had never seen the Emperor's Service before. She did not recognize that the rough men and women who looked up from their own tables at her entrance were wranglers, guards, spies, enforcers, and thieves. She did not realize that they recognized her for exactly who she was. Thus, she was quite surprised when she was grasped roughly by a burly man, who called to his companions that he would hold her hostage until her father listened to their demands.

The little girl cried out in distress. Within a moment, the great cat leapt in through the window and did not stop to shake the shattered glass from his fur. He growled, and his long, white teeth shone in his mouth, and his long, white claws tore through the wood of the table on which he had landed.

At the sight of the great beast, the wrangler dropped her fearfully. The great cat leapt forward and caught her by the neck in his mouth, as if she were a kitten, so his breath warmed her skin. Then, he returned through the broken window to the fading sound of worried shouts behind them.

It was a while later, tucked between his great paws as they sat out on the desert at the edge of the city, that the empressina finally calmed down. She lay her head against the great cat's breast. "I was frightened," she said, "but you saved me."

The great cat butted her gently with his head. "You should be more careful."

She nodded absently while unsuccessfully mopping the tears from her face with her sleeve. "Except with you."

"Especially with me."

That startled her.

He had already breathed upon her. He could not take it back. Knowing this, he leaned over and licked her face clean of tears, comforting, leaving her skin faintly red. "The great cats are not meant to have souls," he told her, then stood. "Climb up on my back, and I will take you home."

So the little girl climbed up on his back, and they loped over the desert until they came at last to her father's city of marble and silver and brick and wood. The empressina climbed down and turned to say goodbye, but the great cat had already left her and settled down on the porch before the stables to stare out into the desert. He seemed to look at the mountains rising high over the desert, but the empressina could not be sure.

So she left him and walked up one street and down another and up one street and down another until she came again to her own palace and went to find her mother and father. They were startled to hear of her adventure and to see the faint flush of her face, but for months afterward, they thought nothing of it.

But as time went on, the empressina did not grow taller and her wounds healed before spices could be sent for to treat them. The emperor and empress grew worried and sent for healers and doctors and, at last, the baker of souls. The baker of souls frowned deeply but shook her head, for what could be done? The great cats were not meant to have souls.

Here in the land of the five cities, so many hundreds of years later, when there is a king and princes and a queen and princesses, we know that somewhere in a distant land, the land of the empire we once served, there lives an immortal empress with long, lovely hair and fair skin, slightly flushed, as if from the sun.

INTO THE TEMPLE OF THE SUN

FAEOLOGY

Night brown shadows had gathered in the homey kitchen, settling over the dustless cabinet tops of carven wood and looming in the corners on stone slab surfaces. A dim red light glimmered from the grate in the morning oven, where Grandmother would warm her hands and set her cup of tea in the ashes before beginning the day's baking.

In the stillness, wings of soft gold light fluttered in the aroma of yesterday's bread and Nyx, eldest of the faelights, flew upward panting to land on the highest shelf on the wall near the door. Fuzzy static beat through her fleshless body, gold spirals of ancient languages in ancient figures frayed through her dying radiance.

Nyx was a wrongness that should not be, and here as she lay dying, she knew it. Faelights may sentient be, but they weren't supposed to have feelings, thoughts, personality. Her carefully crafted cell-minds spoke to collective intelligence, not personhood, and so not understanding herself, she had foregone the restorative measures engaged by the other lights. They repaired themselves. They broke themselves into pieces and re-formed. They curled up in their winged cocoons of spiraling ancient words in ancient graphemes and became reborn. But Nyx... Grandmother loved her as she sang her humming tunes and obeyed Grandmother's thought and touched commands. She lived for Grandmother. She lived.

"Fool!" Nyx shook her head with vim. Not even a faelight could live forever.

This morning the youngest lights had screamed out laughter in their golden tongues that spoke only dead and ancient languages. They laughed at the old faelight who bumbled about as a common insect, panting her way to lighten the bread and make it rise, to fill the water in the rose jar, to

weave air into droplets of water and milk and honey as any faelicht could do in a moment.

What faith could the elements possess?

Rebirth in fire, in dry brown wings tightly bound around herself, fraying her bones into liquid streams. And would what made her Nyx be born again with her?

Night had faded the harsh edges of the day. Eternal snow hemmed in the windows. Grandmother was asleep in her bed.

Nyx folded up herself and thought of human dreams and myths and imagining sleep, imagined dreaming of a bird born of the sun.

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.

WWW.LIANAMIR.COM