



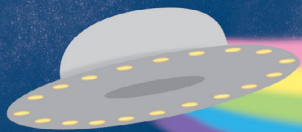
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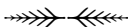
LESLIE VEDDER

"An enchanting read
for fans of fairy-tale
romance and girls
with battle axes."
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1



Fi

FI PUSHED OPEN the door and stepped into the dingy tavern known as the Silver Baron. The bang of the door closing behind her raised a flock of crows pecking the dry dust outside, and the shadows of their wings against the window drew the attention of the crowded room. Suspicious faces peered at her over pewter cups of dark wine and the scraps of finished meals. Fi pulled her hat down over her eyes. She made her way through the tables and took a seat at the counter, where she could watch everyone in the room without looking like she was watching them. She had business here today, the kind that might attract unwanted attention.

“Lemon tea, if you have it,” she said, catching a barmaid by the elbow. The dark-haired woman sashayed away with a clipped *milord*.

Fi was actually *Lady Filore Nenroa*, the title official since

she'd turned seventeen a few months back, but that was probably not immediately obvious between her dusty brown jacket and her low-brimmed hat. It kept the sun off her face when she was traveling and also, apparently, was not terrible for keeping a low profile. So far no one in Darfell had recognized Fi, but it was only a matter of time.

She slid a creased map out of her pocket and onto the bar—then snatched it up again as the serving girl clanked down her cup so hard tea sloshed into the saucer. Carefully, she unfolded the map to reveal the torn scrap of parchment hidden inside—the real reason she had come to this tavern.

The Silver Baron hadn't changed much in the year Fi had been gone. The patrons seemed as disreputable as ever. A hard-faced woman played chicken with a quicksilver dagger, stabbing it into the scarred tabletop between her spread fingers, and a raucous game of dice was punctuated by harsh barks of laughter and the clink of money changing hands. A sallow, balding man deep into his cups eyed her from the end of the bar. Toward the back were private enclaves hidden behind thick wine-red curtains, for small gatherings of nobles and those who didn't want their faces known. No one stood out, but then, Fi didn't know who she was looking for. She slid the scrap of parchment into the cup of her palm, frowning at the messy scrawl.

Meet me at the Silver Baron at sundown. I have an offer you can't refuse. No signature.

The note had been slipped under her door at the Iron Lantern Inn, where she'd been staying the last two days. Her first instinct—probably her best instinct—had been to pack up and leave town. But every time she reached for her travel

bags, she found herself lifting the note instead, studying the puzzle it presented. Who knew she was back in Darfell? And what did they mean, *an offer you can't refuse?*

Fi drummed her fingers against the counter, staring at the black fingerless glove on her left hand. The crumpled map was scratched with harsh Xs, drawn in her own frustrated hand, as search after search failed to turn up what she was looking for. Following a mysterious note to a place like the Silver Baron was an act of desperation.

She pulled off her hat and set it on the bar. Her skin was tan, her cheeks dusted with freckles from hours in the sun. She ran her hand through her dark brown hair, which was just long enough to trap in a small ponytail at the nape of her neck. She wasn't keeping a low profile because she was a fugitive, nor was she up to anything shady enough to take place in the back rooms of the Silver Baron. She was just avoiding her ex.

He had been her first horrible guess as to the author of the message, but cryptic notes weren't his style. And she'd never known *him* to sign off without a telltale flourish from his silver-tipped quill. That didn't leave her with a lot of suspects.

Fi lifted the cup of tea, tipping it to study the yellowish liquid before taking a sip. Only years of practice at being polite kept her from spitting it out. It was supposed to be lemon tea. It tasted more like an old lemon rind steeped in a bucket of rinse water.

"Master," Fi said, signaling the tall man with the neatly trimmed beard who was wiping glasses behind the bar. "This isn't tea. I think you may have poured water in a dirty cup."

The man's expression said that's what she got for ordering tea in a place like the Silver Baron. "I can throw it out for you free of charge."

Fi snorted. She'd spent the last year in the coastal nation of Pissarre, where exotic teas and spices had come in from the ports every day. She let herself get lost in the memory of salt air and long afternoons in the giant library with a wall of windows that overlooked the sea, lush green lemon trees swaying in the breeze. Then she wiped the dirt from her brow and shook it away.

This wasn't Pissarre—this wasn't even the same kingdom. This was the town of Raven's Roost on the eastern edge of Darfell, nestled up in the Cragspires a stone's throw from the fallen kingdom of Andar. She was going to have to get used to border living again: harsh terrain; roughing it; and other, less pleasant things.

Her eyes slid to the posting board beside the bar. Among the Border Master's bounties on wanted criminals and merchants' calls for muscle for hire hung a scatter of notices and hand-drawn sketches of suspected Witches in the area. This time it wasn't the tea that pinched her face. The Witch Hunters were getting bolder if they'd started to hang their notices out in the open, even in a place like the Silver Baron.

The Witch Hunters were a vicious cult who believed all magic was corrupt and vowed to stop Andar from ever being restored—probably the only ones left, after a hundred years, who still believed the great kingdom of magic could be saved. They operated mostly in the scorched, lawless wastes of Andar, looting magic relics and chasing Witches out of the fallen kingdom. Raids over the border into Darfell used

to be rare, but recently they'd started coming after Witches in the border towns, where the Guard was always stretched too thin. Fi's eyes lingered on the rough sketch of a man with wispy hair and a large crystal earring.

She fisted her gloved hand under the counter. There wasn't anything she could do. Witch Hunters were outlawed in Darfell, but they still operated in secret, vanishing into the hills whenever the Border Guard was dispatched. Worse, it seemed like the harder life got in Darfell, the more people were willing to look the other way. The cities on the border had once been the most prosperous in Darfell, bustling with merchants coming and going from Andar. But ever since the great kingdom of magic collapsed, the whole area had been in steady decline, leaving a lot of hard, hungry, desperate people.

The door swung open with a bang, and a figure swaggered into the tavern. A short, stocky girl headed toward her, wearing a rust-red coat that fell to her knees over a gray tunic and a scuffed pair of dark pants. Her ash-brown hair was braided and wound into a knot, and a battle-ax was slung across her back, its dull head gleaming between her shoulder blades. But what really caught Fi's attention were the heavy boots with thick soles and wedge heels. Those she would recognize anywhere. They were a custom design that gave a few extra inches of height to the young woman who went with them.

Shane—the huntsman for hire.

Fi set her teacup in its saucer and tucked the map back into her pocket as Shane elbowed her way through the tables instead of going politely around. She slung herself onto the high stool next to Fi. Her heavy canvas pack hit the floor with a thud.

Fi waved the note. “You,” she said flatly. “You sent me this?”

“Yep.” Shane grinned. The girl hailed from the Steelwight Islands of the north, but she’d been in the borderlands long enough to dress like all the other rugged scouts and explorers—namely, in well-worn travel clothes with a thick layer of dirt, her fair skin sunburned in the cheeks. Her sea-gray eyes studied Fi. “You’re a hard one to track down.”

“Clearly not hard enough,” Fi muttered, pushing her tea away. It certainly wasn’t fit for drinking. “How’d you find me?”

“A mutual friend told me you were back in town,” Shane said, shrugging her eyebrows.

Fi’s gaze darted to the wall of posters, seeking out the man with the crystal earring. Shane leaned forward over the bar, craning to see. Her face twisted into a scowl when she realized what Fi was looking at.

“Oh, no they don’t!” Shane pushed up from her seat and stalked over to the Witch notices.

Conversation at a few of the tables trailed off. Shane crossed her arms, staring up at the wall before raising a hand and ripping down through the overlapping posters. She was short enough, even in the boots, that she had to jump to get the highest ones. She landed heavily and turned to glare at the room. Fi wasn’t sure whether Shane was so mad because the *mutual friend* they’d been discussing featured prominently on the board, or whether she just hated Witch Hunters in general. Shane was well-known for her aggressive brand of justice—the tavern was probably lucky she hadn’t buried her ax in the wall.

Shane crumpled the last scrap of paper into a ball, spinning to face the bar master. “You,” she warned. “Don’t let those scum post their garbage here!”

“It’s a public board,” the master said, not looking all that concerned—either by the notices themselves or the fact that they were now in shreds on the floor. Shane huffed.

Satisfying as it might be to make a scene, the kind of patrons who frequented the Silver Baron weren’t likely to be shamed by one angry huntsman. Fi didn’t tell Shane that, though. She wasn’t in the mood for a fight. They’d only worked together a couple of times before, and never closely, but she hadn’t forgotten the girl’s temper.

Shane thumped into her seat backward so she was facing out toward the silenced room with her elbows crooked up on the bar, daring anyone to have something to say. Nobody met her eyes. “Cowards,” Shane hissed.

Fi shook her head. “Isn’t this a little out of your way for a social call?”

“Actually, I have a proposition for you,” Shane said.

Fi rolled her eyes. *A proposition* for her and everyone else in the place, since every ear was turned toward them.

“You sure you want to be *propositioning* so publicly?”

Shane snorted out a laugh and threw up her shoulder in a shrug that said she didn’t particularly care. Then again, she wasn’t the one trying not to attract attention. Fi fought down a wave of irritation.

“Master, we’ll take one of the back rooms.” She pulled two copper coins from the pouch at her waist and slid them across the bar.

The man put down his cleaning rag to retrieve his money, then raked a disapproving gaze over Shane's ax. "No weapons in the back."

"I don't carry any." Fi lifted the edges of her jacket and spun in a circle to show her belt. Aside from her money pouch, all she carried was a rope tied off with a blunt ring, fastened in a tight curl.

"And I'm not disarming for this," Shane added.

The master was unmoved. "Ax stays out front, or you do."

"You're not going to part me from my stuff!" Shane warned hotly, clearly winding up for precisely the kind of public display Fi was trying to avoid.

"I'll do it, then." Fi ducked behind Shane, deftly sliding the ax from its straps. It was heavier than she'd expected, and the metal head lurched toward the floor before she heaved it onto the bar. Now that she was looking closer, she could see how fine the weapon was, the wooden handle worn but polished, and the single curved blade inlaid with a design of interlacing knots. She kicked Shane's overstuffed pack under a stool. "There, problem solved," she said, pushing Shane toward the back.

"I have everything in that pack memorized, down to the balls of lint!" Shane yelled over her shoulder. "And I'll know if you've so much as polished the spots off that ax!"

Fi shook her head, giving the girl an extra push into the curtains of one of the enclaves. "Stop making a scene." With the way she acted, it was hard to believe Shane was a year older than Fi.

The small enclave was thick with shadows, lit only by the flicker of tall candles in cast-iron candlesticks. A round

table and chairs hunched against the wall. The heavy velvet curtain muffled the sound from the bar as it swirled closed behind them.

“You know, that guy only took my ax,” Shane said, throwing herself into one of the high-backed chairs. “I could easily be killing you back here with a hidden dagger.”

“But it would be much harder to destroy the furniture while you did it,” Fi pointed out, sitting carefully on the edge of her seat, “which I think was his bigger concern.”

Shane chuckled, tipping back in her chair. “I forgot how sharp you can be.”

“Feel free to leave anytime,” Fi offered blandly.

“I meant it as a compliment!” Shane protested. “And anyway, we’d both regret that. Didn’t you read my note? I have an opportunity you can’t refuse.” Fi threw her a look, but Shane leaned over the table, suddenly serious. “I found something when I was exploring a ruin down by Haverfall. It’s a map—one you’re going to want a look at.”

Fi clicked her tongue, refusing to be baited. “There are a lot of maps floating around, most of them for ruins long discovered. What’s so special about this one?”

Shane grinned like a fiend. “It’s in the Witches’ Jewelry Box,” she said, pulling a piece of paper out of her tunic and laying it down with a flourish.

The map looked ancient. Through the splotches and creases, Fi recognized the range of high mountains that reared up just beyond Raven’s Roost. Within them lay a deep valley riddled with alpine lakes and high waterfalls, all clustered around the river that cut the gorge like a vein.

Up until a hundred years ago, the area had been part of

Andar. Treasure hunters called it the Witches' Jewelry Box because, for a thousand years before the fall, Witches had congregated there, building secret manors and hideaways, strongholds and stargazing towers tucked into switchbacks or teetering on cliffs—now a string of lost ruins studding the river canyon like jewels on a chain. They'd been abandoned when Andar fell and the Witches fled. Technically it was within Darfell's border these days. The whole valley was a crisscross of traps and counter traps, with entire buildings designed to safeguard relics and treasures of long-dead Orders of Magic.

Fi's eyes scoured the map. She frowned, peering closer. "I think someone played you for a fool. There's nothing here." Besides the geographical features, there were no marks at all—there weren't even any roads.

"Watch."

Shane held the map up to the candle, so close Fi worried there wouldn't be a map in a second. Then she saw it. Something was starting to appear—dark lines of ink revealed by the heat, bleeding across the parchment like water soaking into the page. *Invisible ink*. When the lines stopped spreading, the river in the center of the Witches' Jewelry Box was overlaid with thick curls of vines, each one hung with blossoming ochre roses.

Fi pressed her finger to the page, tracing the complex whorls and loops in astonishment. "These aren't just vines. They're words in one of the magic languages." There had been countless Orders of Magic throughout Andar's long history. Many of them crafted their own languages to keep their spells secret. "It's the Order of the Divine Rose."

“I figured that much,” Shane said. “The roses were a dead giveaway.”

Was it possible? The Order of the Divine Rose was the oldest and most powerful of all of them, and every Witch in the royal line had been a member. Shane was right. This wasn’t just any treasure map.

“Now you can see why I brought this to you. What’s it say?” Shane asked.

Fi leaned close, breathing in the scent of old paper as she studied the intricate letters. “It says, *among the roses.*”

“Well, that’s not much of a hint,” Shane grumbled. “There are a dozen roses on that vine. You mean the map could be pointing to any one of them?”

“No. It’s none of them.” Fi couldn’t keep her excitement out of her voice anymore. “At the top of the vines—see how there’s one rosebud that hasn’t blossomed yet?” She pointed to a spot northwest of the gorge, perched on the edge of a cliff. “Sometimes the Witches of the Divine Rose used a rosebud to indicate something hidden in their scrolls—things too important to write down, in case they fell into the wrong hands.”

Shane squinted at the paper. “But that cliff’s less than a day’s hike from here—it’s not even in the canyon! How has nobody found it after all this time?”

Fi shook her head. “I guess I’ll find out when I get there.” A curl of anticipation teased her stomach, but she tried not to seem too eager. “How much are you selling the map for?” she asked, thinking about her slightly thin purse.

“Selling?” Shane snorted. “I’m not selling it. I’m looking for a partner. You used to be a treasure hunter—*used to*

be pretty good at it, too. I can't imagine all your skills have dulled during your grand travels."

"None of my skills have dulled," Fi snapped back.

"Great." Shane smacked the table. "Then you're hired. Standard agreement: All treasure goes to me, all books and boring historical stuff to you, and nobody touches any magic relics."

That breakdown worked fine for Fi, unless they found only treasure—though she supposed it would be equally unfortunate for Shane if they found only books.

"Wait," Fi protested. "I haven't agreed yet."

"You will," Shane said, smug. "Your eyes haven't left this map since I pulled it out."

Fi felt her cheeks getting hot. She prided herself on having a good poker face, but Shane had seen right through her. *Way to keep your cards close to the vest*, she thought, annoyed.

"Fine." Fi reached her hand out over the table. "We do this one job, then go our separate ways."

"One job," Shane agreed, seizing her hand. It was a rough handshake, like everything else about Shane.

"Meet me at the crossroads past the old watchtower two hours before dawn," Fi said, already calculating what she'd want to bring on an expedition like this.

Shane gave a pained groan. "Two hours *before* dawn? No wonder you can't keep a partner."

Fi's chest gave an unpleasant squeeze. It was only a gibe, like the other insults they'd been trading, but it hit a little too close to home. She'd only ever had one partner, after all, and now—well, now she didn't.

Something must have shown on her face, because Shane was suddenly backpedaling.

“Sorry. Forget it, I’m just hungry. Oh, and in case you were wondering about that note—I’m actually in the room next to yours at the Iron Lantern. That’s how I found you so easily.” Shane snatched the priceless map, bunching it up and shoving it back into her shirt. “I’m going to go scare up some grub.” She nearly got into a fight with the curtain as she made a hasty exit.

“I’d recommend a different tavern,” Fi called. The after-taste of the sour tea still curdled on her tongue. She wouldn’t risk a meal here.

The curtain whispered closed, leaving Fi alone with her thoughts. She was about to have another partner, even though she’d sworn never to go down that road again. At least Shane was nothing like her former partner—now her ex in every sense of the word.

Slowly, Fi worked the fingerless glove off and set it aside. She held up her hand beside the guttering candle, looking for the thousandth time at the butterfly mark burned into her palm—a stylized swallowtail, dark as ink, with long tails that trailed over her wrist before curling in toward the sharp, angular wings. It was a curse mark, and it had been her old partner’s parting gift to her a year ago, before she fled Darfell.

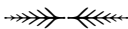
Fi curled her fingers into a fist. She had come back for one reason: to find a way to break the Butterfly Curse. She’d searched so many ruins, buried herself in old libraries of forgotten books, and none of them had held the answer she

was seeking. Shane's map could be just another dead end. But the Witches of the Divine Rose had been masters of warding and protection magic. Maybe they'd left something behind, something that could help her. Maybe this was finally her chance to wipe the slate clean and get rid of the ugly mark.

She wasn't the same person she had been a year ago, and she wasn't going to make the same mistakes.

No more partners. It was safer that way—especially for the heart.

2



Shane

SHANE SURGED UP in bed, all her senses on high alert. She blinked away the haze of sleep. She was in her small room at the Iron Lantern. From the darkness that pressed in at the window, it was either really late or really, really early.

A noise had jerked her awake. She couldn't place it, but it set her teeth on edge. Shane listened hard. The kinds of places she usually stayed, she could hear every rat and cockroach scuttling through the rafters, but the Iron Lantern was more upscale, with stone walls and thick oak doors. The silence prickled in her ears. Then she heard it—the creak of a foot on a loose board, like someone sneaking around deep in the building. It could be nothing, but . . . Shane swore, kicking her blankets away.

She crammed her feet into socks and boots and hurried to the door, cursing when her own pack nearly took her out. Her shin throbbed from a rude collision with her ax's wooden

handle. Limping, she snagged the weapon and plunged into the corridor.

The windowless hall was pitch-black. Shane hugged the wall, the metal ax head cold against her thigh. Fi's door was shut tight. Shane considered shaking her awake, but if it turned out she was stalking some terrified raccoon through the halls, her new partner didn't need to know about it.

The Iron Lantern was a sprawling inn right at the edge of Raven's Roost. It took its name from two giant lanterns that stood to either side of the main doors and burned all through the night. She was close enough now to see the sputtering red light pouring through the front windows.

Another footstep. The crackle of broken glass. Shane hefted her ax. Whoever or whatever was awake, it was in the foyer.

A shadow detached from the wall ahead, darting forward to crouch in the doorway to the foyer. Shane stiffened. Then the figure tipped her head, and Shane caught a glimpse of her new partner silhouetted in the dim glow. Fi's brown hair feathered over her shoulders, and her white nightgown was sleep-rumpled.

So Fi had beaten her there. At least Shane had thought to come armed.

She inched up until she could lay a hand on Fi's elbow. The girl nearly jumped out of her skin. Her wild eyes darted to Shane. Fi sagged in relief, then lifted a finger to her lips, scowling—as if Shane was going to do all that work sneaking down the hall and then blow it by braying out a *fancy meeting you here*. She ducked low and took up position beside Fi, peering around the doorframe.

The lantern light gave the room an eerie glow. Amid the shadows stood a figure dressed all in black, his cloak thrown over his shoulder. A shorter, balding man lurked at his elbow, wringing his hands. Glass glittered on the floor. They had broken one of the windowpanes to reach the lock. That was the sound that had startled Shane awake. She strained to make out their harsh whispering.

“You’re sure she’s here? The girl with the ax?”

Shane’s guts lurched.

The shorter man nodded, the light sickly on his sallow skin. “Shane. I don’t know who the other one was, the girl in the hat, but I heard them talking about some big score.”

Now Shane recognized the snitch. He had been in the tavern, hunched over the bar when she tore the Witch notices from the wall. Fi scowled, and though she didn’t say a word, Shane could just *feel* her partner chewing her out for *propositioning so publicly*.

“Find them.” The cloaked man turned, and Shane caught a flash of grim eyes above a sharp, beaky nose, an amulet of yellow topaz glinting at his pale neck. Her blood ran cold as her gaze cut down to the saw-toothed longsword tucked into his belt, the iron cut with nasty-looking spines. Shane cursed. Only one type of lowlife carried a blade like that.

Witch Hunter, she mouthed to Fi.

Fi went still. For the first time, she looked worried. Shane didn’t blame her. She hadn’t cared much about Witch Hunters one way or the other when she’d first found herself kicking around Darfell. Now, three years later, just the thought of them turned her stomach.

There was an unspoken code among treasure hunters:

Whoever made it through a ruin first got to claim the prize. But the Witch Hunters had other ideas. Roaming the borderlands in mangy packs, they swore a claim on all magic relics and other treasures in the Witches' Jewelry Box, and they weren't above taking them by force. In their flapping black cloaks, they reminded Shane of vultures, stripping the old ruins down to the bones, looting what they wanted and often burning the rest.

She didn't know what they used the relics for, whether they sold them, or destroyed them, or locked them away somewhere for safekeeping. But she knew why they carried those ugly swords. To make people too afraid to get in their way.

Shane was wide awake now, her blood thrumming as every muscle geared up for a fight. "What do we do?" Fi whispered, so close Shane felt the words on the back of her neck.

Her hand tightened around the ax. The snitch had found the inn's ledger, where the guests and their room numbers were recorded, his fingers sliding greedily down the columns. In a second, he would have them.

She grabbed Fi's shoulder, pulling her from the doorway. "Get our packs. Then go out the back window and wait for me there."

"Why?" Fi asked. Her eyes darted to the foyer. "What are you going to do?"

"Slow them down."

Fi looked like she wanted to argue. She bit her tongue at the expression on Shane's face. "Don't get yourself killed," she murmured as she slipped away, silent on her bare feet.

Shane gave her partner a ten-second head start. Then she drew herself up from the shadows and stepped into the

doorway. The blade of her ax shone molten red in the guttering light.

“Looking for me?”

The intruders whirled.

“That’s her! The huntsman,” the snitch from the tavern hissed. He backed toward the door, his eyes locked on her ax.

Shane had a better view of the Witch Hunter from here. Brutal and broad-shouldered, he was at least a foot taller than she was, his heavy boots jangling as he stalked toward her. He drew his sword, beating the flat against his palm.

“I heard you found something valuable in a Witch ruin, little girl. Hand it over.”

“Or what?” Shane chambered her ax on her shoulder, staring him down.

The Witch Hunter’s face twisted into a sneer. His eyes slid to her weapon. “Can you even use that?”

Shane smirked. She could feel him sizing her up, underestimating her. Everyone always did—ever since she’d first wrapped her fingers around this ax handle, when she was too small to lift it. She never got tired of proving them wrong.

“I can use it,” she said. “But for someone like you, I won’t even bother.”

Inside a breath, she spun and slammed her foot into the innkeeper’s stool, sending it flying into the Witch Hunter’s legs. He hit the floor in a heap. Before he could scramble for his sword, Shane seized the tall candelabra and threw it down onto him, the heavy brass clanging on the stone. Then she sprinted down the hall, her ax swinging and her face split with a fierce grin.

She could hear cursing and spitting, the Witch Hunter struggling to his feet. She threw herself into her room and slammed the door, twisting the lock.

Heavy footsteps pounded after her. The Witch Hunter had given up on stealth. Just as she wrenched open the window, a body crashed into the door from the other side, determined to break it down. She leapt out into the dark and landed with a crunch in the overgrown weeds.

Fi was crouched low with the packs. Shane almost laughed at the sight of her new partner, still in her nightgown but with her worn traveling hat jammed resolutely onto her head.

Fi's eyes flashed over her. "Shane, are you—"

"Go, go!" she whispered, pushing Fi ahead of her through the bushes.

The last thing she heard was the door splintering open into the empty room as they raced into the night.

"DO YOU THINK we lost them?"

Shane leaned against the trunk of a knotty pine, watching the first shafts of sunlight pierce the forest gloom. She crunched into an apple scavenged from her pack. Between their surprise guests and running for their lives, there hadn't been time for breakfast.

"Seems like it," Shane said. "But I wouldn't let my guard down."

After their close call at the inn, they hadn't stopped running until they were well into the foothills, both of them panting and out of breath. Shane hadn't seen any sign of their pursuers, but Witch Hunters never traveled alone. They

were like cockroaches—if you saw one, you knew there were more scuttling around just out of sight.

Shane glanced at the thicket where Fi had disappeared. “They might catch up if you take any longer changing, though.”

“Trust me, I’ll be much faster without my nightgown snagging on every thistle from here to the Witches’ Jewelry Box.”

Shane chuckled. “You know, if you slept in your clothes, you’d never have this problem.”

“Spoken like someone with a lot of experience bailing out the window in the middle of the night,” Fi said. “Something I don’t plan to make a habit of.”

Shane couldn’t deny that.

Fi reappeared fully dressed, with a blue shirt under her brown jacket and her hair caught in a ponytail. Shane gave her partner an appraising look. Fi was attractive enough, she supposed, with sharp hazel eyes flecked with green and warm tan skin, but she wasn’t Shane’s type. Shane went for girls, but not bookish know-it-alls—especially if they were taller than her.

Fi had a reputation among treasure hunters as one of the best, mostly because she’d studied everything ever written about the fallen kingdom of Andar. But she also had some famous ex she was supposedly locked in eternal war with. Rumor had it they’d flamed out so badly Fi quit treasure hunting entirely and left the country, and Shane knew better than to get in the middle of something like that.

As Fi shouldered her pack, Shane pulled out the map. She scowled at the crumpled parchment, irritatingly empty

of rose vines. “You hold this. I’ll get out the torch so we can see where we’re going. Trust a Witch to make this as complicated as possible . . .”

“No need,” Fi said, digging a piece of parchment from her pocket. When she opened it, Shane could see Fi had sketched a rough version of the curling vines onto her own map and drawn a circle where the rosebud had been.

“You copied my map!” Shane accused, impressed in spite of herself. Fi had only looked at the original for a minute or two at most.

“I have a good memory,” Fi offered with a shrug.

“Good enough to steal a score right out from under me,” Shane grumbled.

Fi ignored her. She bent over the map and pulled out a compass, turning it a few times until she was satisfied. “This way,” she said, taking off without waiting for Shane.

Though the ruin had seemed close, the hike still took most of the day. The low foothills gave way to high mountains as Shane followed her partner along narrow switchbacks cut right into the rock. The summer slopes rustled with cedar and silver-green sage. From what Shane had seen, the kingdom of Darfell was almost all mountains—it seemed like she was always trudging up a hill or tumbling down one. The hot sun glared out of a clear sky, and she could practically feel her fair skin burning.

At times like this, Shane missed the foggy Steelwight Islands, rippling with waterfalls and emerald forests and storms lashing rocky coasts. Her native kingdom was a chain of islands in a misty archipelago, each home to one of the eight clans and ruled by a War King. It would be the rainy

season now, the whole island of Rockrimmon glittering with silver droplets clinging to the leaves. She imagined her grandmother sitting on the ring of mossy rocks beside the meadow marsh, singing “O Wispy Waters” in her raspy voice, a folk-tale about the spirit of a drowned girl who became the guardian of the willow grove.

It had been Shane’s and her brother’s favorite. When they were young, they would link hands and dare each other to look into the glassy water, hoping to see the ghost. All they ever saw were their own reflections staring back: nearly identical twins, distinguishable only by Shane’s long, unbrushed hair.

My little wildling warrior. That’s what her grandmother had called her. *So eager to take on the world, she beat her twin brother out by three and a half minutes.*

But along with those memories came all the things she’d rather forget. The bitter fights. The broken promises. The years of watching her twin’s face grow distant and cold, her position as firstborn driving a wedge between them. All the reasons she’d left Steelwight and her family forever.

Shane wasn’t just some warrior from the north, as she let people believe. She was the daughter of a War King, the lord of Rockrimmon, and the heir to his throne. Her birthright by three and a half minutes—one she had never wanted.

“I think we can take a shortcut through here.”

Fi’s voice broke into Shane’s reverie. She shoved the old thoughts away, following her partner into a wall of spiny juniper.

Shane liked the idea of the shortcut in theory. In practice, it meant scrambling through a tunnel of brambles that

grabbed her like they had been lying in wait. By the time she tumbled out the other side, she'd made the acquaintance of everything that crawled or slithered in the whole kingdom.

When she got to her feet, she found Fi staring at a craggy rock wall. The cliff towered over them, the shadows of the pine forest thick and deep. It looked alarmingly like a dead end.

"This is it?" Shane asked.

"This is the spot on the map," Fi hedged.

Shane glanced around. "I don't see any roses." Actually, she didn't see anything. No crumbled fortress. No mysterious statues. These old maps weren't always reliable, but if someone had gone to this much trouble to hide the royal Witches' favorite picnic spot, Shane was going to be peeved.

"*Among the roses,*" Fi murmured absently. She jerked her head up. "Roses grow in the sun. We have to get higher."

"That I can do." Shane walked along the foot of the cliff, studying the outcroppings and fissures for the best handholds. She squinted at a strange mark. "Hey! Look at this." She scrubbed away a crust of yellow lichen to reveal the whorl of a rose carved into the rock—and another, and another, a chain of roses pointing a path to the clifftop.

Excitement churned in Shane's gut as they scrambled up the slope. Finally, she was starting to feel it—the rush of taking on a ruin, each one dangerous and unpredictable. It was why she'd become a treasure hunter in the first place. She liked the payout—as someone who'd come to Darfell with nothing, she knew the value of having a big pile of money when you needed it. But she lived for the challenge, never

knowing what to expect and trusting her skills to get her through one more time.

She reached the top first and turned back to watch her partner. Fi missed a step and her foot shot out from under her, but Shane caught her before she could slip, pulling her easily over the ledge.

Fi gave her a sideways glance. “You’re stronger than you look,” she said grudgingly, probably the closest to a compliment she could manage.

Shane tossed her head. “Looks like we made it.”

Ahead of them was a tall manor, built right into the high cliff overlooking a glistening lake. The stone walls were so overgrown with ivy and wild roses that Shane could easily have walked right by it. From a distance, it would have been indistinguishable from the crags in the rock. That was the kind of thing a Witch would come up with. They were a secretive bunch in general—really, it was no surprise Fi got on so well with them. Shane thought she could make out the skeleton of a tower that had once risen above the hulking ruin, but it had long since collapsed into the body of the house. It looked like a good stiff breeze might knock the whole manor off the cliff.

Fi was making for the entrance, and Shane hurried to catch up. She helped her partner brush away the roses and ivy to reveal a wooden door. It was badly warped and blackened with decay, sitting at odd angles in the frame. A dusty half-moon window glinted above it.

Fi bent over her notebook, a stick of charcoal clutched in one hand as she copied down a line of intricate markings cut into the door. They looked a lot like the ones on the map.

Squinting over her shoulder, Shane saw the notebook was full of similar notations, clusters of old symbols scrawled all the way to the margins. “More Divine Rose squiggles, huh? What’s this one say?”

Fi was entranced, running her finger over the grooves in the wood. “Give me a minute—”

“Or we could just try the door,” Shane suggested, grabbing the ornate metal handle and pushing. To her surprise, the door yawned inward, creaking on rusty hinges.

Fi squawked indignantly. She stood up fast, brushing herself off. “It said *a drop of blood, a drop of hope*,” she snapped, shoving her notebook into her pack.

“And now, even better, it’s open.” That was a pretty ominous thing to be written on a Witch’s door, but far from the worst Shane had seen.

Fi gave her one last look. “Ready?”

“Born ready,” Shane replied. Then they ducked through the doorway and disappeared into the narrow space beyond.

They’d gone only a few steps when Fi stopped dead. Shane forgot her grumble about *rude partners blocking the way* as the details of the house surged out of the gloom.

The sunlight spilled in through the wrecked door behind them, throwing their shadows across the stone floor of a dingy entrance hall. A crystal chandelier spun slowly on a rusty chain. On a second look, Shane realized the crystals were carved into intricate roses and the metal ring was shaped like a snarl of thorns. It might have been beautiful if it hadn’t been shrouded in a thick layer of cobwebs pocked with dead flies.

“Real homey place,” Shane muttered.

Fi stepped over hunks of rotted wood scattered across the floor like bones. She parted the curtain of spiderwebs stretched across the mouth of the hallway and then stopped to brush a hairy spider off her shoulder. Shane's guts clenched, and she had to remind herself that using her ax on spiders would be overkill—that's what boot heels were for. Still, she was happy to let Fi take the lead.

"So, any idea what we're dealing with here?" Shane asked.

"I'm not sure." Fi ran her hand along a rose design scratched deep into the wall. "This manor is centuries old, but there are signs someone's been here more recently."

Shane went quiet, instantly on alert. *Recent* meant there could be danger lurking in the shadows. Could the Witch Hunters have found this place without the map? Or worse, beaten them here? She squinted down the murky hallway, shoulders tensed. The stone walls were slanted with the weight of the house, and she could smell something dank rising up from between the stones, probably mold festering in the cracks.

"How recent are we talking?" she asked in a low whisper.

Fi dusted her hands off on her pants. "The writing on the door is definitely less than a hundred years old," she said, sounding almost excited. "Which means someone was here after the fall of Andar."

"Oh yeah, that's what I call *recent*," Shane muttered sarcastically. Nobody bothered lying in wait for close to a century. She resisted the urge to put her boot heel in the back of Fi's head.

It's only one job, Shane reminded herself. Then they would

go their separate ways, only much richer. She imagined herself spinning a jewel-studded crown around one finger, hip-deep in a pile of gold.

A door set into the wall seemed to be the only way forward. Shane frowned. She hated being led through these ruins like a rat in a maze. As if taunting her, a wicked-looking spider slid along a thread, its jointed legs skittering before it vanished under the door.

Fi dug out her bandana and knocked the webs off the knob. She pushed the door open, leading the way cautiously into the room beyond. This one was narrower, the walls tapering toward the ceiling so the whole room felt like it might collapse on them. It was also strangely dim. Six small half-moon windows were set deep into one wall, keeping the room in a perpetual twilight.

If you were going to bother to put in windows, Shane wondered, why not make them big enough to light the place? The door clicked shut, making her shoulders jump up to her ears.

The room contained only one thing: a small stone table, which held four statues, each about as long as Shane's arm. An off-kilter door was tucked into the far wall.

"I'll check the door," Fi said.

"Great. I've got the creepy statues, then," Shane muttered, shuffling over to the table. Up close, she could see that the statues depicted four identical figures in long robes and flowing cloaks, hoods pulled close to their faces and obscuring their features. Each figure had its stone hands outstretched, offering a gleaming key.

"The door's locked," Fi confirmed, twisting the handle.

“Well, not for long. One of these has to be the key.” Shane frowned at the statues. If one of them was right, odds were the others were very, very wrong—she didn’t want to find out what nasty traps the Divine Rose might have left behind. Shane ran a finger over one of the stone hands, brushing off a grimy layer of dust to get a better look at the first key.

The instant her finger touched the cool metal, the key popped out of the divot in the statue’s hand and clanged against the table. The noise was instantly lost in a much louder sound—the deafening groan of ancient mechanisms screaming to life behind the walls. Shane grabbed the table as the room shook. Iron bars rushed down from the ceiling with the screech of metal on stone.

Fi had been braced against one wall, inspecting the door. She barely threw herself out of the way before the bars slammed into the floor, right where she’d been standing. Chips of stone flew up at the impact.

All the walls were now blocked off—everything except the locked door.

“Fi!” Shane called, worried in spite of herself. The other girl was getting to her feet, breathing hard. She threw Shane a withering look.

“Watch what you’re doing!” Fi snapped.

Shane laughed nervously. “I guess that was the wrong key.”

“Is that a joke?” Fi bent to snatch the runaway key that had fallen to the floor. She shook it at Shane. “Why would you yank one of the keys out?”

Now, that was just unfair. “I did not *yank one of the keys out*. I barely touched it.”

“Maybe don’t touch anything at all, then,” Fi advised, snippy. Shane was not sure she deserved that—she had a reputation for being a hothead, not a bonehead.

“Not a problem,” Shane said. “By all means—show me how to choose between four identical statues.”

Her sarcasm was lost on Fi, who now had eyes only for the ornate bronze key. She twirled it in her fingers and then turned to the table, clearly fascinated by the puzzle of the room. Shane had no idea what Fi was looking for as she examined the statues from different angles, peering into their hoods and even pulling out her spiderwebby bandana to polish the stone table. *Or maybe this is some bizarre form of revenge*, she thought, when Fi made Shane boost her up for a closer look at the small half-moon windows, her boot heel digging relentlessly into Shane’s spine.

At last, Fi stood in the middle of the room, eyes closed and her fingers tugging absently on one earlobe. It was a classic *I’m-thinking* look. Shane had been hoping for more of an *I-got-it* look.

Shane tapped her foot. “Let’s just guess,” she suggested. “There’s a one-in-three chance of getting it right now. I’ve always been pretty lucky.”

Fi huffed. “I will not be trusting my life to your luck.”

Shane wanted to accuse her of exaggerating, but she probably wasn’t. There were a lot of ways for traps to kill you in places like this. Now that they were locked in, the room could be flooded with sand or water, or sliding floor tiles could dump them into a pit of spikes, or worse. Then again, Shane could also die of boredom waiting for Fi to make a decision.

“Well?” she pressed.

“Shh! I’m thinking,” Fi said, eyes squeezed tight. “Andar was known for its powerful Witches. Those have to be the figures in the statues. Four statues, four Witches—”

“Skip the history lesson,” Shane said. “Left, right, or center?”

“The statues have to represent the Great Witches who served the last royal family of Andar,” Fi rushed out, clearly aware that Shane’s patience was growing thin. “They erected statues of the Witches in the courtyard of the castle, giant statues that looked down on the main square . . . and the people looked up at them!” Her voice shot up at the end—the classic *aha* signal Shane had been waiting for. “Shane, pull out a torch,” Fi said excitedly, digging into her pocket.

“Bossy,” Shane grumbled, but she was grinning all the same. There was no point in partnering with someone like Fi if you weren’t going to listen to her.

By the time she found a torch in her overstuffed pack, Fi already had her flint and tinder ready. Shane pulled back the heavy canvas wrapped around the torch to reveal a blunt metal stave, one end bound with tar and oil-soaked cloths so it would catch quickly. Her eyes watered at the pungent smell. Fi struck the flint with practiced ease and the torch flared to life.

“What do you want me to do with this?” Before Shane had even finished the question, Fi snatched the torch, turning back to the statues. Too curious to be offended, Shane crowded behind Fi as she thrust the torch at the first statue, the one missing its key. A face flared out of the dark beneath the cowl.

Shane hissed a breath in through her teeth. The statue's grotesque features were twisted in a cruel scowl, and the hard stone eyes seemed to look right at her. Instinctively, she pinched the nerve between her thumb and forefinger. It was a trick her grandmother had taught her in case she ever met one of the wandering mist spirits out of Steelwight legends, which were said to weave illusions to lure lost travelers toward the rocky cliffs. Shane was pretty sure mist spirits didn't exist, but she'd picked up the habit anyway. Pain grounded you like nothing else.

Fi looked pointedly at her. "It's not magic," she said. "It's a trick of the design. The features can only be seen when lit from below." She slid the torch under the second cloaked figure. Another hideous face leapt out in the firelight, wicked teeth bared. "These figures are meant to mimic the great statues in the courtyard of Andar's castle. They can only really be seen from below."

"I hate traps that are all about knowing your history," Shane mumbled, unsettled by the stone eyes that still seemed to be following her.

Fi shook her head. "Hardly. Everything about this room is a clue."

"Now, I know *that's* an exaggeration," Shane said, looking around at lots and lots of nothing.

Fi gave an exasperated sigh. "The windows are set high and deep so the room is dim enough to disguise the trick sculpture, but not so dark we'd naturally think to light a torch. And when you set off the first trap, even though everything else in the room shook, the statues remained perfectly

still. They're affixed so we can't lift them up." Fi shrugged. "And then there was the table."

Shane could hardly believe what she was hearing. "The table?" she repeated as Fi slid the torch under the third statue.

"Yes," Fi muttered, not paying attention anymore. This time the light revealed a woman's face, smooth and serene, her eyelashes lowered as she stared at the key in her outstretched palms. "It's made of a reflective stone to bounce the light up into the statues' faces."

Shane whistled, impressed. She'd had a lot of fleeting partnerships over the years, but this was the first time she really felt matched.

"I know. The detail in these old traps is amazing," Fi said, completely misunderstanding what had impressed her.

Shane shook her head. "So can I touch the key now?"

Fi blinked, like she had totally forgotten what they were doing and why. She passed the torch under the final statue just to be sure, revealing the curl of a demonic smirk.

"I think we have a winner," she agreed, nodding Shane toward the third statue.

Fi's reasoning was sound—flawless, in Shane's opinion. Still she held her breath as she took the key from the hand of the third statue. The metal teeth came free at the slightest touch, but this time, there was no crash of gears from another trap springing. Shane sighed in relief. Maybe they were through the worst of it.

She had to wiggle the key into the rusted lock, but once she had it in, it turned easily in its grooves. When she heard the tumblers click, Shane gave the handle a tentative push—

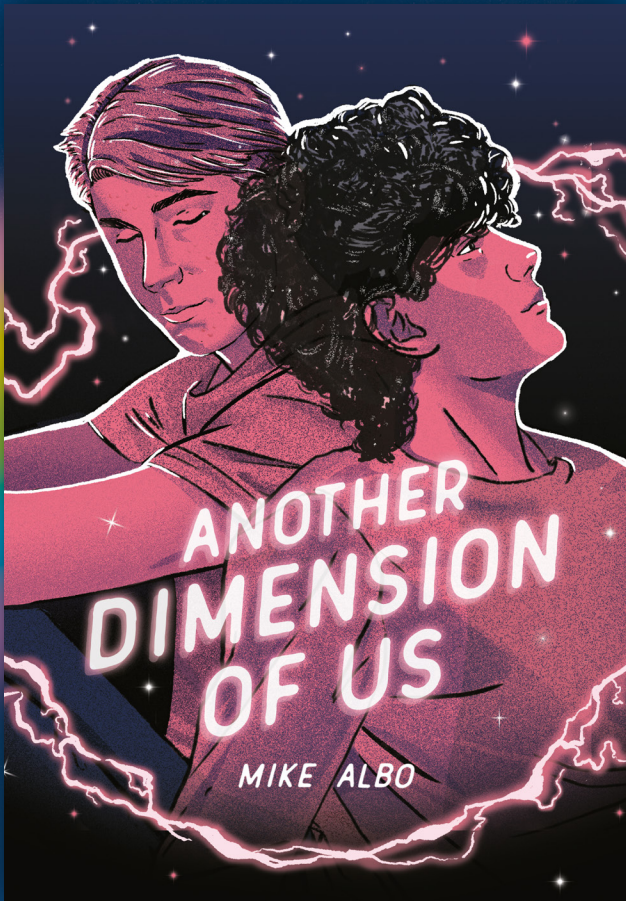
but the door was warped by time and damp, and the corners stuck in the frame. Shane shoved again. No luck.

“Give me a hand here?” she called over her shoulder.

Fi moved in beside Shane, both of them leaning hard against the door.

With a loud crack, the door sagged inward, and suddenly they were both stumbling into the next room. The treacherous door swung shut behind Shane, plunging them into darkness. The torch sailed out of Fi’s hand and spun across the floor. Through the wild shadows, Shane saw a gleam of wire stretched taut across the room—just in time to watch it snap against Fi’s ankle as they went down in a pile of flailing limbs.

A trip wire, Shane realized. And her partner had set it off.



AVAILABLE NOW

1986 TOMMY

Tommy was crying, holding his head in his hands, saying over and over that he should have kissed Renaldo Calabasas that night when he had the chance.

It had been a week since Renaldo was struck by lightning. Tommy was sitting where it happened: under the charred tree in Hollow Pond Park, huddled into the base of the blackened trunk—the exact spot where they almost kissed. He wrote down his thoughts.

You are like smoke, a dark dance in the air.

No.

You are a storm cloud, weightlessly heavy.

No.

You are as mysteriously beautiful as black smoke.

No.

A crow.

No.

A raven?

Tommy crossed out his words. He was such a shitty poet. He wasn't even a smidge as good as René. And his bad poetry couldn't match what he was feeling.

But he kept writing in the book. He had to. Renaldo Calabasas was lost in the astral plane, floating somewhere in its expanse. And it was the book that told Tommy that if he wanted to find Renaldo and bring him back to Earth, he had to write down how he felt. He had to get close to him in words, and the words would be his path to him.

The book told him to write it all out.

The book. The book.



JUNE, THREE MONTHS EARLIER

Tommy stood at the bike rack watching Renaldo Calabastas unchain his clunky old banana-seat Schwinn.

René was sweating through his white button-down shirt, and Tommy could see the contours of his chest through the wet fabric.

It was Friday, the last day of school, and everyone had cleared out in an end-of-the-year frenzy, ripping up and throwing away their schoolwork and locker decorations like they were getting out of jail. The trash bins next to them were filled with spiral notebooks, crumpled papers, tattered locker posters of Van Halen and the Doors. All the wealthy juniors and seniors of Herron High had driven away in their cars to some popular person's party somewhere. Tommy wouldn't know where.

"You ready to go?" Renaldo asked, piling books into his basket before stopping suddenly. He leaned against his bike and stared up at the sky.

“What are you looking at?” Tommy asked.

“I’ll come to you when the sky is cerulean blue,” René said.

“What?”

“That sentence. It came to me last night after a dream. Like someone said it to me. I’m just wondering if this is what ‘cerulean blue’ is.”

Tommy followed Renaldo’s gaze. The sky was strangely dark in color, like the coldness of outer space was closer than normal. *Cerulean, cerulean*, Tommy repeated to himself.

Renaldo rummaged through the bike basket and ripped out a page from his notebook. Tommy could see that there was a poem written on it titled “Storm Omen.” Even by sight, Tommy knew it would be good and that it would appear in the next *Cornucopia*—the student literary magazine they worked on. Everything René wrote made it in there.

“It’s about lightning,” René explained, still staring at the sky, “about this thing called *keranuscopy*. Do you know that word?”

“No, sorry,” Tommy said. He wanted to say, *Do you know how beautiful you are?* But of course he didn’t.

“It means divination by lightning,” said Renaldo. “I mean, isn’t that the most amazing word ever? Apparently, the Etruscans believed that lightning and thunder were omens.”

Tommy only had a vague idea who the Etruscans were but nodded assuredly, anyway. Renaldo was so well-read. Lightning was his latest obsession.

“Lightning on a Tuesday or Wednesday was good luck for crops. But on a Sunday meant a man would die, a whole different thing. On a Friday, it meant something foreboding was coming. I wrote this last night. Well, technically, this morning after

midnight, so it was on a Friday.” René talked quickly and floridly, like he always did, and Tommy ate up every word.

He scanned the page.

*I am naked, only in my skin,
bare bark,
listening for storms
waiting for omens*

Tommy couldn't get the naked part out of his mind.

“Come on,” René said suddenly, snatching the poem back, “we have to get to the library.”

Tommy watched as he folded the poem meticulously into a triangle, like he was folding a flag for a soldier, and placed the little parcel in the front pocket of his shirt. Then he hopped on his bike, and Tommy quickly strapped on his backpack full of books and grabbed his bike, too, pedaling hard to keep up.

They rolled down Freedom Avenue. Tommy let René go first so he could watch him from behind, his hair flying, white shirt billowing in the hot air. It was the beginning of June, the air was humid, and every yard they passed was dense with green lawns, sprinklers chattering away in wet stutters.

Tommy wrote poetry, too, but never as good as Renaldo's.

Except for the poetry he wrote *about* Renaldo.

About René's dark curls that cascaded down his neck.

About his strong nose and deep brown eyes that were so open and expansive, they were almost like staring into a night sky filled with stars.

About René riding his bike in his strange white pants and

white shirts that he always wore, sometimes with an equally unstylish fedora hat, his bushy hair peeking out from under it.

About his brown skin, not one freckle.

About his body that was wiry and skinny and surprisingly strong, even though he never exercised.

About his old poetry books that he was always carrying around, along with his giant hardbound notebook that he wrote in constantly.

About the callus between his left index and middle finger that had formed because he wrote so much.

About how René wasn't popular but he didn't care at all. Tommy wasn't popular, either. That was for many reasons. But the big one: His last name was Gaye. And because life was apparently one giant cruel joke, he had always known he was gay, too. Last week he even said it out loud. He shut the door to his bathroom, making sure his parents and his brother were safely downstairs, and he looked in the mirror and whispered it to himself. *I'm gay.*

He muttered it quickly in the mirror so that he wouldn't have to get close and look at his pimply skin and feel even worse about himself. But now he was with René and they were on their way to the library and school had ended and he was free, flying down Freedom Avenue, and René was on his bike in front of him. He felt jolted with life.

Just two hours ago, René had surprised him at his locker before last period.

"Hello, fine sir," he said, miming the bow of a mannered gentleman from a different age like he always did. "See you at Ziller's after sixth?"

"Yes!" Tommy answered, already regretting his enthusiasm. "I

know Ms. Ziller wants to, like, say goodbye to us or something?”

“Yes. And what are you doing after?”

“Um. Nothing, I guess,” Tommy answered.

“Can you join me? I want to take you to the library and show you some of my secrets there,” he said. Tommy swore he winked as he spoke. It made Tommy’s heart leap.

René was talking about the public library, the one behind the Kmart in the middle of town. René had discussed going there with him for months, since they met at the beginning of the semester. It was his sacred space, where he checked out poets like Anne Sexton and Langston Hughes and Christina Rossetti—always someone new—and gave them to Tommy to read. At home, Tommy would dive into each page looking for messages. (Emily Dickinson was the hardest to decipher, but at the same time, strangely the most powerful, like her words were almost supernatural visions.)

“And anyway, I have to return that Anne Sexton book you keep hogging.” (He gave Tommy the poet’s *Love Poems* last week. Tommy had been poring over every word trying to find messages to him: “That was the day of your tongue / your tongue that came from your lips,” she wrote, and Tommy felt himself vibrate.)

“Sure,” Tommy said, trying to sound calm. Inside he was shining with excitement, but he had learned to not be so expressive, ever since his brother made him feel bad about it. (“You’re so . . . expressive,” Charley said when he caught Tommy dancing in his room to the *Xanadu* soundtrack.)

“Great. Well, I better make haste to what they call ‘PE,’” Renaldo said, making air quotes. “We have some sort of incomprehensible

final fitness test we have to complete.”

“I hate PE with all of my being,” Tommy said.

“To my very essence, pure loathing,” René answered, and bounded off. “See you at Ziller’s!”

Ms. Ziller was their favorite teacher. She ran the poetry club and was the literary magazine supervisor. Tommy had spent a lot of time after sixth period in Ms. Ziller’s room this past spring. After winter break, he saw a light purple flyer on the bulletin board saying that Poetry Club was meeting on Thursdays after school. Something about the color alone made him know it was the right place for him.

It was just the three of them every Thursday—René, Tommy, and their friend Dara—and all they did was hang out and work on *The Cornucopia* and read poems or draw. When the door was closed, Ms. Ziller was funny and talkative and like their friend and not their teacher. Dara was the artist—lately obsessed with spiders, which in turn informed René’s writing to include cobwebs and entanglement. Every Thursday, René would show up with a new typed-out poem that Ms. Ziller would quickly mimeograph on thick white paper, and Tommy would hold the wet, buttery paper in his hands and read another perfect work. Then Dara would pull out her charcoal pencils and begin an illustrated reaction to it like they were a jazz duo. Tommy’s friends were so talented.

Tommy had only one poem that he was proud of (but no way would he show it to anyone), called “More Than Friends.”

You look at me
brown endless eyes
As if

You were sharing something
More than enough
A more perfect union
More than friends

He crumpled it up immediately. Then tore it up. Then ripped it into smaller pieces. And then ran downstairs and put it at the bottom of the garbage can in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” his brother, Charley, asked, suddenly behind Tommy, surprising him.

“Nothing!” Tommy answered, trying to sound calm.

Ever since he and Renaldo became friends, Tommy had a vision. Or more like a daydream. He would be in bed still half-asleep after yet another night of wild dreams that made no sense, and like a movie under his eyelids, he would see himself and René, older, maybe even as old as sixty or seventy, in a house by the ocean. Tommy was in the kitchen making something (he had no idea how to cook anything but could in this daydream). He would finish cooking and bring the food out onto the porch, and there would be the ocean, not far away, crashing in relentless shushes, and René in his chair, with a book in his lap. Then Tommy would ask if he wanted some lunch, René would say *yes* and offer to help, and Tommy would say, *No, no, keep reading*. Then, Tommy would come up to him and stroke his long hair and kiss him.

Tommy wanted to do so, badly. But even though his best friend had asked him to come to the library, and summer was starting, he wouldn't dare try to kiss Renaldo Calabasas.

And so, when the bell rang on that last day of school, Tommy

walked through the trash-strewn hall to the back of the building, where Ms. Ziller's room was at the end. The sign posted on the door read:

“All that we see or seem
is but a dream within a dream.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

As if she had known, Ms. Ziller opened the door before he knocked and waved him into the classroom. She was wearing a sunset-orange turtleneck and tight bell-bottom jeans—so completely out of style, they were almost cool again. Behind her, on the walls, were other quotes in bubble letters on the bulletin board from people Tommy had never heard of: “*You write in order to change the world,*” said James Baldwin, and “*Poetry . . . is the liquid voice that can wear through stone,*” by Adrienne Rich.

Tommy slipped into a seat. René was perched on the top of a desk. Dara was leaning back in a chair, wearing her usual powdered white foundation and charcoaled-out eyes, her hair spiked up and standing on end like dynamite had exploded on her face.

“René told me you're going to the library, so I don't want to take up too much of your time,” Ms. Ziller said, opening and closing drawers, rummaging around in five different directions like she often did. “I have something for you guys, since I won't see you till September.”

“Oh, I can't go to the library,” Dara interrupted. “My parents are going out, and I have to babysit my little brothers,” she explained, and Tommy felt bad for feeling thrilled that it would just be him and René.

“Well, here you go,” said Ms. Ziller. She held out three slim

gift-wrapped boxes. Inside each was a pen, heavy and gold, with a removable cap.

“Just a reminder from me to keep writing. All summer.”

“Wow. Thank you, Ms. Ziller,” said Tommy.

“Cool,” said Dara.


“It has a heft to it,” said René, weighing it in his hands.

“For heavy words. And light ones, too,” she said, almost embarrassed by her gift. “I just want you three to keep creating this summer. And be safe.” Tommy watched as tears pricked her eyelashes. She was getting emotional.

“Now go, get out of here!” Ms. Ziller composed herself and pushed the teenagers out the door.

“Have fun. I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Dara said as she walked off in the opposite direction toward her locker. “We can watch this movie I rented.”

Tomorrow they all had plans to hang out at Dara’s. Tommy was already excited. Now he got to be alone with René. And then tomorrow, the hangout.



Tommy and René stepped into the library. It was empty. Just a smattering of old people concentrating on their magazines. A blast of air-conditioning chilled Tommy’s face, and his eyes darted around, trying to spot a bathroom so he could go to a mirror to see if his bad skin, his acne-covered skin, looked okay.

“I’ll be right back!” he said.

He was glad he did—in the bathroom mirror, he saw that two whiteheads had formed on his nose. He popped them immediately. He hated mirrors. He hated his skin. Furtively, he dabbed the

little spots where he was bleeding until they stopped. Someone knocked on the door and he jumped.

“Hold on! Sorry!”

He washed his face and dabbed his skin again and quickly slipped out the door, an annoyed middle-aged woman staring at him like he was in there masturbating. He felt the wetness of his skin in the air and the tiny sting of his pimples.

Tommy found René in the reference section, standing before a giant dictionary set on a wooden podium. It was the biggest dictionary Tommy had ever seen. It smelled like museums.

“Here it is,” Renaldo said, introducing Tommy to it proudly, like it was his souped-up car. The pages were delicate and thin, the words so microscopic you needed a magnifying glass to see them. One dangled from the podium on a string.

“This is how I found *keraunoscopy*,” Renaldo told him.

Renaldo’s spectacular poetry was full of amazing words. He confidently sprinkled them into long, descriptive lines like a chef with herbs. *Caveat, brindled, encomium. The Cornucopia* was basically an excuse to publish Renaldo’s work. And Dara’s accompanying drawings, which were also amazing.

“So, if I ever get blocked or don’t know what to write about, I come here and just close my eyes and find a word, and then *pow!*” He made a head explosion gesture. The sudden movement made Renaldo’s white shirt lift up, and Tommy saw the hair leading down his stomach. “Other times I just walk through the poetry section and pick out books randomly and read a line or a stanza to try and get messages. That’s called poetic divination. James Merrill did it, and so did Sylvia Plath. A lot of the great poets used to do this.”

Tommy watched René glide his hands over the dictionary. He flipped through the book again.

“*Augury!*” he said. “Oh, I know this one. It’s a sign of what will happen in the future, like an omen. It’s a word from the Romans. The Romans loved omens. They even had, like, government-supported psychics called sibyls. But from what I’ve read, the Romans really owe their whole psychic knowledge to the Etruscans. Who were very observant about the planes.”

“Planes? There were airplanes flying around?”

Renaldo laughed and rested his hand on Tommy’s shoulder. Tommy felt electrified by his touch. “Not, like, airplanes. Meaning, like, areas. Planes of reality.”

If he wasn’t obsessing about poets, René was focused on ancient myths and magic. He often talked about spirits and other worlds like he really believed in them.

He pointed to the walls. “This,” he said, pounding the floor with his fist. “This, the earth we’re standing on, is just one plane. There are others!” He said this loudly, swerving his arms around.

The librarian looked up from the desk and glared disapprovingly.

René quieted down. “There isn’t just life and death,” he whispered. “The Etruscans, the Romans, the Mesopotamians, the Maya, all these ancient cultures thought that there were other planes—other places where we exist. They had *way* more respect for . . . elsewhere. Our culture, now, doesn’t respect that. Why do we think we are so much more evolved than them?”

René tugged at his hair again and then stared at Tommy with his deep brown eyes.

“Yeah, sure, sure,” Tommy answered with confused enthusiasm. “How do you get there, to this other place? I mean plane.” Maybe in

this other plane, René would actually kiss him. Tommy imagined it looked like one of those special episodes of afternoon soap operas where Sierra, the rich girl, and Locke, the stable boy, finally made love on a gauzy four-poster bed surrounded by a menagerie of lit candles and rose petals sprinkled on the comforter.

“Different cultures say different things,” Renaldo said. Then he grabbed Tommy by the shoulders and placed him in front of the huge tome. “Your turn.”

Tommy closed his eyes, flipped through the book, and moved his finger around the tissue-thin page. He opened his eyes to find his finger on *projection*.

“Cool,” Renaldo said encouragingly. “*Projection*. Like a projection into the astral plane!”

“The astral plane?”

“Oh! That’s what they call the other planes these days. I have to show you this book that I am obsessed with. It’s about traveling to the astral plane and how to do it.”

“Cool,” Tommy said, not fully understanding what René meant.

René stood up, grabbing Tommy’s hand. Tommy hoisted his backpack over his shoulders as they scurried through the tall stacks, down to an area that seemed like no one frequented it. It was in a corner. René crouched in front of a low shelf of books, dusty and undisturbed.

“Here it is,” he said, rummaging through the shelf to find a slim volume. The cover had a swirling illustration that looked like melted stained glass. Tommy saw the title emblazoned in scarlet letters.

THE SACRED ART OF ASTRAL PROJECTION

“I check it out at least once a month. It’s full of history that

you won't learn at Herron," René said, scooching next to Tommy to show him the pages. "There are several different methods to project. Some are super insane, like you swallow two worms in a glass of water. The Druids were all about hanging mistletoe."

"Mistletoe? Like Christmas?"

"Yes! That's what it became. Pagan rituals of sacred passage are turned into watered-down versions in our culture."

"Oh wow, so that's why we have it around at Christmas. Like, it was some ritual before?"

"Yep. And now it's just become an excuse to make out." René laughed.

Tommy wanted so bad to say, *I wish I had some mistletoe right now*, but even just thinking it made him cringe inside. He wasn't sure how Renaldo felt. One slipup, one admission, one mistaken touch, and he could ruin everything.

René handed Tommy the book. "Now you have me obsessing about Druids," he said. "Look through it! I'm going to go find some other stuff. By the time I come back, maybe you can figure out how to astral project, too."

"Wait, you know how to do this?"

"Oh, I'm just practicing. But maybe we can help each other. Master Sebastian can teach us. He wrote the book," René said. "Read about it and maybe you can visit me tonight in our sleep. Ha!"

Renaldo Calabastas jumped up and ran excitedly down the stacks to find yet another pile of books.

I would like nothing more, Tommy thought. He sat on the floor, crossing his legs, and opened the book.

Master Sebastian. Tommy imagined him with long hair, in an

iridescent robe, with a crystal ball in front of him. *The physical body isn't the only body*, Master Sebastian explained in the introduction. Tommy read through the book for a long while. He noticed little notes in René's handwriting. He must have checked out the book a hundred times. There were exclamation points and circles around lines about the "energy body" and how time was a construct. But this was the occult section. Tommy glanced at the other titles on the shelves—about ESP and Bigfoot and space aliens. He didn't believe in those. But he wanted to believe in astral projection simply because René did.

"So, what do you think?" René said, crouching next to Tommy again. His body odor fumed off him, like he had gone through puberty since they were sitting there at the library. Tommy was intoxicated by it.

"It's pretty wild stuff," said Tommy.

"I know. And in every civilization there's always ancients who believe in this. Also that there's a multiverse with different timelines and—"

"Whoa, slow down, I'm still trying to understand what Druids are," Tommy said.

René looked at him and smiled. "Maybe you can come over to my house for dinner tonight? We can practice."

Tommy flushed with excitement. *Was he just asked on a date?*

They biked to René's even though it was uphill and on the other side of town. Tommy followed René through the streets where the houses became older and smaller. They wheeled down the end of a cul-de-sac called Imperial Court, right off Marquis Street. The cul-de-sac dropped downhill, and René's house was low and red, emerging from a deep wooded slope behind it.

Tommy walked up to the front door. To the left was a big bay window that looked into the family TV room, and beyond it, the kitchen. Tommy saw René's parents and younger brother there, in the kitchen, all talking in Spanish. Tommy had no idea what they were saying. His father was bent over a boiling pot, in an apron, stirring and tasting what was in it, and his mother, wearing a flower-printed sundress, her long black hair tied up loosely in a bun, was clanking plates onto the kitchen table. They all seemed so connected, like they enjoyed being together. René flopped his bike into the yard, and what sounded like a dozen dogs started barking.

"Cállate!" he heard René's mother say. The door opened and she stood there, two yapping dogs jumping behind her, René's younger brother peeking from behind her skirt. "Callate! Callate!"

Tommy had almost forgotten that René's family was from Argentina, which René had told him several months ago. Tommy had run home and looked in the encyclopedia to read about it.

René's mother turned and commanded the boy to grab the dogs and pull them away. "You must be Tommy," she said, opening her arms, kissing him on the cheek.

René's father peeked around the entrance to the kitchen, with a wooden spoon in his hand. "Tommy! We have heard much about you."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Calabasas," Tommy said politely.

Stepping inside, he smelled the air, rich with fried dough and vegetables and warmth. The dogs jumped on Tommy's legs and then, satisfied, ran off. René bent over a pot that his dad was stirring on the stove. He looked more juvenile. Being in his home made him seem like less of a demigod and more of a teenager.

René led Tommy around the house. It was covered with books and plants. There were charcoal drawings hanging in the foyer hall. Nudes of a woman.

“Those are my mom’s self-portraits,” René said, as if it wasn’t at all scandalous that Tommy was seeing his mom naked. He understood then why René was so comfortable talking about nudity.

The dinner was delicious. Beef empanadas and then flan for dessert. René’s parents asked him questions about his life and his own poetry as if they were genuinely interested. They spoke glowingly about *The Cornucopia* and how René’s poetry was being printed in it. They were so proud.

“And your friend Dara,” René’s mother said, “she’s such a good artist.”

“Yes, she is very talented,” Tommy replied.

Mrs. Calabasas leaned over to Tommy and loudly whispered, “She doesn’t need all that ghost makeup! She is beautiful on her own.”

“Bea,” said her husband playfully, “she is expressing herself. Let her be.”

René’s father tapped the table. “Well, I’m sure you boys have things to do.”

“Right! We have things to create,” said René, who stood and cleared the dishes dutifully. “Tommy and I will clean up and then we can go to my room.”

Tommy was embarrassed, afraid that this was a joke. Why were they so encouraging of them to spend time in René’s bedroom? They must have thought Renaldo would never be interested in boys, much less one like Tommy. Maybe it was because René wasn’t gay. *This can’t be anything*, Tommy thought.

He followed René's lead, helping rinse off plates and stack them in the dishwasher. René's parents settled in the living room, reading. His younger brother played with Hot Wheels cars. The television chattered. No one paid attention while René guided Tommy up to his room.

Stepping into René's room, Tommy felt suddenly immersed in his best friend. In the past he had secretly smelled René—his clothes when he brushed past him, a whoosh of him when he made a passionate point at a Poetry Club meeting. But now those brief breezes of intimacy filled the space like a scented candle.

His bedroom faced the backyard, with a big window looking out to the trees and sloping hill. Tommy felt like he had been here before, in a dream, like this was *déjà vu*.

René began excitedly showing him various things he had collected: poems by H.D. and by Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill.

"He reminds me of you," said René.

"Why?" Tommy asked.

"Oh. Just that he is sensitive to things. And he likes to write about things being . . . entangled." René suddenly grabbed his shoulder.

"Oh, and another thing about Merrill! He loved to use divination to create his words. Like Ouija boards and other channels to other planes."

Renaldo opened a bag of runes, and they tried to make a poem using the letters as a guide. The words were simple: *crow, tree, fire*. Then they tried the Ouija board to talk to spirits, only getting as far as nonsense words: *lolly, oona, pris*.

Renaldo looked up from the pile of runes and the Ouija board.

“You know, nothing we do is going to be as good as that poem you wrote.”

“Mine? What poem?”

“The one about leaving your body.”

“Why? It’s bad.” He knew exactly the poem. It was in the red spiral notebook Tommy carried around full of his bad poetry (much of it about René), in his backpack now.

“No, it’s not. Read it! I know you have it in your notebook,” René said, nodding to Tommy’s trusty backpack.

“I can’t.”

“Come on, poetry is meant to be read out loud,” Renaldo goaded. “You know what? I’ll read it.” René grabbed Tommy’s backpack and pulled out the notebook. Tommy lunged for it.

“Okay, okay! I’ll read it,” Tommy said, snatching it back and flipping quickly through the pages, careful to not show his other poems. Tommy cleared his throat.

We are just energy, just fizz.

We are far away, not hers, not his.

We meet and intertwine, not yours, not mine.

René looked at him and smiled proudly. “So good. It’s like you are expressing how much we aren’t locked into our bodies. How we aren’t even a man or woman . . .” René stared at him. “Wow, I have never noticed how blue your eyes are,” he said to Tommy. Tommy’s stomach lurched.

Then René turned out the lights.

“Wait for a second,” he said. “Close your eyes.” And Tommy complied, sitting there and burning with anticipation. Tommy

heard the thrums of guitar and keyboard. Pink Floyd.

“Keep your eyes closed and concentrate on the sound,” René instructed. “I heard that they put secret messages in the music. Maybe we can detect them. Your psychic perceptions are more sensitive if the lights are off,” he said.

Tommy sat there, confused. They were in René’s room and it was dark and they were sitting next to each other, but they were listening to Pink Floyd. If it was the Smiths, that would be more of a signal that Renaldo *liked* him, because he heard that the lead singer was bisexual. But Pink Floyd? The scary burnouts who smoked in the back of the school wore Pink Floyd T-shirts. They didn’t seem gay. What kind of signal was that?

He tried to imagine René’s energy, as he had done countless times in his bed alone. But this time René was right there next to him. He was afraid that something would happen down there in his pants, and then he would be caught with proof of what he was feeling. The song continued. A bunch of noodling guitars. He didn’t dare reach across the darkness to touch René.

They sat there for what seemed like ages. The record ended, and Tommy looked at the clock. It was 9:00 p.m., and he needed to go home or he would get in trouble.

“I have to go,” he said, more abruptly than he wanted to sound. He rose and grabbed his bag.

“Okay. Well, we can try to astral project tonight. And then talk about it when we go to Dara’s house,” René said.

Tommy smiled and settled down. This wasn’t his only chance with René. He had the whole summer, and a hangout at Dara’s was the perfect next step.

He made it home that night dizzy with feelings. Before he

walked in the door, he parked his bike and lay on the front lawn. Nestled there in the groomed grass, looking into the sky as it darkened to a deeper blue, he felt his body expand with what he could only call promise. Maybe this was how poets felt.

He sat up, went inside, and greeted his mother. She was cleaning the dishes, an empty Stouffer's frozen pizza box on the kitchen table.

"How was your friend's?" she asked.

"Fine," he said, and then hesitating, "Can I go to Dara's tomorrow afternoon? We have a . . . a Poetry Club scrimmage."

Tommy knew that his parents would disapprove of him going over to Dara's house, a *girl's* house, even if he wasn't the least bit interested. It was easier to pretend that poetry had scrimmages—that thing his brother, Charley, was always having to go to for his dumb soccer games.

"But why? The school year's ended," his mother asked.

"Poetry Club scrimmages run all summer," Tommy lied, and then, before she could ask too many more questions, he darted up the stairs.

After Tommy brushed his teeth, he sat on his bed and thought about what René had said about seeing him tonight. Tommy closed his eyes. He tried to remember what he read in the library from *The Sacred Art of Astral Projection*. That there was a technique for taking the first step to the astral plane.

Imagine spots on a path out the door, and in your mind, put valuable objects there. They are your talismans.

Tommy decided he would place his old *Star Wars* action figures in each corner.

He mentally placed his Luke by the door, Obi-Wan in the

hall, and Princess Leia by the stairs. She was his favorite. He had learned at a very young age that boys couldn't play with dolls, so she was the closest he could get. They were all worn down, scuffed up, cherished and chipped away by a younger version of himself. When he was younger, he remembered playing with a doll and it being ripped out of his hands. But it was blurred like a lot of his childhood memories. It all seemed so long ago.

Master Sebastian said that to begin astral projecting, you had to think about someone you cared about (that was easy) and focus on that person. Tommy lay in his bed, ready to travel to Renaldo and go somewhere free of containment. Somewhere they could actually kiss, far away from any judging eyes or danger. He felt himself drifting off.



Tommy jolted awake in his bed. His alarm jangled with that horrible Top 40 pop hit “We Built This City” by Starship. He lay there in bed feeling the reality of his life solidify out of the fog of sleep. He was Tommy Gaye, he had just finished ninth grade, and it was 1986.

He tried to remember his dreams. They were like they always were: absurd and hard to describe. Vibrant, intense, weird—full of strange creatures, flying whales, snake-horses, talking thumbs, hair that became gooey slime that became edible. They were always like this.

But then, suddenly, he remembered one part of his dream last night that almost made sense. He dreamed he was on a large, flat expanse, like the high-school football field but even bigger.

He felt like he was in a balloon, floating, descending through

clouds, the air growing opaque until he landed like a feather. Then, he woke up.

That evening, while it was still light outside, Tommy biked to the Bauras' house. He told his mother it was much closer than it really was. Dara lived on the same side of town as René, the side with all the older, shabbier houses. He parked his bike and walked up to the cracked cement porch.

Dara opened the door as he walked up. She was wearing less makeup than usual but was still dressed somberly, in a long black coat with a black shirt under it. She motioned to him to follow her downstairs to the recreation room.

Her younger brothers were in there, loudly pelting each other with bean bags from the Toss Across game.

"Quiet! Out!" Dara said firmly. Tommy was impressed at how obediently and quickly they left.

"Look what I got," she said, and pulled out a bowl of cheddar-cheese-covered popcorn. "It's gourmet. My parents brought it back from one of the fifty thousand events they go to."

She pointed to a huge recliner and ordered Tommy to sit in it.

"Where's Renaldo?"

"He called before you got here. He says he is busy tonight. Working on some new poem about some supernatural hogwash," she said.

Tommy tried really hard not to look disappointed.

"Anyway, I am so psyched to show you this movie," Dara said, pulling out a VHS tape. "It's, like, going to change your life."

She pushed the plastic rectangle into the machine. Tommy heard a *ka-chunk* and a whir.

"It's gonna take a while to register," said Dara. He still couldn't

believe movies could be contained on these things.

As they waited, Dara looked at Tommy.

“So . . . what did you do with René?” she asked, surprising him. The phrasing made Tommy feel unstable. There were so many ways for him to answer that. He really wanted, desperately, to talk about René and how he felt about him and ask Dara everything, but he couldn’t. This might be a trap.

So he tried to sound casual. “We just went to the library. Then I went over to his house, and we listened to Pink Floyd in the dark.”

“Ew, Pink Floyd?” Dara said to him. “That’s, like, so . . . classic rock! Like something my uncle listens to. Is Renaldo secretly, like, in his thirties or something?”

Tommy laughed. “I think he thought it may be a way for us to travel to the astral plane or something?”

“Oh, gag me, is he going off about that crazy book again? *Master Sebastian!* He talked all about it last fall. He’s obsessed.”

Tommy couldn’t hold back any longer. “I know. He won’t stop talking about it.”

Dara brushed popcorn off her long black skirt. “Renaldo is the most talented person I know . . . but he is also a little—”

“A little what?” Tommy interrupted, and then immediately regretted sounding so eager.

“Like he is on another planet sometimes. Just a little fragile,” she said. She busied herself with her bangs, twisted them into dark spikes like icicles on her forehead. “I worry that he gets too deep into all that occult stuff. Like it’s making him, like, overly focus on stuff. He can get a little *too* invested sometimes,” she said carefully. “Last fall before we met you? He was so obsessed with the concept of time, he didn’t sleep, and then he got sick. He was

out for a week. Just be careful with him.”

Tommy felt his face burn.

The movie came on. It was called *The Hunger*, and starred Catherine Deneuve and David Bowie as vampires seducing people, and Susan Sarandon as their next victim. Halfway through, there was a scene where Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve started making out, two women touching each other. Tommy couldn't believe that something like this was in a movie. He and Dara remained silent. He looked behind him to make sure Dara's brothers weren't coming down the stairs.

They kept watching the movie. It was sensual and soft focused and scary. New York City seemed so dangerous and seductive. And David Bowie was . . . beautiful.

“Bowie is so beautiful,” Dara said, as if on cue.

Tommy didn't dare agree.

Soon he found himself dozing off, and when he woke up, the TV was blaring a Lollipop Crunch commercial. Dara was in the chair next to him curled into a fetal position, sleeping peacefully.

He had to get back home. He promised his mom he'd be there by 9:00 p.m., and it was 8:30. Tommy didn't want to wake Dara, so he left her a note and quietly walked upstairs and out the door.

When he got home, he could hear his mother arguing on the phone with his father.

“I understand, Walter. It's fine. But we are going to see my sister. And you are coming. Have a great night at . . . work.”

She hung up the phone angrily. Tommy heard her sigh. He pretended to have just walked in.


“You're back!” she said, with rehearsed brightness. “How was your poetry scrimmage?”

“Fine!” he said cheerily.

He ran up to his room and shut the door. He wanted to call René but thought he would just write another poem about him instead. But right before he put pen to paper, his mother knocked on the door, making him jump out of bed. She walked into his room and told him to think about packing tonight. With Tommy’s father working so much, she had put her foot down and insisted they all needed a family vacation. In two days, they would be driving ten-plus hours to Ohio to visit his aunt Susan. For almost three months.

He didn’t even get to say goodbye to Dara or René. He called their houses, but there was no answer. He left a message on the Bauras’ and Calabasases’ answering machines, letting them know he would be gone until the end of August. His dreams of a summer riding bikes with René and maybe possibly holding hands with René would have to wait.

And wait. And wait.



He bought *The Hunger* soundtrack and listened to it on his Walkman constantly, writing more poems about René, trying as hard as he could to pour himself into concealed objects like flowers and branches.

When he got to Ohio, Tommy wanted to call René and check up on him but couldn’t because that would be a long-distance call, and his parents would be angry at him for spending the money on his aunt’s phone. He wondered if René was maybe reaching out to him. He wished for a signal or a sign and looked for it in everything: the weather, the color of a car passing by, even what

the next commercial on TV might announce.

The weeks seemed like they spanned decades. Tommy played with his cousins and cleared dishes and slept with his snoring brother on couches in Uncle Ross's office den, surrounded by stamp collections and old books about maritime history. There was not one book of poetry in the entire house. Tommy would lie there and think about René, and worry about him, and fantasize about saving him, and he would, night after night, turn to a vision of them on a porch, the ocean roaring in the distance, René reading, Tommy kissing his head.

The days moved on and on in monotony: breakfast, pool, dinner, Charley's snores, only broken up by his florid, bizarre dreams of flying absurdities and looming figures.

August rolled on. Tommy felt the air begin to thin and saw the yellowed edges of tree leaves begin to appear. Finally, during his last week there, his aunt took him to the library in town, because it was next to her dry cleaner.

"We don't have much time!" she said from the chugging car.

Tommy ran into it, rushing to the poetry section. Hoping for a sign or signal, he thought he would attempt that "poetic divination" that René had talked about. Quickly he looked for his divine message, reached out for a book, opened it, and pointed at a line:

*Divulging it would rest my Heart
But it would ravage theirs—*

Emily Dickinson, once again, freaking him out. He chose again. Anna Akhmatova, who René had mentioned before. The book was worn down and old. He closed his eyes and pointed.

*Because it is unbearably painful
For the soul to Love silently.*

He let out a sigh trapped inside him for weeks.
He chose again, Stanley Kunitz:

*The universe expanding, thinning out,
Our worlds flying, oh flying, fast apart.*

He hated that message, and grabbed a thick tome to his left above him. He opened it, closed his eyes, trying his best to feel like he had powers of premonition, and pointed his finger to a page. William Blake, one of René's favorites:

*O ROSE, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,*

*Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret Love
Does thy Life destroy.*

"Tommy!" someone screeched.

As if he had been caught by police, he furtively shoved the book back onto the shelf. His aunt walked up. "Tommy, I've been honking outside. We have to go!"

"Simultaneously heart-pounding and hilarious!"

—Kerri Maniscalco, #1 *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Stalking Jack the Ripper* and *Kingdom of the Wicked*



AVAILABLE NOW

Chapter 1

Arthur Pendragon was drunk. Enormously, blissfully drunk. He slouched down in the booth of the Crooked Spire, enjoying the gentle way the tavern had begun to spin.

Everything about the place fascinated him: The arched stone ceiling that gave the impression of an underground cellar. The iron chains that served as handrails to the back staircase. The fat purple candles that dripped wax indiscriminately over floor and table. And then there was that odd sword in the courtyard. If the rumors were true, the last knight who'd attempted to pull it free had strained so hard that he'd actually soiled himself.

Arthur would have laughed if he'd been there to see it. But then, he hadn't seen much of anything lately. Tonight, however, he was free of the castle's oppressive gloom, if only for a few hours. And he intended to savor his freedom.

He drained his mug of ale and glanced across the table, where his friend was fiddling with a deck of cards. Lancelot shuffled them with a practiced snap, sifting them into a bridge. He did it a second time, and then a third.

"Please tell me you're going to do a magic trick." Arthur smirked, and Lance shot him a look.

"I was *going* to make the ale disappear," Lance retorted, "but you already did that yourself."

"Well, we *are* in a tavern."

"Stop looking so pleased with yourself. *I'm* the one who snuck us out."

That part was true: Lance had conjured some absurd excuse that sent Arthur's guards back to quarters, tossed him a shabby cloak, and announced they were going for a drink. It was bold and reckless, but it had worked.

And for that, Arthur was immensely grateful. He hadn't realized how badly he needed to be somewhere else until they were hurrying through the maze of London streets, the night thick with the promise that they could spend it as they pleased.

"I guess I owe you one," he said.

"You owe me six hundred and twenty-three," said Lance, "but who's counting?"

Arthur reached for his ale, finding his mug empty. He glanced hopefully toward the bar. "Another round?"

"Bad idea."

"Terrible," Arthur agreed.

"But how will we learn from our mistakes if we don't make any?" Lance's eyes danced with mischief as he climbed to his feet.

"My thoughts exactly." Arthur offered up some pennies, but Lance waved them off, scooping some petty coins from his vast pile of winnings and sauntering over to the bar.

Lance had left the cards faceup on the table, and the King of Cups stared back at Arthur, bearing more than a passing resemblance to his father. He sighed and pushed the cards away. Of course the great Uther Pendragon would commission his likeness on something so trivial. The king wasn't even the highest card in the deck. And worse, there were *four* of them. Arthur would have laughed, if it wasn't so depressing.

He glanced toward the bar, where Lance was leaning forward, a flirtatious smile on his lips, turning his charms on the barmaid. The girl blushed from the attention, and Arthur snorted, knowing Lance would just as happily flirt with the barkeep, or, probably, the barstool.

It was nights like this he wished he could make a girl smile and laugh, and know it was for real. These days, too much of his father's court treated him like a prize to be won, or a piece of clay they intended to mold. He

wasn't sure he'd ever get used to it. Especially when, for most of his life, they couldn't dismiss him fast enough.

It was the end of September, and he was supposed to be at university, dividing his time between the library, the laboratory, and whatever dark watering hole everyone crammed into, just another scholar in the crowd. But that dream was long gone, replaced by a future that was never supposed to be his.

He tried to put it out of mind as Lance sauntered back to the table with two frothing mugs of ale, sending one in his direction with a practiced slide.

"These ones aren't stale," Lance bragged, nodding his chin in the direction of the barmaid. "I think she likes me."

"She likes your purse," Arthur said. "Anyone can see you've won half my coin."

"Consider it charity." Lance swallowed a mouthful of ale. "Guard's pay is a joke." He paused, calculating. "Hold on, was that only half?"

Arthur shrugged, pushing the cards the rest of the way across the table. In truth, Lance had almost cleaned him out, but he wasn't about to admit defeat. He just needed to bluff a hand or two, let his friend get cocky, and wait for his moment. Or else get so drunk that he didn't mind staggering home with an empty purse. Honestly, both were solid options.

Lance gave the deck an elaborate shuffle and started to deal, just as the bells over the door jingled. A blast of cool night air rushed into the tavern—along with a ruffled, nervous squire whom Arthur recognized immediately.

"Everyone, come quick!" the squire urged. "Sir Kay is about to pull the sword from the stone!"

Arthur stiffened. This was bad—very bad. He shot a panicked look across at Lance, who'd slid low in his seat, his hood shadowing his face. Arthur did the same, just as a stout man at the bar let out a booming laugh.

“Sure he is,” said the man. “Just like the sop last night, and the night before that.”

Suddenly half the tavern was laughing, and the other half shouting insults.

The squire blanched. And then he held up a heavy purse that clearly belonged to his master. “S-see for yourselves,” he stuttered. “For those who b-bear witness, the next round is on S-Sir Kay.”

“Why didn’t ye say that in the first place?” someone called.

The tavern emptied in an instant, its patrons stampeding eagerly toward the door. Arthur slid lower in his seat, but no one paid his table any attention. Games of cards and dice sat abandoned, the tavern empty of all but Arthur and Lance, and one old drunkard snoring contentedly by the hearth.

“*Sard.*” Arthur groaned. “It had to be Sir Kay.”

The knight was Lance’s uncle, and would enjoy nothing more than dragging the two of them back to the castle and throwing Lance under the horse for their unsanctioned adventure.

“I’m dead,” Lance murmured, rubbing a hand over his face. “Speak kindly at my funeral.”

“There’s still a chance he won’t spot us,” said Arthur. “Come on. We’ll slip through the crowd. Just keep your head down.”

“It’s not *my* head I’m worried about,” Lance grumbled.

Arthur adjusted his hood. His cloak was old and far too short for him, revealing boots of polished calfskin. Even worse was Lance’s sword, the unmistakable blade of the royal guard, which he’d refused to leave behind.

Sloppy. They wouldn’t make the same mistake next time, if there even *was* a next time.

Arthur yanked open the door, and his last scrap of confidence fell away.

The courtyard was packed. Sir Kay had obviously sent his squire to the cathedral first, gathering a sizable audience there. It was impossible to push

past the steps of the tavern, much less through the tightly pressed crowd.

They were stuck.

Lance swore under his breath.

“At least we’ll get to watch,” Arthur whispered, trying to make the best of it. They had a decent view, and no one would spot them all the way back here.

“I guess.” Lance bit his lip as he surveyed the crowd.

“Maybe he’ll shit his armor.” Arthur was mostly joking, but Lance brightened considerably at the suggestion.

The crowd, growing thicker by the moment, buzzed with whispers, and coins changed hands as hasty bets were placed. The well-heeled churchgoers huddled together, shooting apprehensive looks at the unsavory tavern folk who had joined them, most with drinks still in hand.

And at the front stood Sir Kay, with his fair skin, ice-blue eyes, and pointed beard the same honeyed color as Lance’s curls. The knight’s crimson cloak flowed behind him, and his armor, although dusty, was gold-plated—designed for tournaments rather than combat. The young, fumbling squire saw to his master’s horse and equipment. From the amount of it, Arthur surmised that Sir Kay had ridden directly from the tournament in Camelard. Where no doubt he had triumphed again in the joust.

Sir Kay preened, motioning for cheers from those pressed against the gate, and then the onlookers in the alley, letting the excitement build.

If they had any chance of sneaking away, this was it. Lance jerked his chin toward the alley, and Arthur nodded grimly. They shoved into the crowd, keeping their hoods low. They just needed to get to the gate, and then they could make for the Strand.

Deeper in the crowd, a man bellowed for more beer, waving an empty flagon in the air.

“Comin’ through!” a barmaid shrieked, shoving past Arthur with a pitcher filled to the brim.

She slammed into him—hard. Beer slopped down the front of his cloak, and he tented his soaking tunic with a grimace. She must have spilled half the pitcher.

“Don’t stop,” Lance urged, his expression tense. He kept a hand on his sword as he wrenched his way between two thick-necked dockworkers.

Arthur followed, beer dripping onto his boots. Coming to this tavern had been their worst idea in a long time. And that was saying something.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the barmaid accused.

With every step and push, the crowd protested and glared. And then Lance stopped short, and Arthur bumped into him. They were stuck.

“You! In the cloak! You better pay for that,” the barmaid snapped, laying a rough hand on his shoulder.

Arthur whirled around in disbelief. “You’re the one who spilled on *me*,” he accused.

He expected at least a mumbled apology, but none came. Instead, she shot him a fierce glare. And then her eyes went wide.

“No, please—” Arthur begged, but it was too late.

“I didn’t r-recognize you,” she stammered, and he held his breath, as though that would prevent her from ruining everything. “Your R-Royal Highness.”

Goddamn it, Arthur thought. *This evening was just determined to go terribly.*

The barmaid sunk into a panicked curtsy, and Lance shot Arthur a horrified look. This was the *opposite* of sneaking away quietly.

“Get up,” Arthur whispered urgently. “It’s all right.”

It wasn’t all right. Already, a ripple was going through the courtyard, and heads were turning in their direction.

“My friends, what distracts you?” Sir Kay boomed.

“It’s the sardin’ prince of Camelot,” someone called, making the churchgoers gasp at both the news and at such a coarse swear.

Arthur wanted to disappear. But that wasn’t happening, so damage

control would have to do. He painted on a smile and pushed back his hood.

“Your Highness,” said Sir Kay, with a small bow in Arthur’s direction. “Lance,” he added, barely hiding his disappointment. “I didn’t realize you’d been at church.”

Lance grimaced, but Arthur’s shoulders stiffened at the barb.

If Sir Kay wanted a verbal sparring match, then so be it. Lance wasn’t getting in trouble for this. Not if he could help it. So Arthur lifted his chin, squared his shoulders, and tried to summon a semblance of his father’s stern command.

“And I didn’t realize you wished to be High King of England,” Arthur returned.

The knight’s smile faltered. “You misunderstand me, Your Highness,” said Sir Kay. “I aim only to prove a point.”

“That winning is your greatest ambition?” Arthur suggested, earning some snickers from the crowd.

“That it’s impossible for *any* man to pull this sword from the stone,” said Sir Kay.

“So you’ve assembled us here to watch you fail?” Arthur asked with a frown.

“I—well—no,” said Sir Kay.

“I see,” said Arthur, surprised he’d managed to gain the upper hand. “By all means, continue.”

No one was cheering now. Still, Sir Kay stepped forward, dramatically wrapping both hands around the hilt of the sword.

The courtyard was silent as Sir Kay pulled. And pulled. Sweat dripped from his brow, and he groaned from the effort. But the sword didn’t budge.

Of course not, Arthur thought. *It takes more than brute strength to overpower magic.*

Sir Kay let go, and a disappointed murmur rang out.

“Knew he couldn’t do it,” someone complained.

“As I said, impossible,” the knight repeated, trying to save face. It was obvious he’d believed he would succeed.

“What a waste!” someone called.

“Oi! Make the prince try!” someone else yelled.

Arthur stiffened.

“Let’s see *him* pull the sword from the stone!”

More people shouted in agreement.

“Well, Your Highness?” Sir Kay challenged.

Arthur desperately wanted to refuse. But of course he couldn’t. Because this was what it meant, being heir to the kingdom. He was supposed to lead the people. To listen to them. And they were calling for him to pull the sword from the stone.

“Why not?” he said with a shrug, as though he hadn’t just agreed to humiliate himself.

He could feel the press of everyone’s stares as he made his way through the churchyard. They weren’t stares of encouragement. He was the boy who would be king, and it was clear on their faces: they didn’t want him.

But he already knew that. He’d spent his whole life as the embarrassment of the realm: King Uther and Queen Igraine’s bastard son. Even though he wasn’t, technically, a bastard. Born five months after his parents’ wedding, he was merely a scandal. And there was no law against putting a scandal on the throne.

Still, the courtiers had whispered. And King Uther had hastily made it clear that, although firstborn, Arthur would be raised as a spare. When the queen produced a rightful heir, the Royal House of Pendragon would have its crown prince. Except their next two children were stillborn. Then there was a daughter so weak that she had lived only a few hours. The queen had grown frail, but still Uther held out hope. A few months ago, it had seemed a grand celebration was in order. But neither mother nor child had survived the birth. Which meant Arthur was, well, *it*.

The funeral was barely finished before Arthur was summoned before his father's advisors, who declared him utterly lacking. He was, they accused, deficient in every subject that a royal heir of eighteen should have long since mastered. No matter that his French was fluent, his Latin excellent, and his knowledge of medicinal herbs first-rate. He knew nothing of hunting, hawking, or combat. And even more troubling, he preferred the company of Sir Ector's bastard, Lancelot, a lad so questionable that his own uncle had refused to take him on as squire.

And now he was going to embarrass himself over a magic sword. Perfect.

He stumbled a little, unsteady from the drink, but his gaze stayed fixed on the sword. It was buried to the hilt in a block of stone, just like in the stories. If he squinted, he could make out the engraving: *Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone is rightwise king born of all England.*

Fair chance. He wasn't even rightwise prince born of Camelot.

The crowd was keen for his defeat, and Sir Kay was eager for Arthur's failure to eclipse his own.

He could sense everyone's scorn bubbling up around him. They didn't think he could do it. They just wanted to have a laugh at his expense. He was never going to be enough. For his father, or for Camelot.

"Get on with it!" someone shouted.

Arthur closed his hands around the sword's cool iron hilt, feeling foolish. *Here goes nothing*, he thought, as he squared his shoulders and pulled.

The sword came loose as easily as if it had been resting in a well-oiled sheath.

He stumbled backward in surprise, gripping the blade in both hands.

The crowd stood frozen and silent, their eyes wide with shock. For a long, shuddering moment, no one reacted. And then a tremendous cheer rippled through the courtyard, and the alleyway beyond.

He'd done it! He'd pulled the sword from the stone! But—but how? His head spun, and he realized belatedly that Sir Kay wasn't cheering.

“You all saw that I loosened it,” the knight claimed. “It’s only fair that we try again.”

Before Arthur could protest, Sir Kay had fitted the sword back into the stone, his smile wide. The knight eagerly clasped his hands around the hilt and pulled. And pulled again, harder this time, grunting loudly from the effort.

But the sword stuck fast once again.

Sir Kay finally stepped away, bidding Arthur try with a mocking sweep of his hand.

The courtyard fell silent. No one dared to jeer after what they had just seen: the king’s bastard, all of eighteen, skinny and bookish and so drunk he could barely stand, had pulled the sword from the stone like it was nothing. While the famous Sir Kay, tournament champion, had failed—twice.

Arthur’s heart hammered, and he wondered if he really *could* do it again. The whole thing felt like a dream—surreal and dizzying—or maybe that was the pitcher of ale he’d downed.

He once again stepped up to the sword, grasping it with a single fist. This time, when he pulled it free, he didn’t stumble. Instead, he held the gleaming blade high.

The crowd went to their knees.

Here was their one true king, a leader who would unite the Britons, the king to defeat all kings.

“Hail, Prince Arthur! Rightwise King of England!” someone cried.

Arthur grimaced. He didn’t want to be King of England—to be honest, he didn’t even want to be King of Camelot. And he certainly didn’t want any of this.

All he’d wanted was to slip away from the castle for one night. To kick back and down a few drinks with a friend, shedding his troubles and his responsibilities—not gaining *more* of them.

But it was too late. The crowd took up the cheer, and as Arthur surveyed them, he felt sick.

He'd set something in motion, something he didn't know how to take back. He looked for Lance, expecting to find him leaning against the side of the tavern with a smirk, but his friend had taken a knee along with the rest of the courtyard.

Arthur stared out at the sea of bowed heads and deferential faces, at the people who, for the first time, truly wanted him as their leader, and his stomach heaved with alarming force.

Oh no, he thought, as he turned and vomited all over Sir Kay's gleaming armor.

Chapter 2

Everything was going to be fine.

Emry Merlin staggered out the back door of the theater and gulped down the warm summer air. It wasn't much cooler outside than backstage, but at least it didn't stink of unwashed armpits. She hunched forward, hands on her knees, willing her heart to stop pounding.

There was no reason to be nervous. She'd filled in for a missing player plenty of times before. Besides, Pell's was a small part. A few lines, a skirmish of swords, a quick death halfway through the first act. And it was only the town theater—it wasn't as though they were performing for their patron, the Earl of Brocelande, at his manor.

And yet, it *was* dangerous. There was nothing wrong with employing a girl to help with the special effects—so long as Emry stayed backstage. But the theater troupe would be in trouble if anyone discovered she was also their understudy.

At eighteen, she was tall and skinny enough to play a boy's part, provided she flattened her chest and tucked her long black hair under a cap. Thankfully, most people assumed it was her twin brother onstage, a mistake Emmett was all too willing to encourage—especially when the mistaken party was a pretty girl.

A bead of sweat ran down her temple, and Emry wiped it away with the back of her hand. It was a scorching afternoon in June, and any sensible person would be indoors, wearing as few layers of clothing as possible.

Unfortunately, Emry wasn't sensible.

“Smart as spades, but foolish as hearts,” her father used to say. When-

ever he'd turn up, which wasn't often, he'd give Emry a pretty ribbon for her hair and take Emmett out to the woods to learn magic. Emry found this arrangement enormously unfair, and campaigned to be included.

When Father refused, Emry made her twin teach her everything he'd learned. The next time their father had shown up, Emry had tucked her hair under a cap and switched places with her brother. Their father quickly realized he had the wrong twin, because Emry learned twice as fast.

She was included in the lessons from then on, although Father never failed to remind her that she was learning things she could never use, which was both impractical and foolish.

Emry didn't care. She just wanted a chance to prove herself before being told no. She couldn't help being a girl any more than she could help having magic, but she'd be damned if she sat home with a box of hair ribbons, letting boys have all the adventures.

It was the same with the theater. At sixteen, she'd bullied the property master into letting her handle their special effects. Flammable powders and pig's blood were expensive, messy, and no longer necessary. Not if he hired her to conjure illusions of fire and blood. Even better, illusions wouldn't need to be scrubbed out of the costumes between performances. Marion, the dresser, had insisted her father hire Emry immediately, and the two girls had become fast friends. When one of the players was struck ill, it was Marion who had pointed out that Emry would fit into his costume, and Emry who had promptly lowered her voice and reeled off his dialogue with a devilish grin.

Screw being sensible, Emry thought. *Being trouble is so much more fun.*

Still, she could have done without Pell's coat, which was not only far too warm, but stunk of flop sweat.

That, at least, was something she could fix.

Emry closed her eyes and focused. Rosemary, she decided. With a

hint of lemon. She didn't have her wand, but no matter. She pictured the wretched coat, mentally issuing the command that would fix it: *Exstergio*.

Emry gave the coat a tentative sniff. Much better. Everything was very nearly perfect—except for the play itself, which stunk even worse than the backstage.

Ronda and the Elf King. It was supposed to be a comedy, but really, the whole thing was a tragedy. Perhaps one day the troupe would have license to perform in the city, where the latest playwrights supplied better fare. But until then, the earl demanded comedy, and so long as he footed the bill, comedy he would get.

She muttered Pell's lines, which didn't take long, and walked through the choreography for the sword fight. She was going over the lines again when a royal messenger rode up the lane.

Knights and their squires passed through Brocelande more and more these days, and a messenger was nothing *too* out of the ordinary. The town was half a day's ride from London, with a bustling market and a farrier who knew his way around a horseshoe.

The king's messenger was sunburnt and dusty, and his horse was lathered with sweat, but his crimson livery blazed in the hot sun. The golden wyvern on his chest shone so brightly that it had to be made from the precious metal itself.

Emry stared down at her own costume, threadbare with a sloppy yellow stencil of a rising sun. It would look impressive enough onstage. The theater held its own sort of magic, which was, perhaps, why she was so drawn to it.

She glanced back at the royal messenger, expecting him to urge his horse down the hill to the inn, or up the lane to Brocelande Hall. Instead, he slowed outside the bakery, leaning down to ask a question of the baker's boy. With only a moment's hesitation, the boy pointed a plump and sticky

finger toward the theater—no, not toward the theater, toward *Emry*.

Well, this isn't good.

She pulled the brim of her cap low across her face, trying to quell her nerves as the royal messenger approached.

“Afternoon, good sir,” he called, sliding down from his horse.

Emry inclined her head in response.

“I’m looking for Master Merlin,” said the messenger.

“My father?” Emry frowned. “You’re about eight years too late.”

Seven years, ten months, and three days, actually. Father had left exactly as he always did, slipping away in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye. Except he’d never returned. Not to Brocelande, or to Castle Camelot, or to anywhere else.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m looking for his son.” The messenger removed a scroll from his belt and held it toward Emry. “Master *Emmett* Merlin, His Majesty King Uther Pendragon of Camelot requires your presence at court.”

Oh no.

Emry stared at the scroll, trying not to panic. The messenger thought she was her brother! And she didn’t dare confess the truth now. Not while she stood outside the theater in a *costume*, for god’s sake. She couldn’t betray the performance troupe, especially to an agent of the king.

With a trembling hand, Emry reached out and accepted the parchment, bowing deeply. “Thank you, sir,” she murmured, pitching her voice low. “It’s an honor to receive a summons from the king.”

“His Majesty will expect you two days hence.” The messenger wheeled his horse around and clattered across the courtyard before Emry could say another word.



“Why would a royal messenger give this to *you*?” Emmett asked, frowning suspiciously at the scroll.

He was sprawled at the kitchen table, boots up, jerkin loose, and a goblet of wine at his elbow. With his fair skin, black hair, and pirate’s grin, he was devastatingly handsome, and what’s worse, he knew it.

“He got mixed up,” said Emry, taking down some bowls for their supper. “I was at the theater, and I didn’t look particularly, well, *ladylike*.”

“One day you’ll get in trouble for that.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Emry sighed, ladling out their stew. She passed a bowl to Gran, who was knitting by the hearth, and set theirs on the table.

“King Yurien invaded Northumbria again,” Emmett said, draining his wine goblet. “Bet you didn’t know that. Overheard it at the Prancing Stag.”

“What were you doing at the Prancing Stag?” Like she even needed to ask.

“Kissing the innkeeper’s daughters and betting at merils,” Emmett said innocently. “The usual.”

Emry shook her head. Not over her brother’s rakish ways, which she’d accepted long ago, but over the news about King Yurien. “Northumbria’s pretty far away,” she said.

“It’s not *that* far,” Emmett insisted. “And it’s just as before. He took control of an unfortified castle along their border and burned the neighboring village. If he goes for Cameliard next, they’ll call for Camelot to intervene.”

He swallowed a mouthful of stew and started coughing.

Emry cautiously licked her spoon, making a face.

Not *again*.

“Gran?” she asked. “Did you add salt to the stew?”

“Yes, dear,” Gran murmured dreamily, knitting another stitch into a long grayish thing with a glove on one end and a sock on the other. “The weather *is* very nice.”

“Salt,” Emry insisted. “*How much?*”

“All of it, from the taste,” Emmett muttered, pushing away his bowl. “If you fix the stew, I’ll tell you what King Uther wants.”

“It’s a simple spell,” Emry grumbled, reaching for her wand. “I don’t know why you refuse to learn it.”

“My father was the greatest wizard who ever lived. Why should I bother with basic household spells?”

Because they’re useful, Emry thought, *unlike you.*

She aimed her wand at their supper.

Abdere.

She took a cautious taste. Spicy, which tended to happen when you magicked your meal. But no longer inedible.

“Ha!” Emmett cried triumphantly, flinging the scroll to the floor. “I’m going to be knighted!”

Emry let out a sharp laugh. “I didn’t realize sarding the innkeeper’s daughter counted as a noble deed,” she retorted.

“Well, I’m *practically* going to be knighted,” Emmett amended, shoveling a spoonful of stew into his mouth. “Ugh. Why does magic ruin the flavor of *everything*? Anyway, King Uther wants me to live at the castle and train to be the next court wizard.”

Emry’s spoon clattered into her bowl. She’d imagined a handful of reasons the king had summoned her brother to Castle Camelot, but nothing like *this*.

“That’s—that’s wonderful,” Emry said, wishing she truly meant it.

“It’s about time Father’s legacy came in useful,” Emmett went on. “I bet half the ladies at court will take one look at me and drop to their knees.” He grinned wickedly. “Openmouthed.”

Emry blushed. “Don’t *say* things like that in front of Gran,” she scolded.

Or me, she almost added, even though, between Emmett’s miscreant friends and the theater troupe, she’d heard far worse.

“Well, it’s true.” Emmett shrugged. “Probably. I’ve heard Prince Arthur’s nothing special. And we all know King Uther’s bald as my arse.”

“Keep talking like that, and you’ll find yourself in the castle dungeons,” Emry warned. “Or worse, the gallows.”

“Two days,” Emmett muttered, ignoring her. He scanned the scroll again, making a face. “I should probably brush up on some magic. What’d you do with Father’s books?”

“Next to my bed,” Emry said. “Help yourself.”

Emmett yawned, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe later. The innkeeper’s daughter wore me out.”

Of course she did, thought Emry.

It was all so enormously unfair. *This* was why their father hadn’t wanted to teach her. Why he’d brought her dolls and ribbons and had frowned when she’d mastered spells faster than her brother. He’d known this would happen.

Their father had served at the royal court. When he was alive, kings had trembled in fear of the great kingdom of Camelot, ruled by the powerful Uther Pendragon and protected by the formidable Wizard Merlin. And now Uther wanted to continue that legacy, with Merlin’s son standing alongside his own.

Well, good luck with him.

Emmett drained his second glass of wine and rambled on about his day, but Emry had stopped listening. All she could think was, *Emmett’s going to London, to live in a castle and learn magic. And not because he’s smarter than me, or older, or more talented. Because he’s Merlin’s son, and I’m just his daughter.*



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DARLING

I had a dream about the dark.

Not the night, which has stars and the moon to cast shadows, but an all-consuming dark, one that devoured and twisted and changed a girl into something else, something defiant and monstrous. She scabbled in the abyss with the other women of her house: sisters and mothers and cousins and friends, each of them dwindling away until she was the only one left. When it finally came to pass that she was liberated from that hole, her eyes had learned to live without the light, to love the cool comfort of the shadows. And so she wept in the arms of her liberators, not because she was sad, but because her poor damaged eyes had no idea what to do with sunshine.

I dream of my childhood every night before a battle, which is a lot, considering Pyrlanum has been at this worthless war since before I can remember. Fighting might be a rite of passage, one that feels less triumphant the longer we're in combat, but my dreams are so familiar they've become equal parts comforting and distressing. Lucky me, I learned to make peace with fear long ago.

"Darling, heads up!"

A knife flies past my face, close enough to slice a line across the deep brown skin of my cheek and take a chunk from my ear. A curl that has managed to escape from the twin buns at the nape of my neck falls to the ground. I don't swear at the sudden blossom of

pain, just turn to wait for the next blade, ready to deflect it with one of my long knives.

“Really, Adelaide? This close to a battle?” I say, swallowing a sigh.

Adelaide Seabreak, second scion of House Kraken and my adopted sister, grins at me from across the deck of the *Barbed Tentacle*, flagship of the Kraken navy. The wind whips her long brown hair around her face, and even though her skin is tanned, it is nowhere near as dark a brown as mine. They say that all the members of House Sphinx had skin as brown as the leather of their beloved treatises, but there is no one to verify this. I am the only one left.

“How else am I supposed to make sure you don’t get bogged down in melancholy?” She stands in a ready position, legs shoulder width apart and feet firmly planted on the deck of the ship. In her cursed left hand she holds another throwing knife, her posture all arrogance and well-earned bravado. She should one day become regent of her house, taking the role of her father, but being left-hand dominant ended that dream before it could even begin. “Chaos touched,” the old gossips still whisper when Adelaide is near. The old superstitions of Pyrlanum control the futures of one and all—even within House Kraken.

At least Adelaide has a house to call her own.

“Not now. And don’t you have a battle plan to review?” I’m in no mood for her good humor, and I push off from the pile of rope I recline against. I wanted a quick nap, a brief respite in a day too heavy with emotion, not an impromptu knife fight.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Really, Darling, it isn’t like you’d have to worry anyway. Look! Your boon has already made you beautiful once more.”

I touch my cheek subconsciously. The cut is gone, nothing but

a line of scab in its place. My ability to heal had made me a legend among the House Kraken Barbs from the moment of discovery and prompted just as much speculation as it had admiration.

After all, how was it the girl with the healing boon had such damaged eyes? Even now I have to wear my smoked-glass goggles, the setting sun still too high in the sky for me to remove them just yet.

My light sensitive eyes are a visible sign that my gifts have limits. I am not invincible.

I stand and walk to the prow of the ship, ignoring Adelaide's platitudes and half apologies. I love my sister, even if we are not of the same blood. I was adopted into House Kraken after Leonetti Seabreak, Kraken regent, saved me from the dark of the Nakumba sewers seven years ago when I was ten. And calling Leonetti my father has been one of the bright spots in my life. But Adelaide likes to push and push until she finds a breaking point. It is just her nature: like water, she flows in and around a person until she finds their weak spot.

The problem is that long before I reveal my weaknesses, I will strike out, and killing Adelaide is not an option even if I wanted to. So, like I have for many years, I find it better to distance myself from her prodding rather than engage her.

"Ignore her, she's feeling the pressure of tonight's mission." Gavin Swiftblade sidles up to me with a grin. The wind tousles his sandy hair, and he absentmindedly pushes it out of his bright blue eyes. The sun has burned freckles into his pale cheeks, giving him a cherubic air. It's a lie, though. I have watched Gavin slide a knife between a man's ribs without the barest flicker of remorse. It's to be expected: the Swiftblades were respected assassins before they

turned their backs on House Dragon, defying the High Prince Regent to fight alongside House Kraken.

“Chaos give me strength, are you making excuses for her? We are all feeling the pressure, Gav. That doesn’t mean she gets liberty to be an ass,” I say.

“I heard that, Darling,” Adelaide calls, even though she keeps her distance. She knows better than to provoke me when I’m in a mood, and memory tugs at me a little too hard this evening for me to smile at her gentle mockery.

Even though we have anchored a few miles off the coast of Lastrium, there’s not much to be seen of the coastline. It’s an unremarkable port city with very little strategic value, but House Kraken spies indicate that somewhere in the governor’s mansion Leonetti is being held captive. Sometime last week while my Barbs and I were razing Dragon settlements along the eastern coast, our regent was kidnapped, forcing us to sail around the southern wastes and here to the western coast of the country. It was a hard trip, but the *Barbed Tentacle* is fast, built for smuggling more than fighting, and combined with Adelaide’s fair-wind boon we made the trip in days instead of a couple of weeks. Now we have to get to Leonetti before the bastard Dragons move him.

I do not have much hope of seeing my adoptive father alive again. This thrice-cursed war has a way of taking everything one loves and turning it to ash.

For a moment I am trapped again in the garden of my childhood, my mother screaming as one of the Dragon’s Teeth, elite soldiers that serve much the same purpose as House Kraken’s Barbs, separates my mother’s head from the rest of her body. The crimson arc of her blood splattering her everblooms is the last memory I have

before someone scooped me up and pushed me through a passageway into the tunnels of Nakumba. There had been over a hundred women and children living in the compound of my childhood.

“So, we gonna skin some Dragons or what?” Alvin Kelpine says, spitting over the side as he leans against the deck railing with Gavin and me.

Alvin is a deckhand and all of thirteen summers old, far too young to be a Barb just yet, but so close to being old enough to draw blood of his own. His mop of dark curls and buck teeth always make me smile. He has the same olive complexion as the rest of House Kraken, pointing to the shared ancestral bloodline that long ago united Kraken and Sphinx.

“You are going nowhere, fry,” I say with a grin, ignoring the fear that rises up when I think of innocents like Alvin taking up arms with the rest of us. But the chances are that, like so many other little ones, he will be forced into battle before he is ready. I’ll do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen. “Show me your stance.”

Alvin takes up a ready position, his feet too close together and his shoulders sloped. I adjust his body to fix his form and run him through a couple of drills while Gavin offers the boy helpful tips. It’s enough to push away the remaining storm clouds of memory, the movements easy and familiar, and I half wonder if Adelaide sent the boy over. She’s always been good at reading my moods.

My smile fades as I imagine Alvin fighting. I was his age when I begged Leonetti to let me pick up my first sword. And two years later I was in my first skirmish when the country estate where we were staying was overrun by House Barghest. Leonetti tossed me a blade and demanded I defend myself.

“Darling Seabreak, if you would be of my House, you will fight

like a Kraken,” he said with a crooked grin, his weather-beaten skin and tousled salt-and-pepper hair making him seem less like the ruler of a prosperous House and more like a rakish pirate.

On that day I killed my first man, and too many since.

“I miss him, too.”

Miranda, Adelaide’s older, more earnest sister, stands nearby, her long dark hair braided and her tan skin already darkened with oily soot. Even though the girls share a mother, Miranda has no idea who her biological father is. But Adelaide is the spitting image of Miranda, just without the recklessness. Miranda offers me the inky soot pot, but I shake my head. My skin is naturally dark enough that I do not have to worry about blending into the shadows.

“I think you and Adelaide must have cast some forbidden blood spell to read my moods,” I say, changing the subject as I begin to ready myself for the night ahead. I do not want to talk about Le-onetti, about how we were not there to keep him from being kidnapped. Instead I wrap a dark scarf around my hair, tucking it tight around the tops of my ears.

“Blood magic? Even with your smoked lenses you have no game face, Darling. Why is it you think you lose all of the time?” Miranda asks with a laugh.

I grin. “Because all of you Seabreaks cheat.”

She shrugs. “But your moods are also as easy to read as a Gryphon manuscript. You should work on that.”

“It’s never a problem in the dark.”

Miranda shrugs. “Only you would think spending life in the gloom was the solution to a simple annoyance.” She says it without any heat, but the words sting anyway. My instinct has always been to hide in the shadows when things go wrong. Perhaps that is why

I was glad to join the Barbs when Leonetti asked me last year. They get praise for skulking about in the dark, not censure.

But after tonight, no more. I've sworn I'm finished with all of the treachery: the assassinations, the hostage taking that never quite goes as expected, the sabotage. All of it ends tonight, after we've freed my foster father. I have played my role in this endless war. Now I will step aside and let someone else take the stage. Someone like Gavin, whose appetite for violence sometimes seems unquenchable.

"We'll set out as soon as the light dies," Miranda says, cutting through my thoughts. "You and Gavin will be going all the way into the governor's mansion. I'll be remaining on the beach to make sure our exit is flawless."

"Are you certain?" Despite my weariness of killing and treachery, there are few things that bring me more joy than being lead on a mission. I like doing a good job, even if it creates far too many sleepless nights.

"Of course I am. He's got invisibility, and you've got the healing. My poison boon won't do much on a rescue mission, and I've sent the rest to see to the warehouses along the wharf. It's just the three of us. I'll be waiting with the boat so we can make a quick getaway." She lays a cool hand on my bare arm. "I want you to be careful, though. I will *not* lose another family member tonight."

Gavin pops into existence next to us, grinning as we both startle. "Are you kidding? If anyone gets in our way, Darling will slice them to pieces. They'll be dead before they even realize they've lost their heads." He's also foregone the soot, for obvious reasons. He winks at me before disappearing once more, and I roll my eyes at the way

he shows off his boon. Maybe if my gift didn't require a measure of pain, I would be more inclined to show off as well.

As Miranda goes over the parameters of the operation one last time, I let my mind wander. The sun hangs low in the sky, fat and round, seeming to quiver with the way the light ripples off the sea. That might just be the smoky goggles that I wear. Either way, the daylight is not long for this world, and I am anxious for us to weigh anchor and be off. In a short while I'll be able to remove my goggles and stride through the dark, where I will be the one with the advantage.

Tonight, I will kill anyone who gets between me and my father.
And then I will lay down my arms once and for all.



TALON

I hate city fighting. There's even less I can control than usual: no high ground, too many people, too little maneuverability, dead ends, unbelievable amounts of flammable materials. And usually screaming. My whole life has been this House War, and there are plenty of shades to everything I hate about it, but urban battle is the worst.

I don't hide my dismay from the captains and officials facing me over the long table. Until two days ago this building was a herd-drake stable, and it smells like sour char and musty shed scales. But even war drakes are useless in city fighting, so we commandeered the stables for temporary barracks and sent the plodding beasts to the countryside.

Governor Tillus argued to meet in his mansion, where there is plentiful wine and pasta, and half my field council agrees, but I don't care: this is war, and I won't let them forget that. They already like to talk around me and pretend I'm not the Dragon scion, not my brother's War Prince, because I'm only eighteen, and compared to Caspian I'm forgettable. But I've been leading soldiers and killing the enemies of the High Prince Regent for years. If Tillus came face-to-face with one of these insurgents, he'd probably kneel to beg before he even thought to draw a blade. He's just annoyed the first thing I did when I arrived yesterday was to send his shiny new prisoner away.

We shouldn't even be here. Lastrium is a port town only because

they built a decent pier, not because it's strategically useful. Jagged cliffs hem it in, while the city of Sartoria, a day's ride up the coast, has a river and was the old seat of the Kraken regent for centuries, before the fall of the Last Phoenix and the first House War. Sartoria is much more tactically relevant, even though we've had it locked down since my father rekindled the House Wars after Mother died, fourteen years ago. If the Kraken are determined to restart their guerrilla tactics here on the west coast, Lastrium is more suited to a practice run than the real thing. Not worth sending their navy. But Aunt Aurora sent a prophecy that the Kraken navy pulled up anchor and will be here, in Lastrium, in three days.

It has to be a feint. The only thing of use in Lastrium is reserves of fossilized venom we use to make dragonfire. But the Kraken have to expect if they laid any kind of siege to the city and we thought we'd lose it, we'd blow up the warehouse before allowing them to have it.

I wonder if I should just do that now and get back to the Crest. Caspian won't expect me, and maybe I can surprise him in his tower before he forbids me to visit. I've been in Barghest lands leading our combined forces for the last eighteen months, and every time I suggest I come home to meet with my war council in person, I'm commanded to remain away. I have got to get to my brother soon. I'm worried about him, especially given the growing rumors of his madness.

But Aurora's prophecies are never wrong. The Kraken are coming here. So instead of Phoenix Crest, I'm in damned Lastrium.

Captain Firesmith points to the map of the city spread on the worn wooden table. "They can't set fire to the cliffs, so they'll focus on the pier. We should send the remaining ships up to Sartoria."

“All that’s left are some cutters fast enough to send messages,” one of the city officials, Mara Stormswell, reminds Firesmith.

I say nothing, tracing the defenses of the city with my gaze. They’re not good, but they’ve never had to be. This place is just cliffs, beach, residences, and a few scattered markets and warehouses. Leonetti Seabreak was here for a minute, but they can’t have known that. I grind my teeth thinking they might have known that. It doesn’t matter now he’s gone. But I don’t want their spies to be better than mine.

“—their ships can easily keep out of range,” Finn Sharpscale says, and I assume he means the limited dragonfire cannons we have. Less than an hour after Caspian appointed me commander of the Dragon’s Teeth, I passed the position to Finn instead, because I’d rather be free to fight where I’m needed, not tied down to a certain company. One of the only things I’ve learned about leadership from my wild older brother is that sometimes it helps if you surprise people with a sudden left turn. If they can’t predict you, they pay closer attention. Of course, Caspian takes that to every extreme. I need to be more reliable. Certain. Respected.

Governor Tillus snorts. “Fool Kraken. Naval warfare is useless here.” His beard twists as he either smiles or grimaces.

“They aren’t fools,” I say quietly. They think they can take something from us here, either Leonetti or some kind of retaliation for his capture.

The governor looks like he wants to call us all fools and go home to wrap up in the silks Dragons won for him, under the roof Dragons provide. His family might have sworn to the High Prince Regent, but a mere five years ago they were Kraken. They haven’t taken to heart yet what it means to be Dragon.

I stand up. I'm not tall enough to loom like Caspian, but I'm broad and have perfected the way I show my teeth when I smile. It's just like the toothy draconic grin of my helmet when I wear full armor. I want to remind Tillus that no matter who he used to be, no matter what lands these were, it's all a part of the High Prince Regent's hoard now. We must defend it and die for it in a reign of fire, because that is who Dragons are. Not fools.

At my side, Finn stands, too. He is huge, with a scar on the left side of his face that hooks his lips into a permanent sneer. I didn't make him commander of the Teeth only for his skill with an ax, or his loyalty to me.

"We have three days until their navy arrives," I say to Governor Tillus, then skewer each other official and captain with a gaze I know is an unwavering vivid green. The color runs in the family. "I want a complete inventory of everything in the city, Tillus, no matter how small. And I want cannons set up along the cliffs to at least make the Kraken marines' lives harder, if we can't reach the ships. Everybody bring me an idea for additional defenses tomorrow. Be creative. Pretend this city is made of your own precious hoard. We must be ready in two days."

With that, I turn sharply and go.

Finn will give me enough time for my exit to make its point, then follow me to the narrow hostler's office I took for my own.

I move quickly across the cobbles of the inner courtyard from the stable's training arena, where we'd set up the council table and cots for most of the foot soldiers. Everything in a drake stable is made of stone or plaster, because drakes of all varieties tend to have fiery accidents. We have the seven war drakes attached to the Teeth harnessed together with iron gear in the corner farthest from the

gates. They're leaning their bodies against each other, twining sinuous scaled necks. Crests of feathers shade their slit-pupiled eyes, but most are looking at me. I stare at them, catching the eye of my primary mount, to remind her who's the boss. She stares back for a long moment, then flicks her row of long spine feathers. I smile and pause to scratch under her scaly chin. She makes a sound almost like a purr.

I glance up at the last streaks of orange sunset. The moon will rise shortly, almost full. Good visibility on the seas tonight, nothing to slow that navy down. I'll eat a quick dinner, wait for Finn, and then go down to the pier myself. We'll check the warehouse. Most of the Dragon's Teeth we have with us are on night patrol, but the few off duty might let me spar with them.

Obviously they'll do whatever I command, but it's better when they want to include me.

Just before I push through the door into the stable building, I feel the distracting pulse at my wrist: Aurora's summons tingling in the bracelet pressed to my skin by my leather bracer. She wants to talk five days before our scheduled meeting, which is unusual. We limit our regular communications by necessity because such distant far-seeing taxes the strength of Aurora's attendant.

I quicken my pace past the stalls where higher-ranking soldiers have doubled up to the hostler's office. Most of the stalls are empty at the moment, as it's near change of watch, but two soldiers lean against their open doors and salute. I put my fist to my chest in response.

Inside the dim office are my own cot, weapons, and armor, plus a field communication kit with the necessary bowl and cleansing glass. I light the oil lamp and pull closed the shutter on the round

window that overlooks the courtyard I just passed through. Fire-light dances on the three chunks of dragonglass settled in the bottom of the shallow stone bowl. I take one in my hand and drag it softly clockwise in a spiral up to the edge of the bowl and balance it there. The second I drag in a counterclockwise spiral and balance it at an angle from the first. The third I use to draw a six-pointed star across the entirety of the bowl before placing it along the rim. A slight tingle tickles my spine, so I know the cleansing worked—Aunt Aurora says I only feel it because my boon is related to far sight, and if I were a true seer, there would be a thin line of power visible everywhere I'd traced the stones. I trust her word on that and go get some water from the pump just outside the office.

Then I wait.

The water shivers as it settles into the bowl. In an emergency we can connect through rippling water, but this must not be one. I fit my body into a core stance, feet apart and fists together over my stomach so my elbows and arms make a strength triangle. I focus on breathing and settling my blood as the water settles. Aurora can always tell when I'm upset, thanks to the way heat from any emotion makes pink blotches high on my cheeks, and I don't want her to worry about taking care of me tonight. I'm an adult; I can take care of myself. I can control my feelings. *Dragons don't need to hide their emotions*, she soothed me once, when I was nine and angrily stomping around wearing a too-large helmet with full faceplate. *Let your fury and joy and grief show; that's where your power is, dragonlet.* Maybe that was true for a little boy, or maybe it's true for a High Prince Regent. It can't be true for me. I'm not powerful enough for people to respect displays of emotions. Not unless they're calculated displays.

Besides, Caspian's reputation is wild enough without having a scion always too near to exploding.

"Talon," Aurora says, and I glance down at the bowl. Her face shimmers colorlessly against the water, peaceful and lovely . . . except there's a tightness I can see at the corner of her lips. Tension that would be hidden to most, but I know to look for it.

"What did he do?" I demand.

My aunt puts her betraying lips into a thin line and says, "It's been a very bad week."

I clench my jaw and slowly nod. "I can leave now—"

"No, Talon, he wants you there. He said that specifically. But . . . he also said, 'Talon must save her.'"

"Save who?"

Aurora's lashes flutter, and she lowers her gaze in sorrow. "There's only one *her* Caspian has ever concerned himself with since my sister died."

The eyeless girl. His imaginary friend, or whatever she is, a figment of his madness. His muse. The only thing he cares to paint. Even Aurora, whose boon is prophecy, cannot see her. But Caspian has been obsessed with her for my entire life. Aurora believes he must have known the girl as a child; perhaps something happened as his painting boon took root. Either that, or she's a piece of his nightmares, a Chaos-induced hallucination. There are old stories of Chaos speaking to all of us through dreams, but not since the Last Phoenix died a hundred years ago. All our boons are weaker now than they were then, if we have them at all. "What does he want me to save her from?" I ask.

"I don't know," Aurora admits. "He was even more distressed than usual."

“Distressed?” Anger makes my voice low. I hate being far away from them, where I can’t do anything at all to help. “That’s no excuse for treating you poorly.”

“Oh, Talon.” She sets her jaw just like I do, and in the water I can’t tell if she has tears in her eyes or not. “You need to come home when you finish there, prepared to take over.”

“Aunt,” I begin, because she’s said this before, and I can’t. I won’t unseat my own brother.

But Aurora cuts me off. “I am holding the council together, Talon, but at *best* they say Caspian is too distracted to rule. At worst, there are the whispers of madness, still, again. We’ve worked hard to keep his tendencies private, but he doesn’t care if people notice he vanishes for days and days, he rarely comes to meetings anymore, and when he shows himself at court, it’s impossible to predict if he’ll be lucid or wild. The Gryphon physician you arranged for does little to—”

A knock on my office door grabs my attention. I hold up my hand so Aurora stops talking, and I call, “Finn?”

“Scion,” he responds through the thin door. “Hungry?”

“Hold a moment.” I turn back to Aurora. She’s watching calmly, not a hair out of place, elegant and pristine as a portrait—though not like the art of our mad High Prince Regent. I’m told she looks like our mother, but I don’t remember. They were both of House Cockatrice, beauties traded by their father to mine in an attempt to allay the spite of House Dragon garnered nearly forty years ago during the previous House Wars. I doubt the bad cross of madness and artistry born in my brother had been the intended outcome of the alliance. “Aunt,” I say, “you know my answer. But I will come home after this battle, strong in glory and heart. We will *help* him,

somehow, not take his throne. I have to be able to do that. I'm his brother."

For a moment, Aurora's expression stills as if she means to argue, but then she lowers her gaze in acknowledgement. "As you say, scion. But please, be careful. We need you."

"If it were my day to die, you would know it through your own boon, Aurora," I answer warmly, and touch the water to disrupt her seeing. I miss her, but I can't let myself succumb to homesickness.

"Finn," I call, and just as he turns the handle, the nape of my neck tingles. I can't react at all before I hear a massive boom.

Finn throws the door open, ax in hand, but I push past him out into the stable. I run, because I know that sound: an explosion.

Behind me Finn yells orders for everyone to arms. I skid to a stop and look up. The night sky blazes with stars, and the moon is too low—there in the southwest is a ferocious orange glow. Fire.

I run toward the inn across the way from the drake stable. It's four stories, the tallest nearby building. I barge in, ignoring cries of alarm and people pushing to get out. They'll see nothing useful on the street. I need to get high.

Up and up the stairs I run, Finn's footsteps echoing at my heels, until I reach the top floor and blow through into a private room, to the south window. I shove open the shutters and lean out.

From my dragon's-eye view I can see exactly how far it is to the flicker of red-hot flames. The billowing smoke, spreading lazily across the sky, blots out stars. Half a mile, toward the sea, but still south. I know what that is.

The fossilized-venom stores. Somebody blew up the warehouse.

I stare for a long moment, mind racing. There must be Kraken insurgents already in the city, a forward brigade of their own, before

the navy. Barbs. That's what they call their spies and sneaks. They must be preparing for the navy to arrive somehow, but why warn us? Why not wait until the navy is right here instead of setting the city on fire?

Below me the streets are filling with people. Chaos. Disorder. It will be harder to get my soldiers anywhere now. That's plenty good reason to blow the warehouse—when the navy arrives. Not now.

I pull myself back inside and tell Finn, "They blew the venom stores. That fire won't go out for hours, even if we can get people with fire and water boons set up to contain it. I'll send Captains Firesmith and Peak to the warehouses for crowd assistance and to catch any of the insurgents, while Wingry and Fallfar go to the cliffs and pier. Get the Teeth seer looking for anything, but keep your people with me."

We start back to the barracks. Finn says, "What are we going to do?"

"Get our weapons. There's only one good reason for them to do this now, days before their navy is here." I spare a reluctant thought for better spies.

"Distraction," he says, baring his teeth eagerly. With his scar, he looks truly gleeful. "They think Leonetti is still here."

I nod and pause at the front of the stable courtyard, snagging one of the toothlings assigned to me. I send the young girl to relay my orders to the various captains. She's shaking with a heady combination of fear and excitement to see action, bouncing on her toes and fingering the hilt of her smallsword as she repeats my orders before dashing off.

Finn claps his hand on my shoulder. "Let's go drown some squids, Talon."

**JENNA
VORIS**

**MADE
OF
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**HE WANTS REVENGE. SHE WANTS FAME.
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CHAPTER ONE



The young ones died first. Blood pooled between the stones and crawled across the floor with delicate phantom hands. Shane felt it sink into his bones the longer he lay in the cell. How long had it been since he tasted pure, unrecycled oxygen? Since he felt the steady weight of a weapon in his hand? His finger twitched as he imagined the shock of a rifle against his shoulder, the silent shot in the open vacuum of space.

You're not going to die here.

Shane rolled over, wincing as his shoulder twisted painfully. He'd popped it back into place after the fight yesterday, but the skin was still swollen and tender. His hands ached, too. He tried not to think about why, but the memories always overcame him in the end.

A pulse slowing under his fingers. The other man clawing at the floor, broken nails scratching down the dusty walls. Shane had always thought killing would be harder, that it would take a certain kind of person to wrap their hands around another's throat and squeeze until there was nothing left, but it had been over by the time the warden arrived, before the droids swarmed and the prisoners rioted. Killing was the easiest thing in the world. And Shane wasn't sorry.

He exhaled, grimacing at the sharp pain in his chest. They kept it cold in solitary. Add that to the list of things these people would pay for. He'd come for them all eventually—every officer, every warden, every droid. Everyone who funded a place like this. *You're not going to die here.*

Shane's last thoughts before the dark claimed him again were of his hands, pale and trembling without something to hold, and that man's vacant, lifeless stare.

CHAPTER TWO



Three months of planning and Ava had still managed to underestimate the cold.

She shivered as she followed a masked officer through the twisting corridors of the Opian prison moon. They had made it through the first security checkpoint without so much as a whisper from the alarms, but another officer stopped her before she reached the second. He yanked her into a corner between a damp, icy wall and a security droid, and Ava had to remind herself that *this was normal* as his hands closed around her waist.

This was Chess. This level of security was expected. Still, she had to force herself not to flinch, to focus on the camera embedded in the droid's flat, metal face and instead think about all the ways she could take this officer apart while his hands skimmed up her legs. He got as far as her left thigh before finding the protein bar tucked in her stocking. His face twisted into a mocking grin.

"Not allowed."

Ava tried to snatch it back, but the officer shoved it into his own pocket before giving her a pat on the back that lingered a bit too long between her shoulder blades and pushing her through the second checkpoint.

The officer in front of her now wore a thick padded jacket

and boots in addition to a mask across the bottom half of his face. Ava had to clench her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering as they walked. *What do the prisoners wear? How many freeze to death alone in these cells?* She tried not to think about what three months in a place like this might have done to Shane. The frigid climate on their home planet, Nakara, meant she wasn't usually cold, but Ava didn't think this chill was entirely due to temperature.

The officers tried to block her view of the cells as they walked, one after the other in a shifting wall of black fabric and polished weapons, but it wasn't necessary. Ava had stopped looking after she saw a girl slumped against the rough stones, eyes half-open as her fingers twitched in time to their footsteps.

"Are you a friend of his?"

The officer's question was too loud. Ava tensed as he looked over his shoulder, lowering her gaze to the floor. "Yes."

What she could see of the man's face relaxed, and satisfaction heated her bones. This was why Shane had hired her, after all. This was why she wore pretty dresses and wove moonflowers into her long, dark hair and blushed at every question. Because she was a good actress, good enough to make it if she'd been born on any part of Nakara other than barren, wasted West Rama. Because she was *harmless*.

When the officer spoke again, his voice was almost kind. "Can I give you a piece of advice?"

Ava nodded as they stopped in front of a thick, steel-plated door. He could give her all the advice he wanted if he looked the other way in that room. "Of course."

The officer removed his glove and pressed one finger to the

scanner laid into the wall. "That boy is nothing but trouble. Everyone on this moon is trouble."

Ava did smile then, and she was glad his back was turned. She ran a hand down the front of her dress, tracing the sharp edge of the pistol still tucked beneath the fabric, cold against her skin.

He didn't know the first thing about trouble.

When the door clicked open, she used the time it took for the officer to put his glove back on to find the cameras—one in every corner. That was fine. Jared said he'd deal with those. He should be in the system by now; she just had to buy him time. Then the officer stepped aside and Ava's next breath caught as she locked eyes with Shane.

Three months.

Had it really only been three months? Ava could see his ribs against the thin fabric of his prison shirt, see the way he stood with one arm pressed against his side. *Too thin.* They had shaved his hair too, so only a thin buzz remained across his pale scalp, but Shane still straightened when he saw her, eyes widening in surprise before his face split into a painful-looking grin.

"Hey, baby, how's it floating?"

Same voice, same confidence, same wry smile. Ava grimaced. "You look like junkmatter."

She reached out a hand, but the officer caught her wrist before she could touch him. "That's close enough."

It took every ounce of Ava's self-control not to snap his fingers. She pretended to shrink away, hands shaking as they fell back to her sides. He didn't need to know it was from fury, not fear. *Harmless.*

Then she heard it—a faint *click*.

The cameras. Jared said anyone watching from the prison's control towers would see the room exactly as it had been seconds before, their images frozen in time. She had two minutes, but the only person Ava had to fool was the officer himself.

And Shane, who hadn't been expecting her, who had no idea what she was planning, who could barely stand.

Ava pushed the thought away. It didn't matter; they would make this work. She took a tentative step forward and silently begged Shane to play along. "I've missed you. How are you doing?" It was a stupid question. Purple bruises masked most of Shane's face and now that she was closer, Ava could tell he was keeping the weight off his left ankle, too. She swallowed her unease and added, "I tried to bring food, but they found it."

She said that part loud enough for the officer to hear, to let him think the game was over.

Shane's confusion only lasted a second longer. His face smoothed into an easy grin, eyes flicking toward each camera as Ava took another step. "That's fine. You were all I wanted anyway, baby."

Ava resisted the urge to roll her eyes. That was a bit much, even for him, but it worked for what she had to do next. Slowly, she lifted her hands to the front of her dress and unfastened one button. "Really?" she whispered. "That's *all* you wanted?"

Shane blinked, color deepening on his bruised cheeks as she opened another button, then a third. Ava glanced over her shoulder to find the officer suddenly very interested in a spot on the floor. She undid another button, finally revealing the barrel of the gun stashed down the front of her dress, and Shane's expression shifted into cool understanding. This time,

when he reached for her, the officer didn't intervene.

Because she was a simple, harmless girl caught up with a boy from the wrong side of town.

Ava slid her hands across Shane's chest as he lowered his face into the curve of her neck. She could feel him shivering under her fingers, and her next words caught in her throat as one of his hands groped at her chest, grabbing the barrel of the gun.

"There's a droid at the first security checkpoint," she breathed, and Shane's answering nod was almost invisible. He slid the weapon into the front of his pants and Ava stepped back, hurriedly buttoning her dress. Every few seconds she threw nervous, purposeful glances over her shoulder at the officer, who still had his gaze fixed on a crack in the floor, but it was Shane who spoke first.

"All that and I don't even get a kiss?"

Ava's hands stilled on her collar, and when she glanced up, Shane looked like he was fighting the urge to laugh. *He thinks this is funny*, Ava realized. Here he was, barely able to stand, and he still wanted to embarrass her.

Unbelievable.

So instead of blushing and turning away like she knew he expected, Ava smiled, grabbed Shane's face with both hands, and kissed him right on the mouth. He let out a pained grunt at the sudden movement, but she ignored him, and when she pulled back, the officer seemed to decide that was the last straw. "Time's up."

Ava patted Shane's cheek and stepped away. "Bye, *baby*."

The last thing Ava saw before the door closed was Shane's grin, wicked and cutting as he lifted a hand to his lips.

The man behind the visitor's desk handed Ava her bag and fake ID as she signed out, but her heart was still hammering as she stepped outside and picked her way through the docks. Their Cruiser was easy to spot, clunky and out of place among the shiny patrol vehicles. The ship wasn't particularly fast, but the boxy model and nondescript paint job blended with the commuter traffic on almost every planet. Shane never would have stolen a Cruiser—they weren't flashy enough for him. But Shane hadn't been there when they needed a new ship. And given the circumstances, Ava thought she'd done a decent job.

Jared was already sitting in the front, feet propped against the dashboard. He scrambled up when Ava hauled herself into the ship. "Did you see him?" he asked without waiting for her to sit down. "What did he look like? What's going on?"

His fingers danced nervously over his skin screen and the sound of fingernails on glass raked down Ava's spine. She shuddered. "Bad."

"How so? What—?"

"It was *bad*, Jared!"

He flinched and Ava immediately regretted snapping. "Sorry," she murmured, running a hand across her face. "I'm sorry. It was bad."

There was a moment of frosty silence before Jared leaned forward, tucking his chin against her shoulder as they waited together. Ava had debated pushing him out the air lock half a dozen times over the last three months, but she was glad he was here now. She wouldn't have made it this far without him. Jared was only fifteen—two years younger than she was—but he was the best hacker she'd ever met, and he still had the skin screen to prove it, despite ditching the Nakaran military years ago.

Ava wound the chain of her necklace around one finger until the small, rectangular charm landed in her palm, gleaming silver in the harsh light of the docks. They shouldn't linger here, especially in a stolen ship. The flow of traffic on and off Chess was almost as strictly regulated as the prison itself, and any minute someone would notice she was still here.

And that a prisoner was making his way toward the exit, shooting down everything in his path.

She checked and rechecked the Cruiser's landing gear, trying to ignore the weight of each passing second. Then, when nothing happened, she checked it a third time before pulling the mirrors forward to reapply her lipstick. It was still smudged from kissing Shane. That was going to be a lecture for sure—he didn't like surprises. She glanced back toward the entrance, certain she would see him dashing across the docks, but the doors were still firmly closed.

He's taking too long.

How long did she wait before calling it and leaving Shane inside? What if he never made it past the guard in the visitor's room or the droid at the checkpoint? Ava reached down and started the Cruiser, wincing at the sharp rattle of the engine. *Just a few more seconds . . .*

"What's the holdup?"

Jared jumped, scattering wires and spare parts over the floor, as another voice echoed across the docks. He turned panicked eyes toward the approaching officer as Ava jammed a finger into his chest.

"Do *not* speak," she hissed. Then she turned and plastered on a smile. "Hi, Officer, is there a problem?"

He didn't smile back. "What's the holdup?"

Ava could only make out his eyes, narrowed over the top of his mask. Shane always said the people who worked on Opia's prison moons hid their faces because they didn't want anyone to know what they were capable of. She remembered his bruises, the girl from the cell, and it was an effort to keep her smile from slipping. "Nothing, Officer, we were just leaving. You know these old Cruisers take forever to start."

The officer ignored her and peered into the back, where Jared was running his hands through his nest of white-blond curls. "What's your business here?"

Ava risked a glance toward the controls. Three switches. That was all it would take to get them in the air. As long as she was through the prison checkpoint before the alarms sounded, she had nothing to worry about.

"Hello!" The officer snapped his gloved fingers in front of her face, and Ava wondered how long it would take to break his hand. Could she do it before he called for backup? Before he reached for the assault rifle strapped across his chest?

"I'm sorry," Ava gasped. Her eyes blurred with fake tears. "We were visiting a friend."

"Who?" The officer's gaze didn't soften. He didn't even flinch. When she didn't answer, he reached a hand toward his ear, and Ava barely had time to open her mouth before he pressed a finger to his portable comm and said, "Air control, this is—"

He never finished the sentence.

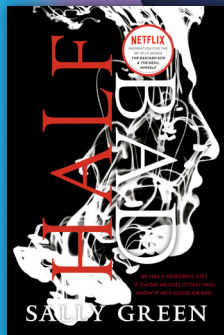
One second, he was standing in front of the window and the next he had tipped forward, blood blooming across his chest as he choked on a strangled cry. Jared yelped and Ava shoved the body to the ground, already feeling for her own weapon. Her

hand had barely closed around its barrel when she saw Shane limping hurriedly across the docks.

He came to a stop outside the ship, and Ava watched him glance at Jared, who still cowered in the back, before his gaze slid over to her. She opened her mouth, three months of practiced conversations blurring together the longer they looked at each other, but Shane held up a finger before she could say anything at all.

"I cannot *believe* you stole a Cruiser."

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