

THORNS OF ASH

CURSED MAGIC. FATED MATES.
THE VALE IS WATCHING.

Z O E Y F R O S T

Chapter One

Blood and Ash

A^{zara} I came here to take what they swore I had no right to. Not to beg. Not to kneel. The Court of Demons builds its power on fear, and I refuse to be one of the voices that trembles when they enter a room.

Let them call me cursed. Let them call me thief. I will decide the price.

Blood coats my gloves before the bells even sound. I do not remember drawing the blade, only the crunch of bone and the choked breath of a demon priest as I shove him aside.

Shadows coil along the stone corridors, whispering with the voices of old gods and the ruined Vale. The taste of iron fills my mouth. Incense smolders in ancient sacrificial pits, heavy with burnt myrrh and bitter herbs. My heart hammers against my ribs, every beat a prayer the gods no longer answer.

I move because stopping is death. Doubt is a luxury I burned long ago.

The relic calls to me, close enough that the warding sigils crawl beneath my skin. Heat rises, sharp and bright, as if my body remembers this magic. The stone beneath my boots is cold, but the air trembles with power older than the Court, older than the town itself.

The Court of Demons does not forgive trespass. I am not here for forgiveness. I am here to survive.

Boots thunder on the flagstones behind me. They hunt for blood, not justice, and my trail runs crimson from the shattered vault to the altar hall.

For an instant, torchlight catches my reflection in a fallen bronze shield. Wild eyes stare back at me, hair damp with sweat, the black mask hiding nothing.

Azara Thorn. Liar, outcast, thief. Tonight, a ghost made flesh.

I burst into the ceremonial chamber. Arches rise high above me, hung with burning sacrificial pits. The relic thrums within a crystal reliquary atop the altar, jagged and ancient, desperate for release. Magic hangs thick in the air, humming against my teeth.

The warding spells hiss at my approach. Glyphs flare in warning. Pain flashes through me, heat knifing along my nerves.

Stolen Fae magic, sticky as honey and dangerous as venom, floods my senses as I whisper the sigil-breaking words. The wards shatter. The reliquary cracks. The relic drops into my palm.

A cold jolt rushes through me like plunging my hand into snowmelt. The world seems to hold its breath. Smoke curls from the sacrificial pits, shadows thickening as if the Vale itself waits for my next move.

A figure emerges from the gloom, a demon priest in torn crimson robes, fangs bared in fury.

“Thief,” he snarls, voice like grinding stone. “Return what is not yours.”

I freeze as he advances, heart hammering. Torchlight catches his eyes, black and bottomless.

“You think you can take what belongs to the Court?” he growls.

“You worship rot and ruin,” I say, forcing steel into my voice. “This relic was never yours.”

My words land clean, no tremor, no doubt.

He spits the next words, each meant to wound. “All things return to ash in the end, halfbreed.” His lips peel back in a snarl. “The mark on your skin is proof enough. You are cursed. Claimed. Already half lost.”

I edge toward the window, never breaking eye contact. “Better cursed and free than kneeling in chains.”

He laughs, low and ragged, a sound like old bones breaking. “You know nothing of chains. The Vale remembers every thief. The blood price will find you before dawn.”

The relic pulses in my hand. “Then you had better pray I never return.”

His shadow stretches across the floor, swallowing the altar. “There is nowhere left to run.”

My hand tightens on the relic. “I have run before.”

Terror coils in my gut as I edge toward the arrow-slit window. “Kill me and you lose it forever.” My pulse thunders in my ears.

Run, the Vale whispers in my mind.

So I leap.

Glass shatters around me. Blood, stone, and shards of leaded glass crunch beneath my boots as I drop to the mud outside. Behind me the Court erupts, bells tolling while curses echo into the night.

The night does not simply howl. It watches, patient and starless, while I run.

I hit the ground hard, mud and blood slick beneath my boots, the chill biting through my cloak. Pain flares in my arm with every step, sharp and bright, a molten thread gnawing beneath the skin.

I force myself upright. The relic is heavy in my grip, alive with a rage that does not belong to me. I slip it into a leather pouch at my belt, tying it shut with trembling fingers.

Instinct screams for me to vanish into the shadowed passages twisting away from the keep, but the curse tugs at me, pulling me toward the ancient warrens beneath the town. The darkness feels alive, old and watching, promising nothing but ruin.

My footfalls echo on stone. Behind me the alarm bells toll again, harsher now, closer. Revelry spills through the upper court, a drunken tide of demons masked and masked again, feasting without knowing the blood spilled beneath their feet.

The air reeks of woodsmoke, roasted meat, and spilled wine. I duck my head and pull my cloak close as I slip into deeper lanes where moonlight barely reaches.

The pain spreads, fire beneath my skin. The relic strains

toward the open air while the curse hungers for sacrifice. I give neither.

A wolf's snarl cuts through the night and my heart jolts. The Court has unleashed their hounds, shifters bred for pursuit, scenting fear and blood on the wind.

I squeeze through a narrow gap between stacked crates, the smell of rot and old herbs stinging my nose as a rat skitters across my boot. Behind me the sounds of pursuit sharpen, armor scraping stone, steel sliding free, the guttural language of demons closing in.

I risk a glance back. Red and gold cloaks sweep through the passageways, blades glinting in torchlight. Above, a watcher whistles sharply and others join the hunt.

Fear settles inside me, cold and coiled, but I move anyway. Tonight fear is a luxury I cannot afford. I am the Thorn witch, made, not born. This is the price of daring fate.

A shadow moves ahead, silent and almost formless. A hunter wearing a bone-carved mask slides into my path.

My dagger is already in my hand.

Steel rings on steel and sparks scatter into darkness as we circle. His eyes gleam behind the mask, hungry. He lunges. I twist aside, pain flaring through my arm as the curse and relic war inside me. My blade slashes low and catches his leg.

He falters. I do not wait.

I vanish into the maze of alleys, breath tearing from my lungs, magic snarling beneath my skin.

Above me, a bell tolls again, slow and deliberate, as if the town itself has noticed my trespass. The Vale's voice presses close now, thick as mist.

You have changed the game.

I do not look back. I cannot. Every step away from the Court is a step deeper into the jaws of something ancient waiting in the dark.

Chapter Two

Ashes in the Veins

Sleep never comes easy when darkness presses close like skin and the air crackles with old, unfinished magic. The Vale's wind whispers faintly through the roots above.

I wake gasping, a ragged sound clawing from my throat, my body tangled in sweat-soaked blankets. The taste of ash coats my tongue, thick and bitter, as if I have swallowed bone dust.

For a moment I cannot move. The memory of fire claws at the inside of my skull. A world burned clean to the bone. Faceless shadows screaming my name. The dream felt real. Too real.

In it, my hands drip red. The relic's pulse becomes a drumbeat, hungry and wild. Wolves circle ruined stones, their eyes burning silver. A throne of bones rises from the ashes. My name carved into stone again and again until I want to claw it free.

Somewhere in that nightmare a woman's voice whispers, cold and knowing.

“You cannot outrun this, little thorn.”

Another voice answers, rougher, edged with wolf-hunger.

“You bleed for us all.”

Shadows reach for me and in the dream I scream, but the only answer is the relic’s low, hungry laugh.

Pain lances up my arm.

I shove back the tangle of cloth.

There it is.

Faint. Embered. Waiting beneath the skin like a coal that remembers fire. It writhes, alive, glowing faintly blue in the pre-dawn gloom. The veins near it burn, as if molten metal pulses through them.

I clench my fist, teeth bared, refusing to let fear take root.

“Not tonight,” I whisper, as if the magic can hear. “You will not break me.”

The cave is cold and damp, the stone breathing a slow cold. Moss slicks the walls. Old ward marks scar the rock. My little fire died hours ago, leaving only embers and the ghost of warmth.

I draw my knees up and breathe through the ache, listening past the quiet.

Every sound, drip, crackle, whisper... might be the Court.

Or something worse moving through the Vale’s dark bones.

“Not today,” I mutter, voice raw. “You do not win today.”

The relic rests heavy in its pouch at my side, almost awake. Sometimes I think it listens. I touch it through the cloth, almost gently.

“You liked that, did you not? Watching me run. Watching me burn.”

The mark throbs harder, as if it disagrees. Or mocks.

I press my palm to the stone floor, grounding myself, forcing my breath to slow. The taste of ash lingers. The relic’s weight at my side is both promise and threat.

Sleep will not claim me again. Not with the magic so close beneath my skin. Not with the world waiting for me to bleed.

The cold does not leave my bones, even when I force myself to stand. Every muscle aches, heavy with warning. The cave feels smaller than it did last night, as if the stones themselves lean closer, waiting for me to slip. Above, the world is still dark. Roots twist across the entrance like crooked fingers. The mark along my forearm throbs with every heartbeat.

I strip off the blanket and shove it into my pack, fighting the urge to check the pouch again. The relic is still there, heavier than guilt, heavier than hope. Its magic hums faintly against my side. Dangerous. Tempting.

I know better than to draw on it. Not after the dream.

My supplies are running low. The hollow ache in my belly is sharper than fear. I need something small to barter. Something valuable enough to buy a day’s protection.

My thoughts drift to the village at the edge of the Vale. To the abandoned shrine near the bone orchard.

Festivals always leave scraps behind. Ribbons braided with luck spells. Bits of silver. Little gods carved from bone or horn. The witches and beggars pick the place clean, but sometimes

something slips through. A charm against nightmares. A ring to fool a hungry spirit.

I could take one.

Just one.

Nobody would miss it.

The mark on my arm seethes as if sensing the thought. The last time I took what was not mine, it nearly killed me.

I flex my fingers, willing the pain to fade.

“It is just survival,” I whisper. “It is not the same.”

The magic burns hotter anyway.

As if it knows the lie.

I press my palm against the wall and feel the faint pulse of ancient wards beneath the stone. The curse inside the mark is hungry. Wild. Impossible to reason with.

Still, I cannot sit here and wait for death.

My choices have always been sharp-edged.

Today is no different.

I shoulder my pack, knot my hair back, and breathe in the cold air spilling through the roots.

Move. Take what you must. Survive.

Because in the Vale, mercy is a story for fools.

And I have lived too long to believe in it.

I slip from the cave's mouth with a thief's caution, breath already shallow, my heart hammering in my throat. Morning

fog clings to the ground in pale ribbons, winding between brambles and bone-white roots. Somewhere beyond the trees the village slumbers in uneasy peace.

If such a thing still exists.

The air tastes of frost and woodsmoke, sharp and clean as the Vale wakes around me. Every step sends a jolt of pain up my arm where the mark coils and tightens. I press my fist against my chest, forcing the magic down.

If anyone saw the mark, I would be a dead girl.

Or worse.

A prize for the Court.

I move quickly, keeping to the deepest shadows, boots silent on wet leaves. Birdsong is thin and uncertain, the kind that warns of hawks or worse moving through the Vale. Somewhere behind me a fox screams, raw and desperate.

Too easy to imagine that scream as my own.

The closer I draw to the abandoned shrine, the more the roots seem to listen. The more the world holds its breath.

My skin prickles. The air grows heavier with the scent of damp earth and something sweeter. Candle wax, wilted blossoms, the fading trace of old magic.

Even the trees seem to watch.

The shrine stands as a half-collapsed arch ringed with dead flowers and forgotten tokens. A broken antler. A green-stained copper coin. Knots of faded ribbon.

I crouch behind a fallen wall and scan the clearing.

Once this place was sacred.

Now it is a graveyard for lost prayers.

I work quickly. Fingers nimble from too many nights stealing in darker places. My gaze sweeps the shadows.

There.

A small charm.

Bone strung on leather, carved with a spiral that tingles faintly against my skin.

I hesitate, the dream flickering in the back of my mind.

Still, I pocket it.

Silent. Swift.

Footsteps crunch in the distance.

Heavy. Deliberate.

I freeze against the stone. Every muscle tight. The air itself seems to shift.

Someone else is here.

If the Court's hunters have found me already, I am out of time.

The footsteps grow louder, boots grinding against brittle leaves. I hold my breath as a figure emerges from the fog. Tall, wrapped in a cloak the color of old bruises, his face hidden beneath a battered hood.

Not a demon.

Not one of the Court's gilded hunters.

But I do not relax.

He pauses at the edge of the broken shrine, studying the offerings. Searching. My fingers tighten around the stolen charm while the mark throbs hot beneath my skin.

If he sees me, it is over.

My face is a rumor here. A story used to frighten reckless daughters.

But stories have teeth.

Mine draw blood.

I edge backward, silent as shadow.

My foot catches on a root.

A pebble skitters across stone.

His head snaps toward me.

He steps closer, hand drifting toward the knife at his belt.

“You there. Show yourself.”

His voice is rough, worn thin by hunger or too many secrets.

I straighten, cloak tight around me.

“Just another scavenger,” I rasp. “Nothing here worth dying for.”

He laughs.

Sharp. Bitter.

“Then you are in the wrong place, girl. Out here everything is worth dying for.”

A pause.

“Or killing for.”

His gaze drops to my hand.

“What did you take?”

“Nothing of yours.”

I bare my teeth in something like a smile.

He scowls. “You lot think you can take whatever you please. Hide behind old curses and children’s tales.”

The mark burns hotter.

Urging me to strike.

But violence here would draw attention.

And attention means death.

“Stay back,” I snap. “I am not afraid to bleed.”

“Maybe you should be.”

I shift my sleeve just enough for the faint glow beneath the cloth to show.

“You want to see what happens when you corner something cursed?”

He hesitates.

“Could fetch a good price for a girl like you.”

“Try it.”

My voice drops low.

“Then earn every coin with blood.”

A thin wind slips through the broken shrine. Dead flowers shiver as if the ruin itself breathes.

He takes another step.

“Let us see your hands.”

The mark pulses.

Hungry.

My nerves scream for me to run.

Instead I meet his eyes.

“Go ahead,” I say quietly. “See how well you fare against the magic.”

Silence stretches between us.

The wind moans through the arch. Somewhere beyond the trees something old seems to watch.

“Last chance,” I tell him.

“Walk away.”

Sometimes a good story is the sharpest blade I own.

For a long heartbeat neither of us moves.

Then he mutters under his breath.

“The cursed.”

And steps back.

I let the mark glow brighter beneath my sleeve.

“Tell anyone you saw me,” I warn, “and you will wish the Vale took you first.”

His throat bobs.

“I do not want trouble.”

“Too late.”

I back away slowly, never turning my back until the trees swallow me.

Only when he is gone do I breathe again.

My hand trembles as I pull the stolen charm from my pocket. The spiral is still warm from the shrine's fading magic. The mark along my arm cools, leaving only a dull throb.

Every choice carries a cost.

Thunder rumbles somewhere over the Vale, low and distant, like something vast shifting in its sleep. Rain-scent rides the wind. I hurry deeper into the woods while dread coils tighter with every step.

The relic at my side feels heavier.

Watching.

Waiting.

Tonight I escaped by rumor and luck.

Tomorrow luck will run thin.

The Vale is shifting. Hunters are moving. And my dreams offer no sanctuary, only fire, ruin, and a prophecy sharpening its claws.

Rain begins to fall.

I keep walking.

Because in the Vale no one is ever truly unwatched.

Rain quickens, soaking my cloak, blurring the world into streaks of silver and ash. I glance once toward the broken shrine and spit a curse into the sky.

“Damn you and your prophecies. Damn every god who ever watched me bleed.”

For a moment only the hush of rain answers.

Then somewhere deep in the tangled dark a wolf howls.

Long. Hungry. Wild.

I do not look back again.

Chapter Three

Demon Court's Edict

Darian

The Demon Court smells like scorched silk and fear. Shadows pour from the rafters, thick and watchful, pressing in until even my wolf feels small. The air bites with centuries of spilled blood and old bargains, none of them mine. I keep my chin up anyway, scars on display. Let them see what exile made of me. If they want a monster, I will give them one.

I am brought in shackled. Nobody here believes these cuffs would hold me if I truly wanted out. It is all theatre, and I am the main act, a show of obedience for creatures who have not felt hunger in a hundred years. My wolf growls, coiled and furious. I focus on the bite of iron and the thud of boots behind me, refusing to give them the satisfaction of seeing me sweat.

The High Magister, face hidden behind a mask of onyx and bone, leans forward on his throne. "Darian Ashclaw," he purrs, each syllable a cold caress. "We were told even outcasts can be made useful."

Blood and old arguments stain my mouth. I bare my teeth, not bothering to hide the contempt. "Depends what you call 'useful.'" I bite back the urge to spit. "You want me to clean up your shit for you?" My voice bounces off stone, too loud in a hall built for judgment. Eyes, red, gold, slit-pupiled, empty, fix on me from every tier. Even the wall paintings seem to glare in disgust. Fuck them all.

A lesser demon steps from the gloom, brandishing a scorched scrap of cloth. "The thief who raided the shrine. She carries a curse. We want her, Ashclaw. Alive." The word twists like it pains them to say it. I catch the stink of fear beneath the formal mask. They do not understand this witch any better than I do.

A beat passes. I roll my shoulders, feeling the iron bite. Their names burn behind my eyelids, father, sister, all of them marked for my sins. "And if I deliver her?"

"Your clan's sentence will be reconsidered." The High Magister's words hang heavy, baited with hope I do not dare touch. He sounds almost bored, like my future is an afterthought.

I arch a brow. "That is a lot of faith to put in an exile. What is the catch?"

He smiles, a crack in stone. "Bring her unharmed. Fail, and you will watch your bloodline burn with you."

The shackles fall away. I rub my wrists slowly, letting the mask of indifference settle back over my face. Inside something snarls, hope, hunger, hate. Or maybe just the urge to tell them all to fuck off.

"Give me her scent," I say. "And keep your lapdogs off my trail. I hunt alone."

The Court murmurs, some approving, some already writing my obituary. The High Magister tosses me the scorched cloth. It reeks of ash and prophecy, of danger disguised as a girl running out of places to hide. My wolf's hackles rise. The fabric thrums in my hand. For a split second I almost see her burning through memory like a ghost. Damn, she is strong.

I do not bow. I never have. Never will. But as I walk out, the doors slamming behind me, I let them believe they own me, for now. One day I will lock this place in fire.

Outside, the world tastes colder. The city's underbelly stretches before me, streets slick with rain, alleys carved by hunger, ash drifting down from some bastard bonfire in the upper rings. Night is thick with secrets, old gods carved into crumbling stone, eyes always watching. I shove the Court's gift into my pocket, the cloth rough and acrid between my fingers, the memory almost bleeding from the scorched edge.

Her scent is wildfire and fear. Something wild. Something desperate. Not the first witch I have tracked, but this one reeks of prophecy. That is poison, pure and simple. My father always warned me, never trust the ones marked by the gods. They will drag you into the dark and make you thank them for the lesson.

The wardline is thin here. Magic clings to corners, pooling in gutters and slipping between cracks like spilled blood. My wolf paces, hungry. I follow, boots silent, senses wide open, hunting the way my father taught me before disgrace made us ghosts. My family, real, stubborn, unforgiven, flashes through my mind. I hunt for them too.

Every whisper in the night is a warning. Demons prowl rooftops, their eyes catching firelight. Even the rats look twice

before vanishing. Someone watches from every window, shutters clacking shut the second my shadow crosses their threshold. The city breathes like a beast with a belly full of knives.

At the edge of the old shrine I find it, a mark burned into stone, blackened and jagged, pulsing faintly under the skin of reality. Witch-sign. The air buzzes with power, the aftertaste of a broken spell sharp as copper on my tongue. Stare too long and it feels like it will crawl under your skin and rewrite your bones. I shake my head. Fuck no, not tonight.

She is clever, leaving just enough trail to tease, just enough curse to bite back. My lips twist. I like a challenge. It makes the blood run hotter. Makes me wonder if I will regret hunting her. Fuck it. No turning back now.

From up ahead comes a crash, a body slamming into metal, a hissed curse lost to the night. I move fast and low. I catch a shadow vaulting over a ruined wall, copper hair flashing, magic crackling in her wake.

Not tonight, little witch. But soon. You can run, but I have your scent. The city wants to swallow you, but I will get there first.

I crouch by the mark, breathing her defiance. For a second I swear it tastes familiar, like a secret I should remember. A word that could burn the world down if spoken aloud.

Game on.

The witch's trail crackles and stings beneath my skin as I hunt deeper into the city's broken arteries. Every sense is lit up. She is moving fast, reckless but not stupid. She knows how to vanish, just not without a fight. I know her kind. Survivors. Fucking stubborn.

I round a corner and nearly trip over the body. A city patrolman, face singed, armor blackened and warped. Mouth frozen mid-scream, eyes wide, hands clutched to a twisted sigil burned into his chest. Not dead, just out cold and reeking of witchfire.

I kneel beside him, scanning for the magic she used. Burn marks lace the stone, crawling like vines. The stink of burnt resin and tar fills the air. Blood too, some hers, most not. Maybe she limps now. Maybe she is already halfway to hell. Or maybe she is just getting started.

She fought here. And she did not lose.

Footsteps echo above, other patrols, maybe her, maybe some fool scavenger hoping for scraps. I sink into shadow, just another memory in the city's rot. I learned long ago how to vanish. In these alleys my family's name is still a curse, and even the ghosts do not want me.

A scrap of cloak hangs from a broken pipe. Copper threads catch the dying light. I thumb the fabric. It pulses with her magic, alive with warning. My wolf paces inside, restless. Whoever this witch is, she has bite, and I would bet my last breath she would rather bleed than be caught. Fuck, I admire her for that.

From somewhere down the alley comes laughter, low and feral. Not human. I stiffen, listening. The scent of demon, oil and burnt sugar, rolls in on the breeze. A rival hunter, maybe. The Court's bastards are everywhere tonight.

I pocket the cloak scrap, one hand on my blade. My fingers itch for blood, but I hold back. Not yet. Not until I find her. If I want to bring her in alive, I will have to move faster. If she keeps fighting like this, she will have half the underworld at her heels by dawn.

And for the first time in months I feel the old thrill, the hunt, the risk, the chance to prove I am not just another ruined name. Ashclaw still means something. At least to me.

The air thickens. Every step I take, the city grows hungrier, shadows stretching, doors slamming shut at my passing. I catch movement overhead, a demon, spined and grinning, crouched on a crumbling arch. Court colors drip from his tattered cloak. Lapdog. Enforcer. The sort who would sell out his own brood for a handful of power. Grin. Yeah, I know this bastard. We have traded scars before.

He drops in front of me, tail swaying, teeth gleaming too wide. "Ashclaw," he drawls, voice slick as oil. "Did not think the Court would trust a mutt with real work."

I do not slow. "Move, Grin. I am working."

He blocks my path, claws flexing. "They said the thief is worth a fortune. Thought I would collect. Unless you want to share?"

I bare my teeth. "I do not share with bottom-feeders. Get lost before I make an exception."

He circles fast, tail lashing. "You are not the only one with orders. The Court wants the witch alive. Does not say in how many pieces."

My wolf pushes against my skin, hot and ready to tear. My claws threaten to break flesh. For a second I almost let him. I let him see it. "Try me. I dare you."

A moment's tension. The city holds its breath.

He grins wider, all teeth and venom. "One night, Ashclaw, you will forget who you really are."

I shrug. "Already did. Did not like the view."

Then something explodes deeper in the alley, a burst of wild, furious magic. The rival's head jerks up. I seize the opening, shoving past him, boots pounding pavement as the scent of burning copper and broken wards floods my lungs.

Behind me the demon's howls follow, the promise of payback sharp as broken glass. Ahead, the witch's power calls, brighter, hotter, impossible to ignore.

I do not look back. Let them chase each other for scraps. I am hunting for more than gold or Court favor. I am hunting for my family's future, my own damn name.

Tonight I run with the storm.

The city's rhythm shifts as I move, like something beneath the cobblestones wakes and watches. Every heartbeat is a drumbeat in my skull, thrumming wilder the closer I get. Azara's magic scorches a path even the rain cannot wash away. Thunder rumbles overhead, and every shadow is a dare.

She is close. I taste it, copper and ozone, witchfire riding the wind. My wolf snaps at the leash, snarling for the chase. I let him bleed through, eyes sharper, senses razor-edged. The thrill is dangerous. It makes me reckless. Fuck, I am enjoying this too much.

The patrols are thick now, demons and mortals alike. I slip between them, just another shadow in the city's ruin, boots splashing through pools of gutterwater. Each step brings me closer to a pulse of magic that does not belong here, cannot belong anywhere. My pulse answers, hungry, hopeful, stupid. Somewhere my father's ghost is cursing me for running toward disaster with open arms.

A scrap of memory flickers. The last time I hunted with my father, before shame, before exile. He taught me to trust instinct over orders, to run toward the heart of the storm, not away from it. I swallow down the ache and push harder.

A shriek splits the night, a wardline shattering, magic screaming raw. I round the corner just in time to see a figure vanish into a crumbling chapel, her silhouette limned in blue fire. The ground beneath my boots shakes, power humming in the marrow.

For a moment I freeze.

That is her.

Everything inside me strains forward. I follow, silent and quick, heart hammering. The world narrows to this ruined chapel and the wild magic inside. Every step tastes like ash and destiny.

I step through the threshold. The heat hits like a fist, choking with ash and prophecy. She is already gone deeper, but she left a mark, a sigil burned into ancient stone, still smoking, still alive. My wolf bares his teeth in my mind. Fuck, this is trouble.

I reach out, fingers hovering over the mark. Power bites back, hungry. I almost smile.

She is not just running.

She is making a promise.

And for once, I want to see if someone can keep it.

