

*Fate Bound Them.*

*Darkness Made Them Dangerous.*

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ZOEY FROST

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## BLOOD AND ASH

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Azara

**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 slicks my gloves before the bells even sound. I don't 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 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 old sacrifices, burnt myrrh, and bitter herbs. My heart

hammers wild against my ribs. Every beat is a prayer the gods no longer answer. I move, because stopping is death.

Doubt is a luxury I burned a long time 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 is cold, but the air trembles with power older than the Court, older than the town. 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. 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 rising high and hung with burning sacrificial pits. The relic thrums within a crystal reliquary atop the altar, jagged and old, desperate for release. Magic hangs thick, humming against my teeth. The warding spells hiss at my approach, glyphs flaring in warning. Pain flashes, heat knifing through my nerves. Stolen Fae magic floods my senses, sticky as honey, dangerous as venom. I whisper the sigil-breaking words. The wards shatter. The reliquary cracks. The relic drops into my palm.

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

A figure emerges: demon priest, crimson robes torn, fangs bared in fury. “Thief,” he snarls, voice like 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, spittle flecking his fangs.

“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 each reply like a curse. “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’d better pray I never return.”

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

“I’ve run before.”

Terror coils in my gut, but I edge toward the arrow-slit window, the relic biting cold in my hand. “Kill me, and you lose it forever.” My pulse is thunder in my ears.

*Run, the Vale whispers in my mind.*

So I leap.

Blood, stone, and shards of leaded glass crunch beneath my boots. I drop into the mud. Behind me, the Court erupts. Bells toll. Curses echo into the night.

The night does not simply howl. It watches, patient and starless, as 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, sharp and bright with every step. It is a molten thread, alive and gnawing, more than pain. I force myself upright. The relic is heavy in my grip, alive with a rage that does not belong to me.

I slip the relic into a leather pouch at my belt, tying it shut with trembling fingers. Instinct screams for me to vanish, to blend into shadowed passages and twisted alleys spiraling from the keep's heart. But the curse tugs at me, drawing me toward the ancient warrens beneath the town. The darkness feels alive, an old, watching thing pressing at my senses, promising nothing but ruin.

My footfalls echo on stone. Somewhere behind me, the alarm bells toll again, harsher and closer. The revels have spilled into the upper court, a drunken tide of masked demons feasting, never guessing at the blood spilled beneath their feet. The air is thick with woodsmoke, the scent of roasted meat, and the sharp tang of spilled wine. I duck my head, cloak drawn close, breath shuddering as I push into deeper lanes where moonlight barely reaches. The pain spreads, a fire beneath my skin. The relic strains toward open air. The curse clamors for sacrifice. I am unwilling to give either.

A voice cuts through the dark, a wolf's snarl somewhere to my left. My heart jolts. The Court has unleashed their hounds. Shifters bred for pursuit, scenting fear and blood on the wind.

I squeeze through a gap between stacked crates, the smell of rot and old herbs stinging my nose. A rat skitters across my boot. The sounds of pursuit sharpen: the scrape of armor, the hiss of drawn steel, the guttural language of demons closing in. I dare a glance back. Red and gold cloaks sweep the stone passageways, blades glinting in torchlight. Some-

where above, a watcher on a balcony lets out a sharp whistle. Others join the hunt, driven by reward or vengeance.

Fear is a quiet thing now. Cold. Coiled. But I move anyway. Tonight, fear is an indulgence I cannot afford. I am the Thorn witch, made, not born. This is the price I pay for daring fate.

A shadow moves. Silent. Almost formless. A hunter with a bone-carved mask slides into my path. My dagger is in my hand, muscle memory older than my name. Steel rings on steel, sparks flying into the darkness. We circle, each breath a promise of death. His eyes gleam behind the mask, hungry for violence or something darker.

He lunges.

I twist, pain arcing up my arm as the curse and the relic war inside me. I slash low and catch his leg. He falters. I do not wait. I vanish into the maze, breath heaving, magic snarling, every step a battle.

Above, a bell tolls, slow and deliberate, like the town itself has noticed my trespass. The Vale's voice is everywhere 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 and waiting.

The crooked lanes wind around me, stone slick with night damp, the wind biting through my cloak. Somewhere in the distance, a horn blows, a signal I do not recognize, or perhaps a warning meant only for the damned. This town does not forgive. It does not forget. I pass beneath archways strung with blackened talismans, past shuttered stalls and the gnarled hands of peddlers hawking charms for coin or

flesh. Masked faces drift by, painted eyes wary and sharp. They sense the ruin clinging to me, a scent on the wind, something even the night shies from.

The pain throbs with each heartbeat, a live, searing line beneath my glove. I long to see it, to know what new shape it has taken, but to do so here would be death. The Court's hunters prowl these lanes, and the Vale whispers my name through the cracks in the stones. A drunk stumbles against me, muttering a curse. I push past, knife ready beneath my cloak.

A voice calls, familiar and lost to me. Guilt crawls under my skin. I press into the shadows between a cart stacked with dried bones and a tent selling nightshade wine. My hand rests on my knife. Too many eyes. Too many secrets. Who hunts, and who only hungers? I do not know. The crowd closes in, pressing tight, and for a moment I am just another mask, another shadow in a town of ghosts.

I fumble for the pouch, desperate to anchor myself. The relic burns. Flames split behind my eyelids, devouring the town. Wolves bay for blood. The sky splits open with prophecy. For a moment I see myself at the heart of the ruin, mask fallen, curse blazing, ash raining down. The taste of smoke is sharp on my tongue. The vision is too real.

I pull away, shaking, heart thundering. I need to escape. I need sanctuary, before the prophecy remakes the world and me with it.

A bell tolls deeper, lower, nearer. Demon soldiers shove their way through the crowd, swords bare. Panic claws at my throat, but I slip away, every muscle taut. My chest aches with the terrible understanding that there may be no end to this night.

Tonight, I am not Azara. I am a shadow. A rumor. The omen at the edge of every fire.

And omens are never outrun. They are endured.

I stumble through crooked lanes until the town gives way to ancient ruins, half swallowed by mist and brambles. The festival's music is distant now, a ghost of drums and wild voices echoing from the upper courts. I collapse behind a crumbling pillar, chest heaving, pain throbbing beneath my skin.

For a long moment, I just breathe. Shallow. Ragged. The world narrows to the cold stone at my back and the thunder of my pulse. My glove feels too tight, heat seething beneath it. I peel it off with shaking fingers.

There it is.

Not a sigil, yet. Not a brand of ownership. Just a faint, embered shimmer beneath the skin of my forearm, like fire waiting for air. A memory of something I did not ask for. A promise of something I can no longer outrun.

It does not pulse. It waits.

So do I.

For a moment, silence claims me. I clutch the pouch tight, feeling the relic's jagged edges even through the leather. It weighs more than it should, a burden, a promise, a curse. Somewhere far off, a wolf howls, mournful as the dying moon. The sound raises every hair on my neck, a reminder that even monsters have their prey.

I scan the shadows for movement. On the high walls, demon sentries patrol with spears. Below, a hunter stalks the abandoned plaza, masked, his gait measured and deadly. My body screams for rest, but I cannot yield. The curse feeds on my exhaustion. The relic gnaws at my will. My breath

comes in shudders. Pain sharp and unrelenting, echoing in the hollow of my bones.

A child's laughter, thin and eerie, drifts through the night, a memory of innocence lost. I wonder if I ever had such peace, or if I was always meant to bleed for magic. Was I ever truly alive, or just another vessel waiting to be hollowed out by fate?

Papa's words echo: *The Vale devours. Give it nothing you wish to keep.*

I force myself upright, vision swimming. I will not die in the gutter. Not tonight. My mother's voice haunts me, softer: *Azara, there is no safety but what you make with your own hands.*

But as I move, darkness swells at the edges of my sight. A voice, neither prophecy nor curse, rasps through the chill: *You cannot run from what you are, Azara.*

An arrow thuds into the pillar above my head. The hunters close in. I stagger forward, pulse frantic, the relic burning, the pain writhing, every step a battle. My feet slip on moss and broken stone. The world blurs, then snaps back. Every sense is alive with the urge to survive, the memory of all I stand to lose.

I run. Not for freedom, but to outrun the end, one last time.

The final passage spits me out onto the verge of the lower town, where the ruins fall away into black mist. The earth is uneven, scattered with bones and forgotten offerings. I am raw instinct now, hunted and emptied, every heartbeat a prayer and a defiance.

Shouts ring from behind, demon voices laced with old binding words. I leap over fallen stone, nearly slipping in blood. The curse is living fire. The relic is a relentless drum against my thigh. The air tastes of iron, storm, and old magic. There is no safety anywhere.

I wheel around and slam into a figure armored in midnight mail, face hidden by a helm inscribed with the Court's sigil. His grip locks on my arm, crushing. Pain snaps my vision white. The reek of old leather, sweat, and dark magic clings to him.

"So, the thief shows her face," he snarls, voice graveled, old as the town itself. His breath is hot against my cheek, and I catch the faint tang of copper. A hint that he, too, has bled for the Court's secrets.

Panic seizes me. I wrench, but he is stone, unyielding. My mind splinters. If I fail now, the relic dies. The curse consumes. The Court's lies endure. Faces flash in my memory: Papa, lost friends, the shadows of those I could not save. I refuse to join them.

Desperate, I summon every scrap of power, curse, fear, the wild hunger of the relic, and drive it into the guard. A pulse of magic explodes between us, wild and raw. He cries out, helm cracking, releasing me as blood pours from his mouth. My legs buckle. The world reels. My hands shake, stained and burning.

A breathless hush. Then chaos. Shouts. The clang of blades. The baying of hounds.

More hunters rush in, swords drawn. I stagger to my feet, throat burning, magic fizzing over my skin. The relic scorches my palm, its voice in my skull little more than hunger, a promise of destruction or rebirth.

*Run.*

I stumble through a broken archway, half blind. Behind me, shouts rise. Hounds bay. The wind moans, swirling ash and cinders through the ruins. The Vale itself trembles underfoot, ancient magic crackling in the air, hungry and wild.

Somewhere my name is shouted, a curse, a promise, a warning. My own voice is lost to the storm.

And as the darkness swallows me, the relic pulses, alive, and the future tilts, forever changed.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### ASHES IN THE VEINS

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**S**leep never comes easy, not when darkness presses close as skin and the air crackles with old, unfinished magic. I wake gasping, a ragged sound clawing from my throat, body tangled in sweat-soaked blankets. The taste of ash clings to my tongue, thick and bitter, as if I've swallowed bone dust.

For a moment, I can't move. The memory of fire claws at the inside of my skull. Visions I can't shake. 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 ruins, eyes burning silver. A throne of bones rises from the ashes. My name carved into stone, over and over, 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 my 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 and 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 curse can hear. "You won't break me."

The cave is cold and damp, walls slick with moss and old ward marks scratched into stone. My little fire died hours ago, leaving only embers and the ghost of warmth. I draw my knees up, breathing through the ache, listening for boots or claws outside. Every sound, drip, crackle, whisper, could be the Court. Or something worse.

"Not today," I mutter, voice raw. "You don't win today."

The relic, heavy in its pouch at my side, feels almost awake. Sometimes I think it listens. I touch it through the cloth, almost gentle. "You liked that, didn't you? Watching me run. Watching me burn."

But the mark throbs harder, as if it disagrees. Or mocks.

I press my palm to the stone floor, anchoring myself, forcing my breath to slow. The taste of ash lingers. The relic's weight in my pouch is both a silent threat and a promise.

Sleep won't claim me again. Not with the curse so close beneath my skin. Not with the world waiting for me to bleed.

The cold doesn't leave my bones, not even when I force myself to stand. Every muscle aches, heavy with warning. The cave feels smaller than it did last night, like the stones are pressing in, waiting for me to slip. Above, the world is still dark, shadows stretching long through the tangled roots at the entrance. The mark thrums along my forearm, each beat an accusation.

I strip off the blanket and shove it into my pack, fighting the urge to check the pouch for the hundredth time. The relic is still there, heavier than guilt, heavier than hope. Its magic hums against my side, dangerous and tempting. I know better than to draw on it. Not after what I saw in the dream.

My supplies are running low. The ache in my belly is sharper than fear. I need something to barter, something small enough not to raise alarms, valuable enough to buy a day's protection. A token. A warded charm. Anything.

My thoughts flick to the village at the edge of the Vale, to the ruined shrine near the bone orchard. There's always something left behind after a festival. Ribbons braided with luck spells, scraps of silver, little gods carved from bone or horn. The witches and beggars pick them over, but sometimes a relic slips through. A charm warded against night terrors. 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 my intent. The last time I took what wasn't mine, it nearly killed me.

I flex my fingers, willing the pain to subside. "It's just survival," I whisper, voice shaking. "It's not the same."

The magic burns hotter, as if it knows better. I press my palm flat to the wall, feeling the ancient wards pulse beneath my skin. The curse 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, wild air. The ache in my veins is a map. Go. Move. Take what you must.

Because in the Vale, mercy is a story for fools, and I've lived too long to believe in it.

I slip from the cave's mouth with a thief's caution, breath already shallow, heart hammering in my throat. Morning fog clings to the ground in pale ribbons, swirling between brambles and bone-white roots. Somewhere beyond the treeline, the village slumbers in uneasy peace, if such a thing exists anymore.

The air tastes of frost and woodsmoke. Every step sends a jolt of pain up my arm where the curse mark coils and tightens. I clench my jaw, pressing my fist to my chest, trying to cage the magic before it slips free. If anyone saw the mark, I'd 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, uncertain, the kind that warns of hawks or worse. Somewhere behind me, a fox screams, raw and desperate. Too easy to imagine that scream as my own.

The closer I draw to the old shrine, the more the world seems to hold its breath. My skin prickles. The air grows heavier, thick with the scent of cold earth and something sweeter. Candle wax. Wilting blossoms. A whisper of old magic clinging to every stone. Even the trees seem to watch, bark twisted into faces that glare or grin.

The shrine is a half-collapsed arch, ringed in dead flowers and forgotten tokens. A broken antler. A copper coin gone green. Knots of faded ribbon. I crouch in the shelter of a tumbled wall and scan the clearing for signs of movement. Once, this place was sacred. Now, it's a graveyard for lost prayers and last chances.

I work quickly, fingers nimble from too many nights picking pockets in darker places. My eyes dart from shadow to shadow, hunting for anything valuable but unguarded. There. A small charm, bone strung on a leather cord, in-

scribed with a spiral that tingles against my skin. I hesitate, the memory of my nightmare flickering at the edges of my vision. Still, I pocket it, silent and swift.

Footsteps crunch in the distance, heavy and deliberate. I freeze, pressing myself tight against the stone, every muscle taut. Someone else is here. I can feel the magic in the air shift, prickle with warning.

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

The footsteps grow louder, boot heels grinding against stone and brittle leaves. I hold my breath, heart pounding so loud I'm sure it will give me away. Shadows flicker as a figure emerges, tall, wrapped in a cloak the color of old bruises, his face half-hidden beneath a battered hood. Not a demon. Not one of the Court's gilded hunters. But I don't let my guard drop.

He pauses at the edge of the shrine, head cocked, eyes sweeping the offerings. He's searching. Desperate, perhaps, or just greedy. My fingers tighten around the stolen charm, pulse quickening as the curse mark thrums, hot and wild beneath my skin.

If he sees me, if he recognizes me, it's over. My face is a rumor in these parts. A story parents tell to scare their reckless daughters. But stories have teeth, and mine are sharp enough to draw blood.

I edge backward, silent as shadow, but my foot catches on a root and a pebble skitters across the stones. The man snaps his head in my direction. A flicker of recognition, or maybe just suspicion, lights in his eyes.

He steps closer, hand drifting to the knife at his belt. "You there. Show yourself." His voice is rough, worn with hunger or too many secrets.

I straighten, cloak drawn close around me, chin high despite the tremor in my bones. "Just another scavenger," I rasp. "There's nothing here worth dying for."

He laughs, sharp and bitter. "Then you're in the wrong place, girl. Out here, everything's worth dying for. Or killing for." His gaze lingers on my hand. "What did you take?"

"Nothing of yours." I let a flash of teeth show. A warning and a lie all at once.

He scowls. "You lot think you can take whatever you please. Hide behind old curses and children's stories."

The mark burns hotter, urging me to strike. But violence here draws attention, and attention is deadly. "Stay back," I snap, letting threat coil in my words. "I'm not afraid to bleed."

He narrows his eyes. "Maybe you should be."

I shift my weight, making sure he sees the glow of the mark beneath my sleeve. "You want to find out what happens when you corner something cursed?"

He hesitates, but bravado clings. "Could get a good price for a girl like you."

"Try it." I let the curse rise in my voice, low and lethal. "But you'll have to earn every coin with blood."

A wind stirs the shrine, setting the dead flowers shivering. For a moment it almost feels like the shrine itself is listening.

He takes another step, posture shifting from curiosity to threat. "Let's see your hands."

I weigh my odds. The curse is restless, hungry for a reason to lash out. My nerves are wire-thin, every instinct screaming for me to run. Instead, I let my gaze harden, channeling every scrap of threat I possess.

“Go ahead and try.” My voice is low, dangerous, made of every scar and sleepless night. “See how well you fare against the cursed.”

A beat of tense silence. He hesitates, uncertain now, eyes flicking to the mark glowing beneath the edge of my sleeve. The wind moans, rattling the arch, and for a heartbeat I almost feel the presence of something old and watchful. My voice comes out steadier than I feel. “Last chance. Walk away.”

Sometimes, a good story is the sharpest blade I own.



For a heartbeat, neither of us moves. The clearing is thick with tension, the shrine watching like a judge. The man’s hand hovers near his knife, but I see the flicker of fear in his eyes, a shadow of old superstitions. “The cursed,” he mutters, more to himself than to me, and steps back, cloak pulled tight.

I press my advantage, letting the curse mark glow brighter beneath my sleeve. “Tell anyone you saw me,” I warn. “And you’ll wish the Vale took you first.”

His throat bobs. “I don’t want trouble.”

“Too late.” I back away, never turning my back on him until I’m swallowed by the trees.

When I’m sure he’s gone, I let out a shaky breath, shoulders sagging. My hand trembles as I pull the stolen charm from my pocket, its spiral still warm from the shrine’s dying magic. The mark along my arm cools, no longer burning. Just a sullen throb, a reminder that every choice costs something.

Thunder rumbles somewhere over the Vale, low and distant. The wind shifts, carrying the sharp tang of rain and the coppery scent of magic. I hurry deeper into the woods, mind racing. With every step, dread grows. The relic at my side seems heavier, its magic whispering warnings in a tongue I almost understand.

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.

I keep moving, even as the rain begins to fall, knowing I am alone but never unwatched.

Rain quickens, soaking my cloak, blurring the world to streaks of silver and ash. I glance back toward the shrine, then spit a curse at the sky, throat raw. “Damn you and your prophecies. Damn every god who ever watched me bleed.”

For a moment, only the hush of rain answers.

Then, from somewhere deep in the tangled dark, a wolf howls, long and hungry and wild.

I don’t look back again.

# CHAPTER THREE

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## DEMON COURT'S EDICT

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Darian

**T**he 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'll give them one.

I'm brought in shackled. Nobody here believes these cuffs would hold me if I truly wanted out. It's all theatre, and I'm the main act. A show of obedience for creatures who haven't felt hunger in a hundred years. My wolf growls, coiled and furious. I focus on the bite of iron, 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 fix on me from every tier. Red. Gold. Slit-pupiled. Empty. Even the wall paintings seem to glare, disgusted. 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 don’t understand this witch any better than I do.

A beat. 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 don’t dare touch. He sounds almost bored, like my future is an afterthought.

I arch a brow. “That’s a lot of faith to put in an exile. What’s the catch?”

He smiles. A crack in stone. “Bring her unharmed. Fail, and you’ll watch your bloodline burn with you.”

The shackles fall away. I rub my wrists, slow, 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’s strong.

I don’t 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’ll 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, memory almost bleeding from the scorched edge.

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

The wardline’s thin here. Magic clings to corners, pooling in gutters, 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 flashes through my mind. Real. Stubborn. Unforgiven. 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, sick with power, the aftertaste of a broken spell sharp as copper on my tongue. Stare too long and it feels like it'll crawl under your skin and rewrite your bones. I shake my head. Fuck no. Not tonight.

She's clever, leaving just enough trail to tease, just enough curse to bite back. My lips twist. I like a challenge. Makes the blood run hotter. Makes me wonder if I'll 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've got your scent. The city wants to swallow you. I'll 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, surges, stings beneath my skin as I hunt deeper into the city's broken arteries. Every sense is lit up. She's 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, but 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. Blood too. Some hers. Most not. Maybe she limps now. Maybe she's already halfway to hell. Or maybe she's just getting started.

She fought here. And she didn't 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 don't 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's got bite. I'd bet my last breath she'd rather bleed than be caught. Fuck, I admire her for that.

From somewhere down the alley comes laughter. Low. Feral. Not human. I stiffen, listening. The scent of demon rolls in on the breeze. Oil and burnt sugar. 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'll have to move faster. If she keeps fighting like this, she'll 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'm 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 stretch. Doors slam 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'd sell out his own brood for a handful of power. Grin. Yeah, I know this bastard. We've traded scars before.

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

I don't slow. "Move, Grin. I'm working."

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

I bare my teeth. "I don't share with bottom-feeders. Get lost before I make an exception."

He circles fast, tail lashing. "You're not the only one with orders. The Court wants the witch alive. Doesn't 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 Grin see it. "Try me. I dare you."

A moment of tension. The city holds its breath.

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

I shrug. "Already did. Didn't like the view."

Then something explodes deeper in the alley. A burst of wild, furious magic. Grin's head jerks up. I seize the opening, shoving past, 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 and hotter, impossible to ignore.

I don't look back. Let them chase each other for scraps. I'm hunting for more than gold or Court favor. I'm 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 can't wash away. Thunder rumbles overhead, and every shadow is a dare.

She's 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'm 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 doesn't belong here, can't 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's 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's already gone deeper, but she's 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, hungry. I almost smile.

She's not just running. She's making a promise. And for once, I want to see if someone can keep it.

**Some thorns don't wound. They claim.**

Step into *Thorns of Ash*.

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**Desire is as dangerous as magic—love and longing can  
destroy or save**