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ELISE KOVA



AIR AWAKENS: VORTEX CHRONICLES

BOOK ONE



# VORTEX VISIONS

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BOOK ONE

ELISE KOVA



Silver Wing Press

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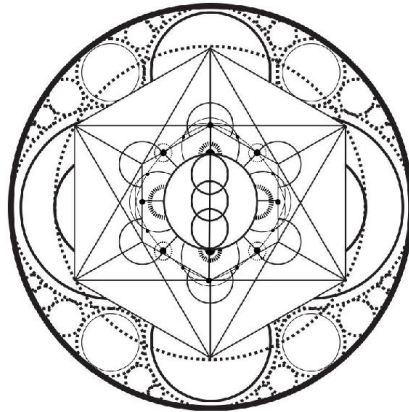
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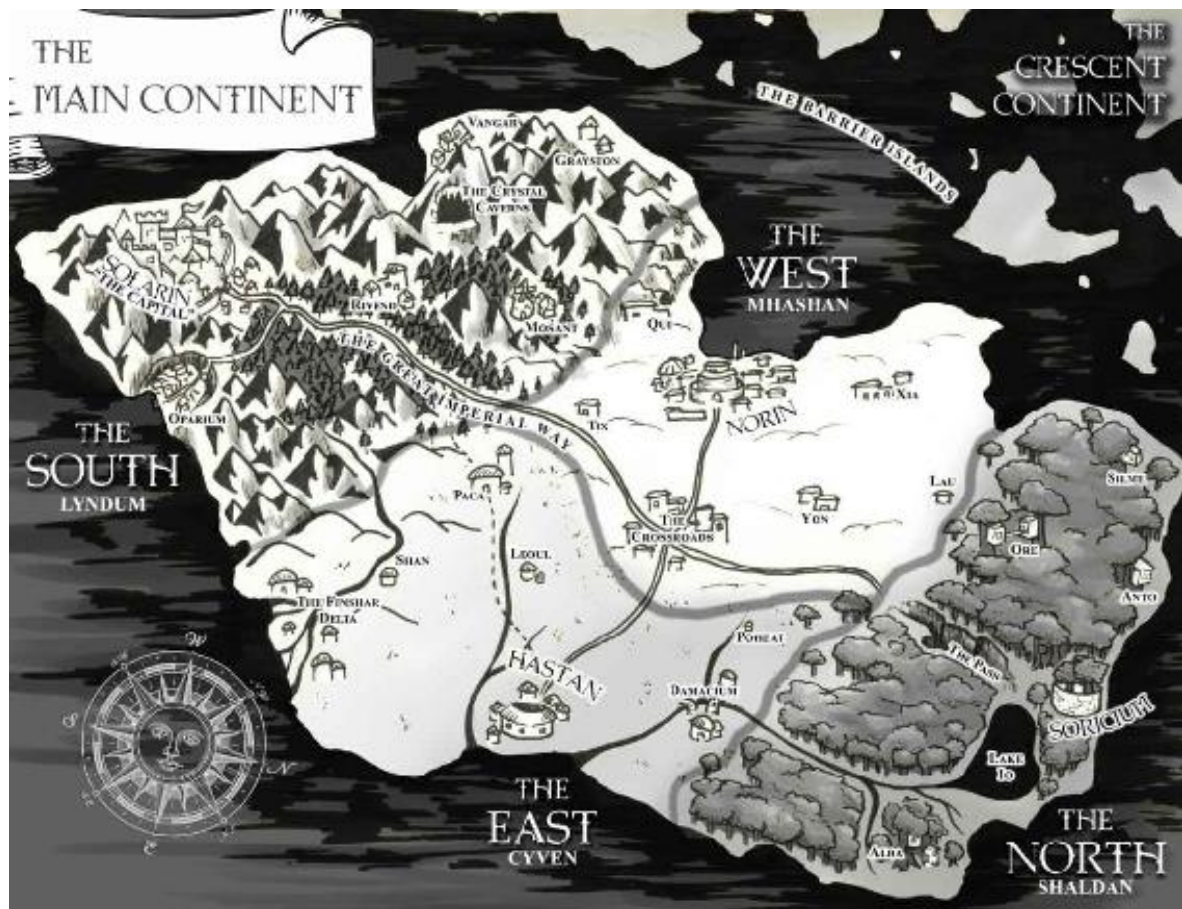
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*for the dreamers who never woke up  
and the doers who never gave up*

## THE SOLARIS EMPIRE





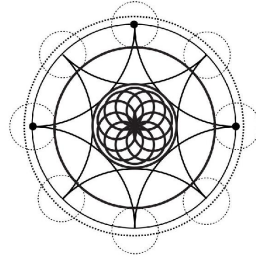
“YOU DID WELL, BUT THINGS ARE ONLY BEGINNING  
NOW. THE VORTEX STILL SPINS.”

— CRYSTAL CROWNED (*Air Awakens*, #5)





## CHAPTER ONE



IN THE DARKNESS, a bitter smile crossed her lips.

*It's just a candle*, Vi told herself. One single candle in the holder at the edge of her bedside table. Vi took a deep breath, trying to quell her nerves. It was ridiculous, laughable even; she was a *Solaris* for the Mother's sake. Yet she was more daunted by this one candle than she would have been facing down a beast in the jungle.

Most Firebearers could light it with a thought. She should have been able to do the same. Vi's hands balled into fists, clutching her bed sheets over her knees. Deep within her was an insurmountable wall. She was on one side, barely able to do more than dredge up a spark of magic. On the other was the power of her forefathers.

Her fingers relaxed, and she reached out. The burnt wick drew a dark line of soot across her hands, nearly invisible in the night.

"It's just a candle," Vi repeated aloud, searching for a sliver of magic. "A tiny spark, that's it."

White lightning flashed in the darkness between her fingers. The wick caught the heat, ignited, and she breathed a sigh of relief. For a brief second, Vi watched the fire dance around her fingertips and imagined the stable little flame was her own.

Vi pulled her hand away quickly, pushing aside the thinly woven blanket covering her bed along with the thought.

She didn't have time to spend on fantasies. There were things she wanted to do and not much time to do it. Her obligations as the Crown Princess would begin all too early.

The air was heavy with the aroma of fresh wood, sap, and the damp tang of morning. Vi had smelled this perfume her whole life. Her chambers were cut into the trunk of one of the massive trees of Soricism—capital of the North. The wooden walls of her room were sleek,

polished. They contrasted with the gnarled ceiling of decorative roots and branches that spilled down, weaving into each of the four corners of her bed, all crafted by the magic hand of a Groundbreaker.

As she moved beyond the foot of her bed, the halo of light from her candle glinted off gilded frames lined on the dresser opposite. There were several, but they all contained carefully painted portraits of the same three people—her mother, father, and brother.

The family she should have been reunited with three years ago. The family that lived far to the south in the Empire's capital, Solarin. The family that had traded her away in a political deal.

"Another year," she murmured to the pictures. Her eyes landed on the flaxen tresses of her brother—a direct contrast to her own dark locks. No one would guess they were twins by looking at them. Vi tried to swallow the lump that grew larger in her throat the longer she looked at the portrait. "Happy birthday to you, too, brother."

Vi turned away from the painted, staring eyes of her family and toward the small pile of supplies stacked in the corner between the dresser and her window.

Everything was as she'd left it the night before, and the night before that. Her quiver hung on its peg, bow attached, the fletching of half a dozen arrows peeking out from the top. A metallic sun—the Solaris sigil—glinted as the candlelight moved over it before illuminating the clothing she'd neatly folded on a chair underneath the quiver.

She would only be gone for three days. Not much was needed. But Vi took stock of every article of clothing and ration as though her life depended on it.

Three precious days of freedom were all she got every year.

It was the best thing her birthday had ever brought her.

"One more thing and I should be set," Vi muttered to herself, straightening away from her packing. Grabbing her candle, she strode out of her bedroom.

The living space of her quarters held a table and two couches for her use—though Vi rarely used them when she was alone.

Which meant she rarely used them at all.

The main entry had four doors; the bedroom Vi just left was one. Clockwise, the next door led to her personal study, after that was her classroom, and then the main door which led to an outer balcony that connected to the rest of Soricism's fortress by rope bridges and wide branches alike.

She'd always thought of her chambers like a daisy. The sitting room was its yellow center and everything else spun out around it like petals in the trunk of a giant tree.

Vi ventured to her study.

In the daytime, the room would be illuminated by the window above the drafting table sandwiched between the bookshelves that lined the walls. Now, her candlelight fell on every hanging map and book spine. But it also revealed something that shouldn't be there.

Candle wax dribbled over the edge of the holder and onto her fingers, but Vi didn't notice. Her breath caught in her throat as she engaged in a staring contest with five foreign objects. It wasn't the first time presents had been left for her, but it caught her off guard every year.

Some wicked little corner of her mind would always tell her that *this* would be the year her family would give up on her. That they had never wanted her to come home to begin with—never wanted *her* to begin with. The doubts would compound into stories about how her parents had been eager to make the deal with Sehra, now Chieftain of the North. That the peace assured by Vi spending her first fourteen years of life as a ward was only a fringe benefit, and not the main goal.

She knew better. The deal had been struck well before Vi was conceived. Before her parents were even wed. Had it not been for it, she may not even exist, as her father was originally betrothed to Sehra... But every time her birthday approached, Vi seemed subconsciously keen to avoid logic, and the doubts grew louder.

And every time she saw the stack of presents, the doubts were silenced for a blissful second. Vi crossed the room, resting her fingers lightly on the ribbon of one of the packages.

"When did he stash you in here?"

Setting her candle down, Vi gravitated to a suspiciously cylindrical present wrapped in Solaris blue and Imperial gold. She recognized her brother's script on the card.

The Senate had never let her brother come north to visit. They'd argued that having both heirs in the hands of former enemies of the Empire was far too great a risk, making a huge deal of it every time it was brought up. So while her mother and father had visited, Vi only knew her twin through letters and portraits.

Vi unwrapped the delicately embossed paper, exposing the contents within. As expected, it was a document tube. Even on her most bitter day of the year, Vi found a smile. Only a map from her brother could do that.

Carefully sliding out the parchment, she unfurled the delicate blueprint.

“The Solaris Castle—Rose Garden,” Vi read aloud, then set about finding an open spot on her shelves to pin the sketch among the others her brother had sent her of the castle in Solarin.

The bookcases were so cramped that not even shadows could squeeze between the spines—packed to the brim with manuscripts of all shapes and sizes, scrolls, and stacks of papers. Pinned on the outward facing edge of the shelves were maps, some created by professionals, others drawn entirely by or embellished with her own hand. In the swirling lines of ink and charcoal were countless stories of places she’d never get to see, and yet, felt like she somehow knew.

Places that she longed to someday visit... if she only ever had the chance.

Vi found a relatively open spot, tacking the blueprint in place by its top corners so she could lift it to still access the shelves behind. Her fingers trailed the lines of the architect’s skilled hand, and she silently thanked whatever nameless artist her brother had found this time.

Returning to her table, Vi skimmed over the gifts from her parents, Aunt Elecia, and Uncle Jax. They were of predictable shapes, mostly books. It made a singular, strange-looking parcel stand out all the more.

It was wrapped in black silk and nearly feather-light. A small black envelope had been slid under the black ribbon, fastening it together. Vi undid the knot at the top, lifting the letter and affirming her suspicions.

Black was a peculiar color in the Empire. No one wanted to associate with it... unless they were a Sorcerer.

On the back of the envelope was a silver seal: a dragon curling in on itself made a perfect circle, split in two and off-set. It was called the Broken Moon, and it was the symbol of the Tower of Sorcerers.

She slid her finger underneath, gently tearing open the letter.

---

*Dear Vi,*

*Forgive my informality in addressing you, but you will always be a dear child to me as I have been by your mother’s side since long before you were born. I was there waiting as she delivered you and your brother. I held you when you were a babe. And your mother is still one of my dearest friends in the world, confiding in me all the pains she feels at your absence.*

*I have only ever known and loved you as Vi, nothing more or less.*

*When your mother was seventeen, she began to manifest and was Awoken to her powers with the help of your father. She has consulted me with her worries surrounding the fact that your powers have yet to Awaken. I have told her not to fret, and will pass on the same advice to you. I believe in you, Vi.*

---

That statement was nearly enough to make her stop reading and throw the letter in the trash.

*Not to worry*, that was easy to say by someone across the world who knew nothing of her. What could this man possibly understand about her struggles with her magic? Vi doubted he had been born into a long line of illustrious Firebearers, only to have his magic be nothing more than a cheap parlor trick.

Still, curious about the package, and already halfway through, Vi kept reading despite herself.

---

*I would like to offer this token to remind you that magic has an odd way of finding us when we need it most.*

*It has been in my possession since before you were born. Many years ago... when the world was at its darkest, and hope seemed all but lost, your mother found the strength to overcome overwhelming odds and be reunited with her power, thanks to this. I've held onto it for years as a reminder to never give up, no matter how impossible a situation I may find myself in.*

*Now, I think you may need it more than me. Perhaps it will help you find your magic, as it helped rekindle your mother's after her channel was forcibly closed.*

*Your friend who cannot wait to meet and teach you,  
Fritznangle Chareem, Minister of Sorcery*

---

Her eyes lingered on the word “teach.” There was nothing to teach. He’d said it himself, didn’t he? That he understood her magic had yet to fully Awaken?

Still curious, Vi looked to the parcel, unwrapping the silken scarf to reveal a small, silver necklace.

“A locket?” Vi lifted it, squinting at the chain. She couldn’t place where she’d seen the links before, but was certain she had. There was an undeniable familiarity about it. The chain fastened around a loop at the top of the locket where there was a small button she depressed. She stared at the plain face—white with black numerals. “A watch.” Vi continued to stare at the hands, but they were still. “A... *broken* watch?”

It was certainly an unexpected gift. Her father had been known for his love of watch-making, a fascinating art that was said to have originated in Norin. Perhaps this had once been a gift from him to her mother?

Vi snapped the cover closed. In the motion, her spark leapt from her fingers unbidden. The arc of white-hot lightning crackled around the watch, engulfing it, and for a brief second, there was something there... but her attention was immediately stolen by the second arc of flame—which landed on her drafting table.

“No!” Vi reached out her hand as the papers—all her work—caught the fire. She’d never seen parchment go up in smoke so fast.

*Control it*, Vi willed mentally. She tried to envision her magic extending out from her, engulfing the flames, gaining command over them. But they wriggled and writhed, slippery and shifting; she couldn’t get a grab on it and before she knew it, her whole precious study would be gone. Her only connection with the home she was supposed to have would be ash. She would be—

The flames blinked out of existence without warning.

Vi stared, wide-eyed, at the blackened edge of her desk. In the moment, the fire had burned for what seemed like forever. Like a whole inferno had surrounded her. In reality, it had been a scorch and mere seconds.

But had she really... Vi brought her hand to her face, staring at her palm in wonder.

“Don’t get too excited.”

Vi’s back went rigid and she turned slowly to the source of the voice. Jax leaned in the door frame, arms crossed over his chest. His long black hair, the same color and nearly the same length as Vi’s, was tied in a messy knot at the top of his head. Half of it was spilling down his shoulders.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

“You’d know if it was you,” he replied, painfully simple. Sure, she’d know if she suddenly had control over her magic. Just like she’d know if she was fully Awoken to it and not just peering through the crack in the wall between her and her power. “I see you found your presents.”

The change in topic was welcome. She’d postpone thinking about magic for as long as possible.

“Thank you for dropping them off. It was a nice surprise.” She knew the presents had been sent ahead months ago. But Jax always kept them hidden, waiting for her birthday. She knew he did it to try to cheer her up on the day and Vi never had the heart to tell him it made no difference in her overall mood.

“You get anything good? Or just more boring books and maps?”

“Books and maps are *not* boring.” Vi knew he was trying to get a rise from her and she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. “Maybe if you’d tried reading one once in a while, you wouldn’t be such an uncultured vagrant.”

“That’s *Lord* Uncultured Vagrant, thank you very much.” Vi gave a snort of laughter at the remark. “What’s that?” He motioned to the watch in her hand.

Vi stared at it, forgetting she’d been holding it at all. The metal was warm under her skin, almost too warm. She’d melt the delicate gears inside if she wasn’t careful. Luckily it’d been broken before her spark had decided to dance around it.

“The Minister of Sorcery—”

“You can just say Fritz.” Jax chuckled.

“Fritz, right... Well he sent this for me.” Vi fastened the watch around her neck.

“It suits you,” her uncle appraised. His eyes lingered, as though he too found it oddly familiar. It seemed his mind went in a similar direction as hers initially. “Did your father make it?”

“He didn’t say.” Vi shrugged. “Just said it was my mother’s.” And that alone was reason enough for Vi to keep it close to her heart.

“You’ll have time to go through the rest of the gifts later.” Jax looked to one of the windows of her study. The dark morning was finally giving way to the first hazy colors of dawn. “We should get down to the pits.”

“Do I have to?” Vi dared to ask, knowing better. “It’s my birthday.” She may hate the day, but she’d gladly use it as an excuse.

“Yes.”

“You are truly heartless.” Her words had no bite and Jax’s grin assured her he didn’t take them personally.

“One of my many positive traits.”

“Let’s get this over with.” Vi rolled her eyes dramatically as she started for the door.

The rules of her life were simple, structured, and painfully clear.

If she followed them to the letter, remained the model future Empress, her reward would be reuniting with her family. She would be liberated from her beautiful, comfortable prison.

*In theory.*

In practice, she was supposed to have been returned when she turned fourteen. But three long years had dragged on, and here she was on her seventeenth birthday. Still in the North. Still a ward confined to Soricium—the fortress, specifically, for her “safety.” Still stuck feeling trapped,

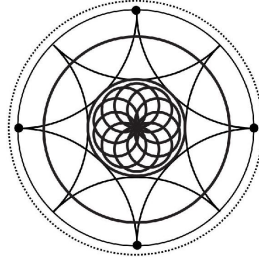
repetition defining her days as she continued to try to jump through political hoops so high and obscure, she barely knew where she was half the time.

There had been delay after delay, issue after issue, preventing her from heading south. The years had slipped by until, at seventeen, growing bitterness had all but replaced waning hope.

Every effort she had ever expended toward this one goal seemed more futile by the day, and now she headed for the most futile effort of all: sorcery training.



## CHAPTER TWO



THE SKY WAS BARELY ORANGE, and she was already drenched in sweat. It rolled down her neck and was caught by the collar of her shirt, pressed slick to her back. It stuck to her just like every couple labored breaths stuck in her throat.

There was nothing enjoyable about trying to wrench her magic to the surface. Her shoulders sagged and her whole body ached. She'd only left her bed a few hours ago and Vi already felt like she needed a good night's rest.

"You look like you're about ready to try again..." Jax said from across the fighting pit. He'd sat on the steps while she caught her breath after the exertion—and frustration—of her last failure.

"This will be, what, the seventeen-thousandth attempt to Awaken my magic?"

"I hear seventeen-thousand-and-one is a lucky number."

"You're such a liar," Vi muttered. "How is it that you, of all people, ended up the guardian of the Crown Princess?" The question was a running joke between them. She'd long known the answer.

Jax, not her uncle by blood, was an old friend of her parents. After the fall of the Mad King Victor, he was even hand-selected to rebuild an illustrious fighting force—the Golden Guard. But he'd chosen to come North with Vi after she was born, giving it all up to look after her.

Guardian might be his official title, but for Vi, Jax was the closest thing she had to an in-person father figure.

"Right now it's because I seem to be the only one who can put up with her ill-tempered moods in the morning."

"If I'm ill tempered then you only have yourself to blame. You could make more of an effort when you are in the presence of your Crown Princess." Vi made an attempt to put on a regal air, fighting a grin.

“Not when I wiped that princess’s arse when she was in nappies.”

“Your service to the crown is much appreciated.” She gave a bow, making a point to stick out her bottom for emphasis.

“Is it? Your family has an odd way of showing appreciation. Shite from you, shite from your parents.” If anyone else had said those words, Vi would’ve risen to anger in defense of her family. But she knew better with Jax.

Jax could say whatever he wanted. Vi knew he would die for her and her family.

“Well now you’re getting shite for magic from Solaris’s latest installment.”

“Your magic is stubborn, not shite.” He gave her a tired smile. “You will open your magic fully soon, I can feel it.”

“What if I don’t?” Vi said softly, confessing one of her greatest fears. “It’s already been two years since I manifested... What if I’ve already Awoken and this is all I have?”

“You don’t believe that.” Jax stood. “You’ve told me of the spark you feel within you. That chasm of light you can peer into but not reach.”

“Perhaps that’s something else?” Though she didn’t know what it would be.

“Or perhaps we simply need to keep trying.”

“How about, instead, we take a break today and I focus on something actually attainable? I could prepare for my lessons, work on my maps, read the books my parents sent...”

“I think if you spent as much mental energy on your magic as you did your maps, you would’ve long since opened your channel and we’d no longer be standing out here.”

That was the last thing she wanted to do. Vi looked up at the treetops dizzyingly high above her. The fortress of Soricism was built in and around them. A noble house beginning to wake—which gave her an idea.

“Aren’t you hungry? We could go inside and have the nice big skillet cake Renna makes for me on my birthday. The ones she drizzles syrup over with pats of butter and fresh berries and candied nuts? Maybe some of the rum whipped cream you enjoy so much?” Her mouth was already watering, stomach grumbling to match.

“And think of how much sweeter it will be when you’ve properly tasted your power.”

“It’s hard to learn magic when your stomach is eating itself.” Vi plastered a hopeful—but knowingly futile—smile across her lips. “I

leave for my birthday hunt tomorrow morning; surely I should maintain my strength today.”

“You’re not going to win me over with the promise of food... no matter how delicious Renna’s skillet cakes are.” She opened her mouth to object again, but he continued before she could. “Try once more, Vi—a good showing of it—and then I’ll let you go.”

Vi knew his acquiescence was a victory, but it didn’t feel like one. Her cheeks burned and she didn’t know who she was more frustrated with: Jax for not giving in, or herself for being such a coward and a weakling about her magic.

Two heavy hands fell on her shoulders, holding them tightly, giving her a light shake. Vi looked up at Jax, his dark eyes set against tan skin. “You know you must.”

“I know.” Vi sighed heavily. “The Senate expects me to learn magic. The Tower will want to see it. I have a lineage to uphold...”

“More than any of that, the longer you go without being fully Awoken, the more likely it is that the eventual, *inevitable* release will be violent.” His voice had a deathly seriousness to it. “You already have enough strikes against your future rule, Vi. Having grown up here. Being a sorceress at all. Don’t add a magical incident to their fodder. Awaken here, where it’s safe.”

Every action had an equal reaction with the nobility of the South. Romulin made them out to sound like vipers, waiting for her to fail. Delighting in her every mistake. Never in public, of course, but behind closed doors.

She was the one forced to stand in the sun while they lobbed their volleys at her from the shadows.

“So, one more time?” Jax persisted. “Give it a good effort?”

“One more time, and then you promise that’s it for today?”

“I promise.”

“Fine.” Vi lifted her hand, reluctantly obliging. One more attempt at magic for the day. *What could it hurt?*

“Remember, when opening your channel, it helps to articulate a physical action.”

“Let’s not put the cart before the horse. I’m not opening any channel until I’ve Awakened my powers.”

“It’s important to start building good habits from the beginning,” he insisted. “Maybe it’ll help draw out the power.”

“I’ve tried just about every physical action imaginable.”

“Then try something you can’t imagine.”

"I think I'll stick with knuckle cracking," Vi muttered.

"Suit yourself." He shrugged and Vi saw how little faith he had in her.

*Believe in me*, she wanted to say. If she had one person believe in her when it came to her magic, then maybe it'd be enough. But how could she ask that of Jax when Vi didn't believe in herself?

Fritz's letter appeared in her mind once more.

*I believe in you, Vi... magic has an odd way of finding us when we need it most.*

Her hand rose to the watch around her neck. Vi closed her eyes, holding it tightly. Maybe it would bring out her spark a second time.

"Find me," she whispered.

Vi didn't know if it was a prayer to the Mother above, or just a plea to whoever might be listening. But the words were the first thing all morning to feel right. If Jax heard them, he made no indication.

Watch in one hand, the other outstretched, Vi dug deep within herself. She tried to coax the power upward, feeling it crackle under her flesh before it crept through the pores around her wrists and hands as shimmering heat that finally ignited into fire.

This pathetic flame was the best she could muster while maintaining any control over it. Daughter of Emperor Aldrik Solaris, regarded as one of the most powerful Firebearers alive. Granddaughter of the late Empress Fiera Ci'Dan Solaris, also regarded as one of the most powerful Firebearers in the world before her son. And now... all eyes were on Vi.

"More," Jax encouraged.

"There is no more." Vi pressed her lips into a thin line, trying to tame her frustration. Her uncle had heard it all already.

"There is."

"There isn't." She looked from the fire to him.

Jax's eyes were alight with the orange hues of her blaze. It lit up the stone walls of the pit, winning against the yellows of dawn. He had a hard expression that she already didn't like.

"More, Vi."

Vi shifted her feet out slightly on the barren ground, getting a better stance. She tried to push the other thoughts from her mind, focusing only on her magic. Her muscles tensed as she urged more power into the flames around her fingers. The moment the ball grew past three times the size of her hand, the fire became wild, barely tamed. Her magic would only extend so far while staying under her command.

"Now, protect yourself with it."

“*What?*” Vi looked out to him. This was not part of their normal training regimen.

“Use the fire to push against mine, like a shield. Protect yourself.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

She didn’t have a chance to finish her thought before a wall of flame hurled toward her.

The fire passed over her, nothing more than a whisper.

Fire—naturally occurring or their own—could not hurt a Firebearer. The only fire that could singe a Firebearer’s skin was one created by another sorcerer—a more powerful sorcerer. So Vi would be fine... as long as Jax didn’t really levy his full strength against her.

“Protect yourself, Vi,” he repeated, lifting a hand. Flames crackled, rising up through thin air, binding together into another wall that he pushed toward her. These flames had a tickle to them. Nothing dangerous or uncomfortable, but more powerful than the last.

“I can’t!” Vi called back to him. But he was already moving his hand again. Another wall of flame; Vi staggered.

What was he doing? Her heart was racing. If he kept this up he would actually harm her. *Would* he actually harm her? Vi thought she knew the answer, but he was making a dangerous case for proving her wrong.

“Yes you can!” He was already readying another pulse of flame.

Vi gritted her teeth, clenching them so tightly her jaw popped. She dropped her eyes to her own flame and willed it to grow.

The fire swirled, condensing into a column, slowly growing in height. Vi began to sweat yet again from the mental and magical exertion. Even if she couldn’t feel heat from fire as a Firebearer, the humidity of the northern jungles did her no favors.

Like a wave crashing against her, another wall of Jax’s fire hit. Vi stumbled, knees hitting the dusty ground. The fire she had been working on completely vanished.

“I—”

“Again!” Jax shouted at her.

Why was he doing this? He had never been like this in any of their lessons before. Vi stared at him, anger singeing her chest. It made the watch feel unnaturally cool against her skin as she struggled back to her feet.

The moment she was upright, another wall knocked her back over. Vi balled her hands into fists, knuckles pushing on the rough ground. *She couldn’t give up like this.*

She lifted her hand, readying herself, but the next wall never came. Instead, fingers closed around her forearm, hoisting her back up. Vi swayed slightly, looking up at Jax.

“That’s enough for the day, I think,” he said gently. “Sorry for pushing you so hard. I thought it might help jostle something.”

“I... it’s fine,” Vi mumbled, looking aside. Shame took over her for every nasty thought she’d had. “I know you were only trying to help me.”

“Yes, well, I think it’s time we get that skillet cake.” Jax gave her a pat on the back and they started for the stairs.

“You go on ahead.” Vi lingered, sinking onto the bottom step.

“Vi...”

“I’m fine, uncle. Just a bit tired. Just want to catch my breath is all.” Vi twisted, looking up at him and forcing the biggest smile she could. “More like, I’m trying to sneak away to look at maps instead of skillet cakes.”

“It’s always a ploy for maps.” He started up. “You should consider joining me for breakfast, Vi. As you said, you should keep up your strength.”

“We’ll see,” Vi called back. But he was already gone.

With a soft sigh, Vi leaned against the stone, closing her eyes. *Why?* Why couldn’t she manage anything? Her hand closed around the watch at her neck.

So much for magic coming when she needed it. The bitter thought was the ignition strike. Her eyes shot open.

“One more time,” she whispered, knowing that it wouldn’t yield anything but hoping against hope it did.

The spark deep within her was ablaze, bright and hot. Rage fueled it—from her birthday and its reminder of how she was stuck in the North, from the leftover feelings of anger at her uncle’s test—rage at her magic itself for betraying her as it had.

Fire exploded around her hands.

Hotter, brighter—she pushed her magic as though Jax was still levying walls of flame against her. But instead of attempting to shield herself with it, Vi poured all her energy into the tiny ball in her palms. Every ounce of frustration was set ablaze, brighter than she’d ever seen her flames before.

The scales tipped without warning and magic flooded her system. Its white-hot flames roared like an unruly beast. Vi gasped as magic poured from her faster than she could find air.

Without warning, the wall had been broken down within her. This was the power she'd longed for, and now that she had it, she didn't know what to do with it. It was as though sunlight itself had turned molten and was now pouring from her.

She stared into the bright, shifting light, her eyes blown wide, and in it, she saw a figure come into clarity. Suddenly the world she knew was gone, and something new clicked into focus.

She was no longer in Soricism, but in a stone passageway she'd never seen before.

It was akin to what she'd imagined the dungeons of Solaris to look like—damp, dark, unembellished, rough stone. But there were no cells, just a long tunnel that continued stretching into the darkness in both directions. She turned to face the source of light at her left.

Vi blinked, disoriented.

Waiting with a small ball of flame hovering over her shoulder was... herself. At least, Vi thought it was her. It looked like her, the resemblance as uncanny as looking into a mirror. But there were notable differences. The woman across from her looked hardened, far more toned, and the natural tan hue of Vi's skin was deepened even further on her cheeks. The large cowl hood that covered the majority of her head cast further shadow.

The woman's clothes were drab and threadbare. Her hands were wrapped up to her elbows, like bandages, or the wrapped knuckles of a brawler. She stared into the darkness, watching, waiting.

Vi didn't have to find out what she was waiting for.

Soon, another light appeared far in the distance. As it grew, it illuminated a man.

He had a tousled mess of black hair cut at odd angles that ultimately ended at his shoulders. *No...* not quite black. It was another hue—a deep plum color off-set just slightly by the light.

A wicked, sickle-shaped scar ran down his left cheek and beneath the high collar of his intricately embroidered jacket. It brought her attention to a pair of piercing green eyes. He stared from underneath long lashes, fixated on the woman.

The mirror of herself spoke, but there was no sound. It was then that Vi realized she hadn't heard the dripping of water off the dank walls and ceiling, or the crackle of the fire over the woman's shoulder.

The whole world was muffled. She could see, but not hear or touch.

*Can you see me?* Vi tried to ask, though she already knew the answer. They couldn't. Their focus was entirely on each other. Tension

filled the air nearly to the point of sparking into magic.

The man spoke and again she heard no sound. But Vi could tell by his expression that, whatever he said, it was serious.

When the woman replied, her free hand rose to her chest, touching her cowl lightly.

Vi's hand reached upward in tandem, her fingers falling on the watch Fritz had given her.

Looking down, she saw a shimmering glyph hovering above it—weak, frail, and flickering. As soon as her eyes landed on it, the symbols shifted and changed, spiraling in concentric circles. Sounds filled her mind suddenly. It was a maddening cacophony she couldn't understand, but desperately wanted to.

She hadn't quite *heard* the symbols, nor had she read them. It was as though the word—words?—had vibrated in the very core of her being. Vi looked back up from the watch around her neck, but the two people had gone blurry and over-saturated. They were fading into white light.

Vi blinked, swaying.

The world came into focus once more, light vanishing from around her. *No, it hadn't been light, it had been flames, hadn't it?*

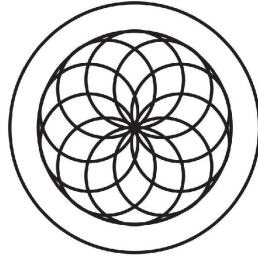
She slumped against the wall, struggling to breathe. Ash coated her hands up to her elbows, coated her lungs as though she had been breathing fire instead of air. Her head spun.

Vi had wanted magic. Begged for it. She'd anticipated flames like her uncle's, like those of her forefathers.

She'd never expected to see the future.



## CHAPTER THREE



THE WATER POOLED around her feet, black with soot. It clung to the ceramic tiles and hung in the grooves between them that surrounded her rectangular, wooden bath. It lingered bucket after bucket, its granules impossible to wash away from the inside of the tub.

Her eyes looked at it unseeing, focused instead on the vision.

Shaking, Vi continued to scrub.

She'd wanted magic. Future sight hadn't been in the plans. Vi looked at the murky water as it slipped between her tan fingers.

That's what it was, wasn't it? It had to be, based on everything she'd read. But if she had future sight, why had she never received a vision when she looked into flames before?

There were four affinities that commanded the four elements: Windwalkers for air, Firebearers for fire, Groundbreakers for earth, and Waterrunners for water. Yet each of those four affinities could, sometimes, tap into a deeper, more mysterious magic called an affinity of the self.

For Firebearers, that was future sight.

"Do you need more water, your highness?" A servant called from outside the door to the bathing room.

"I'm fine," she lied.

The water was tepid and like ice on her skin. But she relished every raised goose bump that now lined her arms. Smoldering embers had taken up residence in her stomach. White-hot lightning arced between them. It escaped, wrapping around her fingers if she moved them too quickly.

She was Awoken now, there was little doubt of that. Her uncle had said it would result in her being able to truly command her magic. But this did not feel like control.

The Crown Princess felt as if she was one breath away from burning alive.

As if she was one breath away from burning *them all* alive.

“Can I get you anything else, your highness?” The woman asked. Vi knew to read between the lines and understood she needed to get moving, go about her day. But how could she act as if nothing had happened?

“I’m done.” Vi stood, wrapping her arms around herself, shivering. But she didn’t know what from—the cold, or feeling the rising tide of the magic within her. What a fitting tone for her birthday.

The servant came in, head bowed, towel in outstretched hands. Vi allowed herself to be attended to and was ushered out into the narrow dressing area that attached her closet, bath, and toilet with her bedroom. She was silent as the servant moved hastily around her, placing her mind as far from her body as possible.

She was no longer Vi the sorceress, but Vi the princess.

Princesses did not object. Princesses did not attempt to dry or perfume themselves. They didn’t choose their outfits or decide what powders to put on their cheeks.

Yet when the woman’s hands moved to plunge themselves into Vi’s hair, she raised a hand.

“I can plait it myself.”

“Are you certain?” It was the usual question, even though whoever was attending her among Vi’s rotation of servants already knew the answer.

“I’m certain. You can go now.”

The moment the servant was gone, Vi’s fingers were in her hair, weaving the braids her mother had taught her were fashionable in the South. They shouldn’t allow her this. But they did.

She carefully twisted the braids, stretching them back, pinning them in place, repeating the process time and again.

By the time Vi was done, she felt some sliver of emotion trying to work its way out from underneath the ash that still coated her soul. Between the strands of hair, she’d almost completely woven the morning out of her narrative. If she tried, she could convince herself to pretend this was like any other morning before her classes.

To sell herself on the fiction, Vi wandered from her bathing and dressing rooms to her study, as she would on any normal day.

Hair still wet and dripping from the ends of her braids, Vi pulled it over her shoulder and tucked it carefully under the collar of her shirt so it

didn't get water on any of her most prized possessions. She closed the door tightly behind her and shut out the world.

What should she do?

Write down her vision? Ignore it entirely? Vi's eyes fell on her drafting table. The burnt spot stared at her like a bad omen. Could she trust herself with her magic feeling so unstable around her books?

Vi crossed to the table, sitting heavily. She tilted her head back, eyes wandering the maps lazily. They landed on the blueprint her brother had sent her of the rose garden.

"How about you, Father?" she asked the parchment. "Did you ever see the future?"

How nice it would be if she could actually ask her parents. It was a fantasy Vi pushed away as she shifted back toward the desk.

Her hand moved slowly, reaching for a quill and parchment. Every move was drawn out, intentional, no unnecessary energy expended so no magic would spark from her fingers again. A blank sheet in front of her, Vi drew the first line of ink across its surface.

She'd intended to write down her vision. But her hand seemed to move of its own accord, darting across the page while her mind lingered on nothing.

Swirling circles, connected by symbols Vi didn't understand. Dots, lines, smaller circles, they all wrapped together. As Vi drew, the sensation of rightness swelled in her, just as it had in her vision.

Why did something that seemed like it made so much sense also terrify her in equal measure?

Her quill stopped, and Vi looked down at the drawing. It was the same symbol she'd seen hovering over the watch around her neck, drawn with what Vi was certain was uncanny precision. Her heart began to race, staring at it. If she looked at it long enough then she may just—

The door opened behind her and Vi jumped, startled.

The paper in her hand incinerated in a bright *pop* of fire. The room filled with the scent of smoke and ash covered her fingertips yet again. She stared at the servant from earlier who stared back with equally wide eyes and an unsettling skepticism Vi had never seen before.

"Forgive my interruption." She gave a small bow, saying nothing of the magic she'd witnessed. "A courier has arrived."

"Jayme," Vi breathed in relief. Perhaps this birthday wouldn't be a complete waste. "Thank you, please excuse me." She pushed past the woman, starting out the door, only to be stopped again by a man who was heading into her classroom.

“Princess, where do you think you’re going?” Martis questioned.

“Jayme has arrived.”

“And you still have your lesson as normal, even when your courier arrives,” he said hastily, trying to stop her with words alone. “You’re about to have three days off, now is not the time to be skipping.”

“We’re about to get a whole fresh batch of news from Jayme’s delivery to debate during our lessons. Don’t you think it’s worth postponing things a little?” Vi braced herself for another rejection. But it seemed Martis would be softer on her than Jax had been.

“Very well, go on.” He shook his head and started into her study. “But hurry back. I expect at least a half lesson from you, princess. You’re not to get out of this entirely.”

“Understood,” Vi called over her shoulder and was off before he even had time to set down his folio on one of the two desks they used in her classroom.

Out the main door was a serpentine walkway, wrapping around the tree, tunneling back into the trunk as it spiraled down. Two different rope bridges connected across to other structures, and walkways that were really massive limbs with railings or twisting stone bridges. High above her, the buildings stretched into the leafy embrace of the most ancient trees in the world. Far below her, the buildings grew up from the ground to make a living fortress that looked like more of a magical treehouse than the strict definitions of castles and fortresses she’d seen in the architectural books she’d studied.

The rope bridge leading away from her room creaked loudly, swaying under her feet as she darted across it. From the platform on the far side, Vi could get a much better look of the main entry of the fortress. Sure enough, if she squinted, she could make out golden embellishments glinting off the standard saddle for an Imperial courier. Two people stood by the mount; one had dark hair like Vi’s, the other brown—like her mother’s.

But unusually, there was a second mount, and a man with bright blond hair.

Vi gripped the railing beside her so tightly the rough edges of the weather-worn rope splintered into her palms. She leaned over, bending at the waist, trying to get a better look without falling.

She couldn’t breathe.

From here, the man looked like he could be... might be... *was it Romulin?* Her heart nearly exploded from her chest with hope.

“Ellene!” Vi called upward. She took the curving steps that wound around the large tree trunk two, even three at a time, her long legs making quick work of the stairs. “Ellene! Jayme’s here and someone’s with her!”

“Princess.” A green-eyed maid gave a small nod, her hands laden with fresh linens. “The chieftain’s daughter has gone down to the stables.”

“Of course she has,” Vi muttered. Ellene and Vi had an unspoken race for who would be the first to greet their friend, and she was currently in second place. “Thank you!” she called as she began running back down the stairs.

Vi spiraled down, in and out of hollowed tree trunks that held the living quarters of the fortress of Soricium. She dashed across bridges of rope and stone, through sitting areas, gaming parlors, libraries, and more. She knew every shortcut, every back-door that led to a tree-limb that ran parallel with another where nimble, confident feet could jump.

In mere minutes, she was breathlessly emerging into the sunlight on the ground below, catching deep inhales of the dust cloud that perpetually lingered in the stretch of dirt that ran the length of the stables. At her left were smaller stables where horses were kept. At her right was a massive pen that contained five large noru cats, lounging about. Vi ignored both feline and equine alike, focusing on the small group collected around the courier she’d seen from above.

“Jayme!” Vi called over as she quickly approached.

“Don’t you have a lesson to be attending right now?” Jax turned quickly, giving her a stern look.

Vi stopped mid-step, freezing in place. The severity of his tone hardly fit him. It was the tone he usually used when they weren’t among friends.

“Martis agreed to a half lesson so that we could properly account for new news from the capital.” Vi’s eyes drifted from Jayme to Jax, and finally to the man still seated high on his horse—the new presence and undeniable source of the tension.

He had cerulean eyes, a square-cut jaw lined with pale stubble, and a mess of wavy golden hair. Vi supposed most women would find him handsome. She also supposed she wasn’t like most women... because his appeal did little to interest her.

She only cared about one thing: he was certainly *not* her brother. Vi knew it from the portraits of Romulin she’d been sent and she knew it

from the way he looked at her—eyes shifting, constant glances askance—awkward. Nothing like what she would expect of her brother's gaze.

"Greetings, your highness." He finally swung one dusty trouser leg over the saddle, dismounting and dipping into a low bow with the same motion. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Andru Rarren, son to Head of Senate, Lord Tomson Rarren."

*Son to Head of Senate...* Vi merely blinked at the man for a long minute as the words sank in. She took long enough that her uncle elbowed her side. Vi coughed softly, trying to ignore her lapse in etiquette.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Andru." Vi held out her hand expectantly.

Andru stared at it for a long moment as if confused. Long enough that Vi wondered if somehow she was remembering what her tutors had told her about Southern introductions incorrectly. But he finally, almost too hastily, grabbed her palm and brought the back of her hand to his lips for a light kiss.

"And you as well, your highness. I've heard much about you. Your brother talks much of you. It's good to finally put a face to a name." He straightened and Vi shifted, drawing her height as well. They were nearly the same measurement and she relished the fact. She was tall for a woman and would leverage her height as often as possible against men who thought they could look down on her by stature alone.

"I believe there have been portrait artists sent before to capture my likeness. Have you not seen their renditions?" Vi asked, part coy, part cautious.

"There is nothing like laying eyes on you in the flesh. The artists do not do you justice."

"Indeed, they are far too generous," Vi remarked dryly. "Why have you come, Lord Andru?" Vi folded her hands before her. "I know it is not to merely set eyes on me. Otherwise you came very far, for very little."

She could feel her uncle shift uncomfortably next to her. He wanted to scold her for her boldness. But Vi didn't feel the least bit sorry for her remarks. The Senate had done her no favors in life and she had no interest in bowing before them or their appointed messenger.

"You are correct, princess. This is not a mere social call. I am here to assess you."

"Assess *me*?" Vi repeated, shock seeping into the question. He would seek to assess her? More than her tutors already had? More than her

parents every time they came? Every inch of her had been inspected and measured since birth. What more was there to assess?

“Yes, on behalf of the Senate.”

“What does the Senate want to assess me on?” Vi asked cautiously. More like, what did they think they had the *right* to assess her on? At least her tutors and parents had ground to stand on for placing her under scrutiny. The Senate was an extension of the people, but far below the crown.

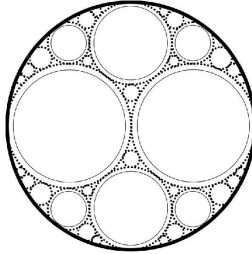
“Your fitness to rule.” He had the audacity to smile as he said it. “The people and Senate question if one raised in the arms of our enemies could be fit to be a leader of *all* the Empire’s peoples. Especially before she returns home next spring.”

Vi didn’t know where to start. Correcting the idea that she had been raised in the arms of enemies? The notion that she needed to be tested at all? Ruling was her birthright—the one unquestioned element of her life.

Or perhaps she should start with the last and most important thing of all...

The fact that she would *finally* head South in the spring.

## CHAPTER FOUR



*HOME*, a place she never thought she'd see. A place she had given up on ever finding. Now dangled before her by the words of a stranger.

"Can you say that again?" Her voice had fallen to a whisper. She didn't think she could muster anything louder if she tried. Everything felt fragile, as though the world itself might shatter if she spoke too loudly. The world likely wouldn't, but the thin veneer of hope that now coated her heart certainly would.

"Come spring, or as soon as the passes thaw enough to get the military parade through, the Senate has declared for you to be returned to Solarin."

It couldn't be real. It wasn't real. Without warning, suddenly, she would be reunited with her family.

"I..." Words completely failed her. Thoughts failed her. She'd fantasized so often about this moment that she should know exactly what her reaction was, and yet Vi froze completely.

Andru's mouth quirked up into a smile that Vi couldn't quite read. It was self-satisfied certainly, bordering on arrogant, slightly condescending perhaps. He must be relishing in rendering the princess speechless. Somehow, though, his blue eyes were kind. Leaving her conflicted about how she should react.

"Yes, princess?" Jax brought her back to the present.

"I am glad to be returning to the home of my forefathers at long last." Vi turned to Jayme, and then Ellene. Her two friends and confidants had been oddly silent. She needed time to process everything that was happening, and she couldn't rightly do that standing in the middle of the stable grounds. "Jayme, you have letters for me, I believe?"

"I do." Jayme gave a bow of her head then turned, reaching for a familiar box at the top of the small pile that had been unloaded from the



over-sized saddle bags of her mount. “This is for you, princess... And for you, Lord Wendyll... And I have a satchel for your tutors and staff.”

Vi gave a small noise of agreement and focused mostly on the small, lacquered white box. On its top was the imperial seal. Inside, packed between folds of blue velvet, were a series of small envelopes and parcels from her family.

“Let us head to my chambers, Jayme and Ellene. Martis should still be there; you can deliver the letters directly to him.” Vi took care to properly enunciate her words for Andru’s benefit, drawing each one out, as was customary for nobility—especially Southern nobility. “Uncle, can you kindly work with the staff and see that Andru is settled in to suitable chambers for the duration of his stay?”

“It seems Andru is not the only one who will need chambers for a longer stay.” Jax lowered a letter he’d been skimming; Vi recognized her mother’s script. His eyes went directly to Jayme. “You have had a promotion.”

Jayme folded her hands before her, head bowed slightly. It was a position Vi had seen often. Spending time in the company of the Crown Princess could be difficult for a woman who didn’t really enjoy being the center of attention.

“What is this?” Ellene finally spoke up. It was unusual for the girl to be so quiet, and the fact only emphasized how much Andru’s sheer presence could change their dynamic. “A promotion?”

“I’ve been appointed as a royal guard.” She raised her head, looking directly at Vi. “*Your* royal guard, to be specific. I will oversee your protection and guard detail, if you’ll have it.”

Vi could practically explode with excitement and she struggled to keep her face passive and manicured, especially in front of Andru. “Of course I’ll have it. You have been a loyal courier of mine for years; we all know that you can gracefully endure my various quirks.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.” Jayme gave a small smile.

“No, that’s about right,” Ellene muttered, finally breaking from decorum. Vi successfully fought a grin.

“You will be staying as well then? You will not be going home this winter?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be here until the Imperial parade comes to collect you this spring... and then after that also, naturally.”

*Imperial Parade comes to collect you this spring.* The words rang in Vi’s ears. She’d never heard something so wonderful and yet so hard to comprehend. There was some kind of disconnect. A wave of familiarity

came over her, as though she was living a moment she'd dreamed thousands of times.

Likely, because she was.

Vi felt dizzy all over again. She shifted the grip on her box. It only contained letters but they were as heavy as a powder keg. Depending on what was written in them, it might be just as explosive. Vi could only imagine what her brother had to say about the newest development Andru revealed.

"I will be assessing Jayme as well." There was that terrible word again from Andru's lips. *Assessing*. "It's quite a strange affair to see a common-born courier appointed to soldier so young. By the Empress Vhalla Solaris herself, no less."

"Jayme is no mere courier," Vi said defensively.

"She must not be, given the circumstances." Andru looked away and then dragged his eyes back to Vi. She fought the urge to squirm under his gaze. The man made her downright uncomfortable. "The Senate wants to make sure you are properly protected, your highness."

"I have the utmost faith in Jayme." Vi left no room for debate in the statement. She didn't like people questioning the merits of her friends—Vi had few enough, and she wanted to keep the ones she did have. "If she feels fit for the job, then I'm certain she is."

*I'm*. Vi caught her slip too late. *I am*. Judging from the slight widening of Andru's eyes, he hadn't missed it. She hastily continued speaking, as if that could cover it.

"Now, if you will please excuse us. Jayme has letters to deliver to Martis."

"Yes, of course." Andru gave another bow of his head. "I shall find my quarters and then yours."

"Pardon?" Vi stopped mid step, half turned away. "A little bold, is it not? Inviting yourself to the Crown Princess's chambers?"

"For your lessons," he clarified.

"Of course..." Vi gave him one last, long look, trying to uncover whatever secrets he was hiding. But the man was a closed book.

It was a good thing books of all kinds were Vi's specialty.



The moment the door to her bedroom closed and they were alone, Vi put the box on her bedside table and threw her arms tightly around Jayme's

shoulders.

“You are the best birthday present a girl could ask for.”

“It’s good to see you too.” Jayme gave Vi a small pat on the back. “While it wasn’t intended, I’m glad I could make it by your birthday. Honestly, I didn’t know if I was going to make it at all before the new year.”

“Really?” Vi pulled away, looking into the familiar set of hazel eyes she hadn’t seen for over two months. “The passages are that bad this year?”

“Worse than ever.” Jayme gave a small nod and paused to give Ellene a tight hug next. “Winter came early, and in a bad way. The passes are becoming too treacherous for even the largest warstriders trained in ice and snow.”

“Well, I’m glad you made it safely.”

“I always do my best to deliver you a taste of home.”

“Yes, speaking of...” Vi looked from the box to her friend. Her head was spinning. Vi pulled her hair over her shoulder and fussed with the ends of her braids, giving her fingers something to do.

“What’s happening there? An Imperial Parade? Spring? Andru?” Ellene asked in Vi’s stead, as if sensing her tension.

“There’s a lot going on at the capital,” Jayme affirmed. “I’m sure your letters detail it better than I could.”

“Give me the quick summary. I may not have time to read them all before my lesson,” Vi urged, impatient. “You always have the best pieces of news that no one else writes about.” No one but her brother. Romulin rarely spared details, one of many reasons why she went for his letters first.

“You’ve heard the quick summary already...” Jayme ultimately obliged her. “The Senate is determined to bring you back South, no more delays or excuses.”

*Finally.* “What made them suddenly demand it?”

“A number of things, based on what I heard. But remember, I was only there for a week or so to deliver and collect replies. I’m hardly embroiled in it.” Jayme began to pace as she spoke.

“I know your usual disclaimers.” Vi sat on the bed, pulling her legs up to sit in a crossed position. “I want to hear what you saw, what you think. I value your counsel.”

Jayme stopped, gave Vi a small smile, and then began pacing once more. The tiny expression of gratitude at Vi’s flattery instantly faded

away as Jayme's tone became serious. "The White Death has become much, *much* worse—that's a good place to start."

"The plague? There hasn't been a single case of it here in Soricism still." Which was on the list of the many reasons why it had been argued that Vi should stay in the North.

"Soricism no, but—"

"It's in Shaldan now—to the southwest border," Ellene finished for Jayme.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Vi looked to Ellene.

"My mother only told me recently... and you know I don't like speaking about the White Death."

The last Chieftain of the North, Ellene's grandmother, had died not more than three years ago of the White Death, after heading West to Norin at the request of the Empress and Lady of the West. She'd gone to see if the strange yet powerful magic of Yargen could be of any help to the efforts to find a cure.

"Not to linger..." Jayme continued with an apologetic look toward Ellene. "But with the knowledge of the disease being here, the argument of keeping you here to protect you has vanished. In addition, your father set out shortly before I did for the Crescent Continent. I think the Senate wants to see you back with your father gone. I think they may feel nervous having neither the Emperor nor heir near them."

"What?" Vi breathed. "My father left?"

"I'm certain he wrote about it." Jayme stopped her pacing. "They say a cure for the plague may be found there."

"So they still are at a loss for how to treat it," Vi muttered. She turned to her box, plucking it off her nightstand. "Thank you, Jayme. I want to catch up further, but I think you were right and I should read my letters."

"Don't be too shocked that I was right," Jayme remarked dryly.

Vi gave a snort of amusement, eyes flicking up. "How I've missed that wit of yours."

"Careful, you may get more than—" before Jayme could say anything further, her head jerked toward the heavy wooden door. Vi's followed as the sounds of movement and muffled voices grew on the other side.

"That must be Andru arriving with your tutors," Jayme whispered.

"Aren't they noisy?" Ellene frowned. "He comes in here like he owns the place."

“He has that air about him. Well, I don’t know... Something is off...” Jayme’s frown deepened. She sat quickly on the edge of Vi’s bed, leaning in. There was a tension that hadn’t been in her actions before, not even when she was talking about the plague. “Listen, Vi. You need to be careful about him. I was with him for over two weeks on the road and have barely learned more than his pedigree. But I can tell you this: the Head of Senate, Lord Tomson, will do you no favors. Tomson is vocal about his concern for you taking the throne, and in the wake of the White Death worsening, the people are getting desperate... desperate enough to listen.”

“What are you saying?” Vi whispered back. Her mind had already connected the dots, but she didn’t want to see the words the lines spelled out. She’d do anything to ignore them.

“I’m saying that some say the crown may no longer be needed. That the Senate can represent the people alone.”

“What?” Vi hissed. “They have no right.”

“They don’t. They don’t, *alone*. But if they make the people believe the future of the crown is unstable—if *you* are unstable—then...” Jayme paused, letting the rest go unsaid. “The people are a powerful force if they unite behind a banner, and getting Andru on your side may be the only thing that could prevent such a tide from rising.”

“I don’t...” She didn’t understand? No, that wasn’t it. Vi understood perfectly, so perfectly that it was agonizing. She didn’t *want* to understand.

“Read your letters, and look for any advice on the political climate. There won’t be mention of Andru in there; the Senate practically ambushed me with him at the last minute after the letters were written. I’m going off the rumors of the people, which are always to be taken with a grain of salt. You may be able to derive better insights than I. But I do know that nothing good will come if you lead Andru to believe you’re anything other than the perfect princess the Senate wants.”

Perfect princesses didn’t speak back to their tutors, or fantasize about running off at the first possible opportunity. Nor did they debate strong opinions about the senate as Vi so often had. Every one of her teachers had been hand-appointed by the Senate. How could she have been so reckless as to feel comfortable?

A cold chill tingled down Vi’s spine. She felt as though she was about to be sick.

Unfortunately for Vi, she’d have to shove aside the queasy feeling, as a knock on the door brought their conversation to a close.

“Princess?” Martis asked through the door.

“Enter.” Vi stood, in the same motion opening her box and selecting a letter at random. The seal was broken and parchment unfurled by the moment the door was opened in full, revealing her tutors—Martis, Callope, Fredrik—along with Jax and Andru. Jayme was off the bed, standing two steps away, rigid. Ellene leaned against the wall by the bathroom door.

“I do believe it’s time for your lesson. We have much to go over,” Martis said.

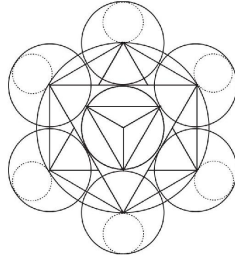
“Yes, of course.” Vi made a show of rolling up the parchment as though she’d been engrossed in its contents. “I was trying to get a head start on reading through my correspondence.”

“There will be plenty of time for that.” Andru’s eyes met hers. Ice blue, Vi decided, his eyes were ice blue and void of all warmth. “You shall have all winter, before the Imperial Parade arrives, and there will be no more letters in or out until then.”

No more letters meant that whatever information her box, and Jayme, contained was all Vi had to work with. She would get no advice from her brother, and no insights from her parents. Vi pressed her lips into a thin smile, trying to use the expression to conceal the pain that heavy stone was still inflicting in her stomach.

“You are very right.” Vi closed her box, standing as straight as possible. Panicking didn’t change her situation. She would keep herself together, and learn all she could. Vi had been groomed from birth to play the games of nobility. She smiled at each of them, the expression of a perfect princess, even when worry threatened to burn her alive. “Well then, shall we begin?”

## CHAPTER FIVE



VI EASED herself down into the chair behind her desk as though it were a throne. As though she wasn't completely surrounded by the men and woman who sought to pass judgment on her. Her eyes fluttered closed and she took a small, stabilizing breath.

She needed to keep her head about her. Her magic seemed erratic—more so than normal today—and the last thing she wanted was it running away on a rogue emotion and causing a mishap in front of Andru. She needed to be a perfect princess, just as Jayme had said.

Vi opened her eyes once more. They had all been waiting for her to speak as the highest rank among them. *Silence can be control*, her father had told her once. This was the first time she felt she truly exercised it.

“Let us start from the beginning. I would rather not have the details, and thus my understanding, be in pieces.” Vi looked to Andru, folding her hands on the desk.

“Yes, your highness.” Andru gave a small bow of his head and took the floor. He produced a small folded envelope, a broken seal bearing the blue signet of the Senate. Handing it to Vi, he paraphrased: “Your upbringing has been unconventional. As a result, many are concerned if you will truly rule with the Empire’s best interests in mind.

“Since the Senate helps bridge the people and the crown, I have been sent to compose an assessment of what you have learned and your overall demeanor. This will help the Senate give you their vote of confidence immediately on returning home.”

Vi had a few things she could think of that the Senate should be doing rather than assessing her—chief among them was not meddling with her family. Her rule did not have to be complicated and she had no idea why the Senate was making it out to be.

“Why the urgency?” Vi asked, already suspecting the answer based on her discussion with Jayme. “The Senate can assess me in full when I return home in the spring. I will not sit the throne for many years, so even the people will have a chance to come to know me when I am no longer bound to Shaldan.”

“As you may have read in your letters, your father has left the capital, and soon the continent. We wish to account for contingencies.”

A nice way of saying, “in case he dies,” and they all knew it. It was the way of royalty; Romulin was the contingency plan for her, she was the contingency plan for her father, alongside her mother.

“Or perhaps you could consider me collateral.” Andru shifted his weight from side to side, glancing askance. “To ensure that Chieftain Sehra will not do anything to try to keep you. The Imperial parade will come to collect me as the son of Head of Senate, ensuring your return as well.”

Her own lips turned into a bitter smile. He wasn’t nearly as valuable as she was. If the Senate changed their mind on making the trip for her, then the trip wouldn’t be made, regardless of who else was stuck with her.

“Yes, well, it is not as if I can send you away, even if I wanted to.” Jayme said the passages were too perilous now for safe travel. They were trapped together, for better or worse, for a winter. “So how will your assessment work?”

“I will sit in on all your lessons.” He lifted a folio off the desk her tutors usually used. “I have notes from the Senate of things they wish to see, certain subjects they want reported on. As you might imagine, princess, they are keen to learn more of your politics.”

Vi gripped her hands tighter still. Now she was to be graded like a child. They didn’t respect her, or her authority.

She took a calming breath, squelching her eager spark to show them all why they should heed her. If this was what she must do, then she would do it gracefully.

“I fear you shall be bored, but do as you like.” Nothing in Vi’s words betrayed the swirling emotion within her.

“Well then, now that we are all acquainted, I would like to begin that half lesson you promised me, princess,” Martis interjected.

“Yes, certainly, I am ready when you are.”

Martis moved behind the desk. Andru moved for a chair in the back corner of the room. Something about having him sit off to her side and



behind her right shoulder had Vi uneasy. But there was little she could do other than sit straighter and try to ignore him entirely.

“Since I am still going through my letters, let us resume with our discussion from two days ago, if you please.”

She didn’t please, if Vi was being honest.

More than anything she wanted a few solid hours with herself to regain her mental footing. Her eyes drifted to Jax for support, but he was already leaving the room.

Outwardly, she’d be the princess, while inwardly she’d boil from her magic super-heating her nerves.

“Yes, Martis, where shall we resume the discussions?” Vi said as the door closed behind her last tutor, leaving her alone with Martis and Andru.

“We had been talking about the nature of the Senate.” What an apt thing to be discussing now with Andru in the room. “Our last lesson had ended before you could answer my question.”

“Please refresh my memory.” Vi remembered perfectly, she just hoped to look for an opening to change the topic.

It didn’t work, and Vi settled in for several long hours of tutelage.



She had never been so exhausted at the end of a day of lessons. It felt like an entire lifetime had transpired. She’d woken up before dawn and now emerged from her classroom after the sun had set.

But her back was still rigid, a relaxed expression turned into a small smile as she thanked her final tutor and sent him away. Andru was close behind but he paused in the doorway.

“Thank you for allowing me to sit in on your lessons.”

“You’re welcome.” He was as welcome as a viper in her bed. Vi wanted him gone. She wanted him gone as badly as she wanted out of her formal clothes, which at that moment was *very* badly.

“I look forward to the next time we have lessons together. But I hear that will be in a few days’ time, as you are going on a hunt.”

“Yes, I am quite excited.” What Vi really wanted to say was that if he tried to do something to take her hunt from her, she’d burn him to ash where he stood. “Leaving Soricium is a gift from Sehra. She gives her blessing for it every year.”

“Her blessing? Prince Romulin has said that you, as the Crown Princess, can do as you please.”

Vi couldn’t ever do as she pleased *because* she was the Crown Princess.

“Even a Crown Princess can show respect toward her host.” The quick response seemed to satisfy him. “Now, if you will excuse me, I am quite exhausted from the events of the day and I can only imagine you are as well, since you’ve been traveling for some time.”

“I am tired.” Andru looked out the door. But instead of leaving, he slowly closed it.

“Lord Andru, I am not sure what you think you are doing, but I do not think it is appropriate for you to be in my chambers, unescorted, at this hour.” Perhaps it was a test, Vi reasoned. Perhaps he was trying to see if she would object or if he could uncover some deeply romantic corner of her, looking for a moonlight tryst. If that were the case, he was about to be sorely disappointed.

“I realize. Forgive me, princess.” Andru took a step inside, and then another. There was something she disliked about how unhurried his movements were, combined with that shifty look of his. “But there is something I must tell you, alone.”

Vi stood her ground, straightening. She wasn’t going to take one step back. If this was an intimidation tactic, it wouldn’t work.

“We are alone. Tell me and then leave.”

“No, no, it’s not *tell* you.” He shook his head and finally stopped. One more step and he might have had his nose singed. “Give you.” Andru reached into the breast pocket of his coat.

Vi watched, admittedly curious, as he produced a crumpled envelope. It was worse for wear, but the seal—the Solaris seal—was still intact. Only four people in the world were permitted to seal their envelopes with that mark.

“It is from your brother,” he said stiffly, holding it out.

Vi looked between the letter and the man, trying to choose her next words carefully. “Why did it not arrive with Jayme?”

“The decision for me to come North was rather... last minute. There was not time for more letters to be added to Jayme’s satchel.”

The story linked up, but Vi still regarded the envelope with suspicion. Even so, she took it. Regardless of how he got it, the contents were from one of her family members, and that was worth more than gold.

“Thank you for bringing it.” Vi held it in both hands, flipping it over. There was no writing on the outside. Andru continued to hover. Her eyes flicked up to his and neither moved for a long second. “Is there anything else?”

“No, well, I—”

“You are dismissed, then.” Vi gave him a smile, trying to ease away the harshness from the statement. “As you agreed, it is improper for you to be here.”

“Yes... of course.” Andru took a step away and Vi felt like she could breathe that much easier. Andru paused one final time, door halfway open. Over his shoulder, he gave her a small smile, the long bangs of his otherwise short blond hair tossed to one side. “Do enjoy your hunt tomorrow, and be careful—we wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

Before she could respond, the door closed.

“*Finally.*” Vi all but ran into her bedroom. She pulled at the lacing of her dress, slipping it off and donning a simple nightgown.

Vi sunk onto the thinly woven blanket that covered her bed.

“Now, let’s see what’s really going on,” she mumbled, placing the white box next to her on the feather mattress. Opening the top, Vi fished out the envelope marked with a golden seal of a blazing sun—the imperial signet—and her brother’s handwriting in the corner marking “from Romulin.”

She glanced at the letter Andru had given her, but decided to start with her box first, and save that for last.

---

*Dearest Sister,*

*I’m sure much of what I’m about to tell you is repetitive to mother and father’s letters and Jayme’s reports to you. If you find it annoying, I’d like to remind you of your previous request for me to tell you of everything in my own words.*

---

A small smile crossed her lips. Her brother’s handwriting was not the tight, slanted script of her father’s, nor was it the wider loops of her mother’s, but somewhere in-between. Every time she read his letters, she tried to imagine a new voice for Romulin. It was a game she’d started playing as a child, and intentionally never asked anyone who knew her brother what he sounded like so that it would be a surprise when she did finally meet him.

---

*The Senate has decided that you are to come home, that they can wait no longer, regardless of the plague and its spread. I think the final straw was word that there was evidence of it in the North. Or perhaps it was father's departure and the feeling that they are in dire straits without their C. Princess here in their sights.*

*Regardless of the reason, Mother could not be more excited to see you again, even though she just left you a few months ago. Which, speaking of, thank you for the cookies you sent. Even though they were crushed somewhat in travel (despite Mother's best efforts), they were quite curious indeed.*

---

Vi closed her eyes, savoring the memory of her mother's visit the past summer. It had been postponed later than usual due to winter lingering in the mountains. But that meant her mother stayed later, and Vi remembered every tangle and curl of her mother's hair, the soft smell of fresh eucalyptus in the perfumes she wore.

When Vi reopened her eyes, they fell back to the words *father's departure*, and prompted Vi to keep reading.

---

*Mother was rather a force in demanding that the entire family be permitted to come and get you. It seems she's finally had enough of "the Senate insisting on our separation"—her words, not mine. Though, I whole-heartedly endorse her on this. She all but made an Imperial decree on the matter. She wanted to come and get you sooner with a small contingent that could navigate the icy passes, but the Senate insisted on a full military parade—no doubt to show the North its might. They also reasoned the protection was necessary if I was to come as well. So concessions were made.*

*Sister, I advise you to steal the ear of the Chieftain sometime soon and warn her of this. Help her set her people's expectations for when the army arrives. The Senate sees this as a display of strength and a necessary level of protection for the royal family being all in one place, but I worry it could strain relations.*

*There is enough political uncertainty right now around the White Death. The people are afraid, and a populous living in fear is an unstable one. You are possibly the singular thing that can unite the Empire, but you'll need to play your cards right...*

---

Vi read on, gaining as much insight as her brother could give her on the dance of politics. Several passages she had to read twice. The whole letter was nearly four pages, but not a single mention of Andru.

---

*... and, with that, I leave you for now. This may be the last letter I ever write, since Jayme will be staying up there with you and the passages will be too frozen*

*for safe travel in short order. No more letters will have a chance to go through before the passes thaw, and when they do I will be on them, heading to you.*

*Can you believe it? The last letter I will ever write you. I have only known you through the tip of a pen... and soon, I will speak to you. I imagine what you will sound like, what our conversations will be in person. I cannot wait to hear about how your birthday hunt went this year, or what mayhem you and Ellene made at the winter solstice festival.*

*Everything feels as though it is happening so fast, yet I cannot wait. Somehow, I already know you feel the same, my twin.*

*Until we meet, dear sister.*

*Romulin*

---

At least it seemed fast for him. For Vi, she had lived her entire life waiting. She folded the letter and sought out her mother's next, hoping for a little brightness.

Vi was not disappointed. Much like Romulin said, the missive contained words of love, excitement, and encouragement. Only Vhalla Solaris could pen a letter that was equally beautiful and sorrowful. She clutched the letter to her chest, as if it could ease the dull ache there.

One more important letter remained: her father's.

Both Romulin and Vhalla had mentioned her father's departure, along with Jayme and Andru, and now Vi hoped that his own words would give more clarity on such a critical decision. Yet she found the letter painfully lacking. Judging from his penmanship, he'd clearly scribbled it in haste.

---

*My darling daughter,*

*I did not want to miss the opportunity to both send you an almost ceremonial final letter in this last batch, as well as my apologies with it.*

*There is reason for me to believe that a cure for the plague sweeping across our lands is on the Crescent Continent. I must go and meet with their leaders, inquire as to this potential cure myself. It is imperative for our family, for our future together.*

*The leaders on the Crescent Continent refused to discuss it with anyone else and our situation—our personal need of it—has become dire. Please understand, had this not been the case, nothing would've taken me from this land so close to bringing you home.*

*Please forgive your father for not taking the time to come north and visit you before leaving. The urgency surrounding these matters cannot be expressed in a mere letter. But the sooner I depart from Norin, the sooner I can return and make everything clear.*

*I promise you, I shall be there with your mother and brother when the time comes to collect you. We will be one family soon enough.*

*With love,*

*Your father*

---

“I understand, father,” Vi said with a thick throat. She’d spent her life being groomed to take his seat and assume the throne following him. Yet Vi couldn’t imagine what it was like to be an Emperor or Empress. To be simultaneously responsible for all the good and bad of the Empire.

*To think that was a job some imagined the Senate to take from them,* Vi thought bitterly. The more power they attempted to chip away from the crown, the greater their own responsibility. She’d heard it said that a heavy crown made a good ruler, but from where Vi sat, the Senate seemed to have necks far too thin to wear the sun crown—even if it were split among them.

Rubbing her eyes, making sure no rogue tears slipped from them as they were wont to do whenever she received her box of letters, Vi returned the envelope to sit with the rest. There were others among them, their wax seals telling Vi who was vying for the eyes of the Crown Princess. She recognized a few crests of court members; one senatorial seal was possibly noteworthy, but likely just another noble attempting to get in the good graces of the future Empress.

She placed the box on her bedside table and picked up the final letter she’d read for the night. Vi slid her finger under the seal and lifted. The flap opened and, just as Andru had said it would, her brother’s script greeted her.

---

V—

*Forgive my brevity. I’m sure you’ll understand. I had to send something ahead and there’s no time.*

*Andru is more important than you could possibly know. Please, be on your best behavior.*

R.

---

Vi flipped over the letter, looking for more, but there wasn’t any.

“What does that even mean?” she groaned, flopping back onto the bed. Vi gripped her pillow, rolling onto her side, clutching it.

Be on her best behavior. Be the perfect princess. Manage her magic that just so happened to show her strange visions of the future now, when normalcy was the watch-word.

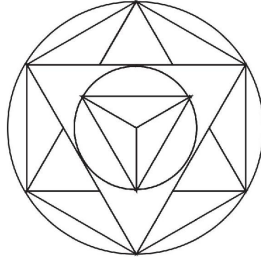
She pressed her eyes closed and took a breath, stopping the spark before it set her bed sheets ablaze.

The only thing Vi wanted to think about was the freedom tomorrow would bring. One more sleep and then she’d be on the hunt—far away

from everything—and would hopefully have a moment to herself to think.

Hopefully.

## CHAPTER SIX



“WAKE UP, SLEEPY PRINCESS!” Ellene declared, barging into Vi’s room.

She didn’t remember falling asleep and her letters were still strewn about her on top of the covers.

“Shouldn’t you knock?” Vi groaned.

“Not when the day is getting away from us.” Ellene threw open the window shutters and Vi yanked the covers over her head. “Come on, up, it’s time to go!”

“I need to check my pack a final time.” What Vi really wanted to say was that she needed five more minutes of sleep. She’d been up before dawn yesterday and was now up with the dawn today. Vi was not a morning person and this was testing her limits.

“I figured as much.” Ellene grinned. “It’s why I took the liberty of checking and packing it for you.”

Vi sat up at that, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “I don’t know if I should be grateful or frightened that you were in here rummaging around in my things while I slept.”

“It’s your fault for being such a heavy sleeper.” Ellene put her hands on her hips. “And I can’t tell if you’re offending my person or packing skills by that remark.”

“Both?”

“You wound me!” Ellene launched herself onto the bed, flopping heavily with a dramatic sigh. This was the Ellene Vi knew—someone caught somewhere between girl and woman still, and had all the best parts of both. Not the quiet observer she’d seen before Andru.

“Given that the last time we went hunting, I believe you forgot your bedroll...” Vi poked the girl’s nose.

“You like snuggling with me.” Ellene cuddled up to her for emphasis. “How could I deprive you of that joy?”



“The time before that, I believe you forgot rations.” Vi struggled to keep her face serious—it was a losing battle.

“You’re a good hunter. I was giving you incentive.” Ellene grinned.

“What about forgetting your—”

“You could just say thank you.” Ellene threw her hands in the air, raised up her legs, and half-jumped off the bed as quickly as she came.

Vi was quickly out of bed after her and throwing her arms around Ellene’s shoulders, hugging her tightly from behind. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, sister.” Ellene squeezed her forearm before Vi let go. “I’m glad you’re still going out, given Andru and all the weirdness of yesterday—” Ellene still didn’t know the half of it, Vi realized. “I think you could use the distraction.”

“I really could.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“I want to grab one more thing...” Vi started for the door to her study. She realized her presents had distracted her from grabbing her journal yesterday morning.

“I already grabbed your journal. It’s at the top of your pack.”

“What?” Vi stopped in her tracks.

“See, now who’s not forgetful?” Ellene asked over her shoulder with a satisfied smirk.

“You’re tolerating my map-making? Is it my birthday?”

“I think it is, actually. Or, was.” Ellene paused in her doorway. Vi was briefly reminded of Andru and the thought woke her spark. She fought to keep it suppressed, not allowing it to run wild. She would not allow it to ruin this hunt with any outbursts or visions. “Now, get dressed and meet me down.”

Today was not the day for dresses or finery. Vi picked her softest leather leggings, pairing them with a fitted shirt that wouldn’t impede her movements. She dressed quickly and made her way down the wooden stairs and winding arches of the fortress.

Vi emerged from the main entrance to find Jayme and Ellene waiting with Jax, Sehra, and... unfortunately... Andru.

He’d said he wasn’t coming the night before. Vi balled her hands into fists, hoping he hadn’t been lying to her. He’d better hope he hadn’t been lying... The sight of only three packs—one at Ellene’s feet and one at Jayme’s, and the third having her bow attached, put the fear to rest.

Vi’s eyes drifted upward, landing at Jayme’s hip. There was something new strapped there—a sword. The hilt was done in gold and

made to look like wheat. A properly Eastern design, seeing as they were the bread basket of the Empire.

“You really look like a proper soldier,” Vi said to Jayme, motioning toward the sword.

“Thank you.” Jayme gave the scabbard a pat.

“Hopefully she functions as a proper soldier, too,” Andru remarked.

Vi’s gaze turned to him with slightly narrowed eyes. But Jayme beat her to the retort.

“I have practiced with it all my life. It’s been in my hands every time I return home and in the training grounds with the other soldiers when I’m in Solarin. I am more than confident.”

“And you were born to wear that blade.” Jax wore a small, tender smile as he looked between the sword and the woman who wore it. Whatever he was seeing, it wasn’t the rising tensions. Vi almost wanted to ask, but kept silent. Now wasn’t the time, and she was still guarding secrets from him.

“Born or not, she is to be your sole guard for this adventure,” Andru continued. “A curious choice.”

“Do you have something you would like to say about it?” Vi couldn’t stop herself from asking. The question was a little too direct, said too quickly. But she didn’t regret the words even after they’d left her.

“Certainly not. I am here to observe, note, and report. Nothing more. I leave any decision-making or judgment-passing to my betters in the Senate.” He smiled his full-lipped, toothy smile.

“You three need to take note not to go too far.” Sehra was the one to get the conversation back on track. “Lord Andru has stated truth; Jayme will be your sole guard for this excursion.”

“You’re actually letting us go unattended?” Vi asked skeptically. What kind of a test was this? They’d never been permitted to go on a hunt without at least one of the Chieftain’s warriors in tow—usually four or five.

“First, you are not unattended, you have the new captain of your personal royal guard,” Jax said sternly. “Second, do not make us regret this. If there is any danger, shoot fire into the sky.”

Vi gave a small nod. She hoped it wouldn’t come to that. The last thing she wanted was to be around fire.

“Stay close enough that our watchers can see that alarm,” Sehra continued, oblivious to the sub-context of Vi’s magic lesson the day before. “And do not be gone for more than four days or we will use the noru to track you down.”

“Yes, mum.”

“Understood.” Jayme brought a fist to her chest in salute.

“We will be exceptionally careful. Thank you again, Chieftain, for permitting us to hunt. I am particularly grateful this year.” Vi lowered her eyes, dipping her head slightly.

“You are welcome.” Her green eyes had turned hard, cold even in the early heat of the morning. “Perhaps you may practice your magic in the forests? I hear from Jax you’ve made progress lately. I would like to see it when you return.”

“Perhaps...” The last thing Vi wanted to do was practice her magic. “Though I think I am looking forward to a vacation from my lessons.”

“Are they too rigorous for you?” Andru asked.

Vi bit the insides of her cheeks. The sooner she left, the better. Or she may show Sehra her magic a little too soon.

“I find the wealth of knowledge my tutors give me settles in best when I have fresh air and time to process. I come back with the best questions.”

“I look forward to hearing them during our next lessons, then.”

With that, she put Andru mentally behind her, eager to find physical distance as well. Vi adjusted her pack, looking to her friends. “Ready?”

The two girls nodded.

“Stay safe,” Sehra said as she leaned in to plant a kiss on her daughter’s forehead.

“You’re the oldest, Jayme, be sure to keep them in line,” Jax gave one final command.

“I’ll do my best, sir!”

The three started away from the towering trees of the castle and into the wooded city of Soricism. The trees were smaller, but still large enough to fit whole homes within and, thanks to the magic of the Groundbreakers, the people of Shaldan did just that.

Soricium, overall, was much like the fortress. It was a mix of stone and foliage. Groundbreakers bent earth and plant alike to make dwellings that came alive right alongside their residents. Doors appeared from solid walls and branches arched over the streets to create pathways for the confident footfalls of the magically inclined. Rooftops were covered in mosses that kept the houses cool in summer, warm in winter, and flowered in springtime.

“We’re not going to stay even remotely close to the city, are we?” Ellene dared to ask when they were well out of earshot.

“Oh, not at all. I wasn’t lying when I said I needed distance. As much as we can manage in the time we’re allowed.”

“What?” Jayme looked between them. “I just got done promising I would—”

“How many times have you come here, Jayme?” Vi interrupted.

“Given that I’ve been your courier for four years now and make a trip almost every month, that’d be...”

“At least forty-eight times.” Ellene jumped in. “Well, almost every month, so at least forty.”

“At least forty times and you’ve never even seen the Northern coast.” Vi gasped loudly, drawing even more attention than the two heirs and their guard already were, walking through the shaded city. Medallions of sunlight danced on the road ahead, striking beams like the footprints of mythical fairy folk the elders spoke of around campfires.

“Can you keep it down?” Jayme looked around, uncomfortable.

“I just think that’s something we need to fix.”

“The coast is a little far,” Ellene said uncertainly. “Why don’t we—”

“No, we’re going to the coast,” Vi insisted. “We can dip our toes in the water before it’s too cold.”

“Yes, this has everything to do with water and nothing to do with the news that the fishing town has moved.” Ellene easily called out Vi’s true intentions.

“They always change the landscape. I must update my maps!” The fishing town was a nomadic ground that traveled along the coast. They used their abilities as Groundbreakers to terraform the land for better fishing. Living in a region full of those with the power to manipulate the earth itself was both a delight and nightmare, for a hobby cartographer like herself. “Besides, you knew this was going to happen, or you wouldn’t have put my journal in my pack. You practically ensured it.”

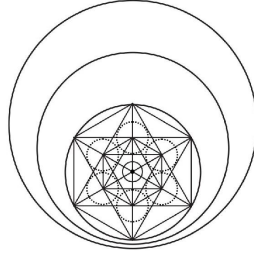
“Did you really?” Jayme looked to Ellene, but the girl looked anywhere else.

“She’s an enabler.” Vi laughed, hooking her arm with Jayme’s. “Now, it’s just us and we have a long hike ahead. Tell us all about the news of the South?”

Luckily, Jayme had no shortage of stories this time, for she talked as they left the city proper and the trees became free of dwellings. Her stories continued as they traversed the burnt stretch of earth that ringed Soricium—a holdover from the Empire’s siege during the war well before Vi’s birth.

On the second day, Vi and Ellene caught Jayme up on their adventures since the last time Jayme had been in the North—much less to talk about. Which was good, because by the late afternoon they had reached the sea, and Vi had all but forgotten the storm of power that loomed within her, threatening to break free.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



FROM THIS HIGH in the treetops, there was only wind.

A vine as thick as Vi's bicep was wrapped around her waist and the bark of the tree curved upward to cradle her feet and give her a comfortable stance. She squinted into the sunlight, trying to make out the exact curve of the land around the waves—nearly impossible with the midday glare off the sea.

Her journal was propped against her upper abdomen, held by her left hand. In her right was a stick of charcoal she was using to make hasty sketches—desperately trying, and failing, not to smudge. Every now and then, Vi lifted her eyes toward the horizon, checking her rendering.

It was close, not exact, but coming along. Vi stared again, this time in sheer wonder at how much the land seemed to have changed from the maps pinned back in her quarters. She'd stared at them for hours on end, committing their wiggling lines to memory. To think that some could make such a difference on the earth itself. Vi couldn't help but wonder what it was like to control power like that.

To have full control of magic at all.

"Are you quite done?" Ellene called up to her. The girl was stripped to her underclothes and dripping wet.

"Are you?" Vi shouted back. "You two look like you're enjoying the water a lot for people who didn't want to go this far."

"You should enjoy it too. Rather than spending the *entire* time perched in that tree."

"She'll just spend *most* of the time perched," Jayme chimed in.

"All right, all right, I'm basically done. I'll come down." Vi returned her charcoal to behind the front flap of her journal, quickly lacing the tie closed.

Ellene raised a hand and the tree shuddered and came to life. The vine around Vi adjusted its grip before hoisting her into the air. Her stomach rose to meet her jaw as she descended from the canopy. She'd been so high up that the wind in her ears grew to a whistle well before she neared the ground.

With a twist of her wrist, Ellene brought Vi to the earth gently. Her feet touching down on the soft carpet of small grasses that quickly became white sand. With a snap of her fingers, the vine uncurled and hung limply behind Vi.

"Was the snap really necessary?" Vi asked, kicking off her shoes and putting them with the other pairs.

"Everyone likes a bit of drama."

"Who did you hear that from?" Vi knew neither of Ellene's mothers would say such a thing. She was fairly certain she'd heard them espousing the opposite.

"Darrus," Ellene answered simply, quickly, as though she could sweep the name away. It didn't work.

"Who's this Darrus I keep hearing of?" Jayme asked from where she sat, legs stretched into the sea foam.

"Don't get her started," Vi cautioned, pulling up her leggings to step into the warm waters of the northern sea. If she didn't know better—didn't know that to the northwest, just over the horizon, there was a whole series of tiny islands separating the Main and Crescent Continents—she'd think she stood at the edge of the world itself.

"Darrus is just a boy." Ellene huffed, sitting back down where she'd been before.

"Wait, it's not *that* Darrus, is it? From the spring dances?"

"The same," Vi affirmed. The last time Jayme likely heard about Darrus would've been months ago. Which was the last time he was anything to Ellene.

"I thought we weren't speaking of him any longer? How did you word it?" Jayme made a show of thinking, but there was no way she'd forgotten Ellene's emotional tirade. "He was 'dead to us'?"

"Apparently asking Ellene to dance at the winter solstice can bring a man back to life." Vi grinned.

"So this is still about dances?" Jayme's eye roll conveyed exactly what she thought about that.

"Can we please change the topic?" Ellene begged.

"Sure, how about Lukke?" Vi recounted the last suitor before Darrus. Ellene had quite a few. But it was hardly surprising. She was smart,

fierce, beautiful, enjoyed the chase, and most importantly—had the time to deal with boys.

“Another boy?”

“You two are the worst!” Ellene laid back into the sand with a huff.

Vi and Jayme both shared a small laugh at her expense, but allowed the teasing to subside.

“What about you, princess? Any suitors catching your eye?” Jayme turned the tables.

“You know the answer is no. If it wasn’t no, you’d already be aware from the gossip that would be flying around the capital.” There was one thing Romulin had always been quite clear on—that regardless of where she was in the world, any romantic involvement on her part would have the gossip mongers of the capital talking. She was the heir to the Empire, and just about everyone seemed to want to have a hand in her match... except for her.

It wasn’t that Vi didn’t care. She hoped that she’d find love, or love would find her someday. But she’d just never felt that way about anyone, not like the storybooks made it out to be, all butterflies and stardust. Certainly not the instant attraction that had Ellene swooning over someone new each of the three springs since she turned twelve. Vi counted her blessings for the fact, since it made following Romulin’s sound advice to avoid romance entirely even easier.

“Plus, I have too much to worry about. I don’t have time to add a boy to the mix.”

“The Senate might disagree with that when you get back,” Jayme muttered.

“Yes, the crusty old men and women who want to take my crown also want to decide my romantic fate.” She’d never be so bold in front of anyone other than Ellene and Jayme. Her directness had them both laughing, and Vi spared a small smile on the outside. She knew it was no laughing matter though. Eventually, she would have to marry—and it would no doubt be a politically arranged union.

“And what about you? You’re doing an awfully good job at pointing fingers at Ellene and me.”

“What time would I possibly have to find a suitor?” Jayme shook her head. “Last I heard, most suitors like their other half at least relatively present, and I’m traveling across the continent every few weeks.”

“Well, you won’t be now.” Vi sat down between them, not caring about her clothes getting soaked in the process. She didn’t know when she’d feel the water again. “Sounds like you’ll be stuck with me now.”



“Lucky me,” Jayme said, deadpan.

Vi roared with laughter. “I’m *the worst*, aren’t I?”

“You have no idea.”

Even Ellene snorted with amusement at that.

“Perhaps you found love already in the man you’re traveling with?”

Vi suggested, not entirely sincerely.

“How dare you!” Jayme gasped and Vi couldn’t tell how much was for show. “Andru is awful.”

“He’s as bad as he seems?” Ellene asked.

Jayme sighed heavily. Her brow softened and she shook her head—a slight reversal on her earlier position. “I don’t know. Perhaps I’ve been unfair to him. He’s just so uncomfortable to be around, with that shifting gaze and those fidgeting hands. I assumed—”

“Don’t go sympathizing with him,” Vi cautioned. “You’re *my* ally.” Romulin had said Andru was more important than she could realize. Vi needed her friends on her side to help navigate whatever *that* meant.

Jayme just shrugged. She was never one for hesitating when it came to contesting Vi, at least in private. Vi appreciated the woman all the more for it.

“Either way, he’s not a love interest. Certainly not for me.”

“Then maybe we’ll both find love when we get back to the capital?” Vi suggested.

Jayme just shrugged, seizing the opportunity to shift the topic. “Speaking of Solarin... Can you really leave all this? For the capital and all its snow and ice? It seems like paradise here.”

“Everywhere is paradise, just a different kind.” Her maps told her that much. The world was wide and diverse; there were highlands and lowlands, frigid mountains and tropical jungles. Who was to say which was better than the other?

“Spoken like an Empress,” Jayme groaned.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Because it’s such a cliché answer.”

Vi shrugged. “It’s the truth.”

“I don’t even want to leave this spot right now.” Jayme looked out over the waves, toward the horizon. “Everything seems so... simple here. Being with you two, like this. It’s almost like I can believe the three of us are just girls relaxing. Nothing more complex than that. I can almost tell myself that time may not come for us, and we could be forever this way.”

Vi studied Jayme's face. There was something distant and sad about it. It was almost the same expression Jayme got whenever she spoke of her family—her father specifically. But before Vi could really put her finger on it, Jayme stood and shook the emotion from her with the sand clinging to her legs.

"Speaking of leaving, though. We likely should. If we're going to lie about how far we went we need to make sure we're back in four days."

"Our guard hath spoken," Ellene said to Vi.

"Right!" Vi jumped up, giving Jayme a salute.

"Don't mock me." The soldier rolled her eyes. "Some of us have to work for our positions in life, you know, we're not just born with them."

"We're not mocking you, we're very proud of you for your hard work," Vi said with genuine sincerity that she hoped shined through. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have had half the connection with my family I did."

Jayme glanced askance, clearly uncertain about the praise. True to form, she pushed past it. "We should also likely hunt something. It'll be even more believable we were on a hunt if we come back with a kill."

"Don't look at me, that's Vi's area of expertise." Ellene tugged on her tunic and the shorts she wore underneath. The girl often went barefoot, claiming it was a Groundbreaker tactic to feel the earth better.

"Do you mind? Seeing as I doubt I'll be killing anything in this jungle with a sword." Jayme strapped the weapon in question back to her waist.

"No, I can hunt something on the way, I'm sure." Vi detached her bow and quiver from her pack, handing the pack itself to Ellene. The girl already had a system for managing both. But before she could sling it on her back, Jayme took it and had it over her shoulder.

"If I can't help with the hunt, the least I can do is carry supplies," Jayme insisted.

"But—"

"Let her, Ellene. You may be able to help me with your magic like you did the last time," Vi thought aloud.

They were a good twenty paces into the forest when Jayme dared to ask the question Vi could only assume had been burning her up since the mere mention of magic. "What about *your* magic, Vi? The Chieftain said —"

"I've no idea what Sehra was talking about. The last thing any of us want, myself included, is for me to use my magic," she said quickly,

sternly. Her friends shared a startled look at Vi's tone. "Sorry... It's been... strange lately, is all."

"Strange how?" Ellene asked.

"I think I'm Awoken now," Vi confessed.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner? That's excellent news!" Her friend hopped from foot to foot. She'd never really understood Vi's plight. Ellene had manifested early, was Awoken quickly, and moreover had an ancient power in her that was said to have descended right from the Goddess herself. The Northerners called her a Child of Yargen.

"Like I said, it's been weird and I'd rather not test it," Vi said firmly. But, unsurprisingly, Ellene missed it.

"Why? You should—"

"If you think it's for the best," Jayme interrupted Ellene.

"The best would be for us to move more quietly so we don't scare away any jungle fowl."

At the suggestion, they moved through the forest silently and Vi appreciated that her play for a reprieve from the conversation worked.

Ellene made almost no noise, the ground curling around her feet with pulses of power to muffle her steps. Vi was the next most quiet, her steps in the jungle confident from a lifetime of venturing through it. Jayme... she tried her best. But she clearly wasn't accustomed to the shrub brushes, dangling vines, or gnarled roots that reached up to trip an unwary traveler.

The first day yielded nothing. They broke for camp, and all agreed that the next morning they'd find their luck. After a few hours of walking, their optimism was rewarded. Vi held up her hand, stopping her companions.

Movement in the distance caught her eye. Vi squinted, looking through the shifting shafts of light that were determined to make their path through the thick canopy. She crouched low, hearing the others following her lead.

There was another flash of green, the light hitting a rainbow of colored feathers. Vi slowly pointed, making sure they both saw it. She brought her finger to each of them, pointed at the ground, and then mouthed the words, "*You stay here.*"

Ellene and Jayme nodded. Ellene soundlessly ascended into the trees above and Vi began her slow crawl through the brush. She pushed aside large fronds, using them to half-keep her concealed as she approached the unsuspecting beast. Vi ignored the branches sticking to the messy braids of her hair as she found a good vantage.

Slowly, she slid an arrow from her quiver, notching it and drawing back. Sweat cut through the grime that coated her like a second skin after spending days in the jungle, raining into her eyes off her brow. It stung, but she ignored the haze of dirt and salt just as she ignored the ache in her legs from pressing into the roots and rock underneath her.

There was nothing in the world beyond the sound of her heart, and the tall-necked and long-legged bird that pecked the ground before her.

Vi took in a deep breath through her nose, holding it as she stretched every last bit of tension from her bow. The creature raised its head suddenly, looking through the forest. Whatever had startled it, Vi couldn't sense.

This was it. One clean shot.

The bird swiveled its head back around. The feathers of its flightless wings puffed outward. Vi could see it squat slightly, loading power in its nimble legs before it would bolt once more into the dense underbelly of the jungle. Her eyes widened slightly and fingers relaxed.

Vi's arrow shot straight, narrowly missing its mark. It whizzed past the head of the bird, her prediction of its movements off by a mere hair.

"Ellene!" Vi leapt from her vantage, sliding down the leafy forest floor. She would give chase, wouldn't let this one go.

Above her, trees groaned and shifted. Their canopies arced and swayed in unnatural ways. She heard the crackling and groaning of wood as branches and vines alike came to life at the behest of her magical friend sprinting across them.

"Head left!" Ellene shouted above.

Just as she finished speaking, a wall of stone jutted from the earth, causing the sprinting bird to track left. Vi notched another arrow, drew, took a breath, loosed. Once more, it whizzed past, missing by the smallest of margins.

"Again!" Vi shouted, pumping her legs against the forest floor, struggling to keep her balance and keep up with the creature. She was determined. This wouldn't get the best of her. She wouldn't let it win.

"Right!" Another curved wall of stone; the bird course corrected.

With flaps of its tiny wings, it launched itself up in a long leap onto a low branch. Every feather stood on end, tail upright and fanned like a rainbow as the bird gave an indignant squawk at her.

Vi was breathless, but from running, not from fear. If it tried to attack her with its long claws, it'd be dead. Either by her arrow, or Ellene's magic dropping a tree branch or rock on it. She was hunting for sport. But all sport would be gone if it actually became a threat to her.

She watched its motions, calming her breathing as much as possible as her legs continued to propel her forward. Her arm strained from holding her bow drawn as she made her calculations. It would try to use the height to its advantage and leap to attack. But that also made its movements relatively predictable, as its options were severely limited.

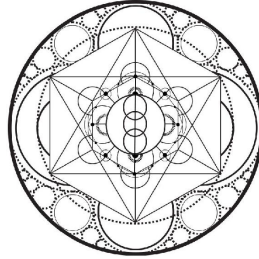
Wanting to keep her advantage, Vi dashed forward, forcing the creature to act. She tracked the tip of her arrow over the face of the animal as she watched its eyes—almost in slow motion—shifting to the left. *There, it would go there*, everything in Vi's body screamed.

Pushing her heels into the ground, Vi skidded, leaning back to get a better angle and bracing herself to come to a stop as her feet would eventually catch rock or root. The bird leaped just as she'd predicted. Her heart raced right before the kill.

"Vi, look out!" Ellene's shrill cry barely registered.

Where she'd expected her feet to meet something solid, there was only air. Her stomach shot up and out through her mouth in a scream, as the world was plunged into darkness.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



SHE WAS FALLING.

The arrow she'd notched flew in a strange arc as she let it go in surprise. Vi watched it whiz past the jungle fowl harmlessly, missing by a large margin, and the creature continued its escape. That was the last thing she saw as the light of the jungle quickly faded.

Ditching her bow, Vi's hands moved on instinct to try to brace her. Vi saw only stars as her body struck against a tall, wide stone. Her bow clattered, finally hitting the ground. She tried to calculate how far down it must be, but there was just pain and tension as her body rolled down the stone. When her body met the ground, Vi flopped onto her back and wheezed.

She could breathe. That much was good, at least.

But she couldn't use the word "good" for the rest of her situation. Vi stared up, blinking at the circle of light above her. It was a green oculus to the jungle she'd fallen from. Vines swayed down into the cavern she now found herself in, dirt padded the ground under her, and the creeping plants that had masked the hole she'd fallen into were torn to leafy bits and cast about like confetti.

Groaning, Vi wiggled her fingers and toes, then moved her elbows and knees. She stretched her arms above her head, slowly, feeling the muscles in her chest expand over her ribs. Nearly every corner of her body hurt, but the stone pillar that stretched at a diagonal through the cavern had broken her fall enough that nothing seemed worse than bruises.

*Pillar.*

Vi rolled onto her side and pushed herself up from her elbow. Blood trickled across her skin, and she felt the same warmth rolling down her

temple. Bruises and scrapes weren't so bad, all things considered, and Vi had more important things to focus on—like where she was.

The cavern was dark, the only source of light from the hole she'd fallen through. It cast long shadows on the ominous, gray underground she now sat in. But what fascinated her the most was how those shadows clung to sculptures carved into the far walls, barely filling their cracks and carvings enough for her to make them out. Her eyes darted from pillar to pillar, to the domed ceiling above her.

*It was a ceiling.* Not a naturally formed cave someone had decorated—which would still be incredible—but a man-made structure.

There were stretches of stone beam with small, black, shining bits of glass or stone placed between them, like dark stars glittering on a gray sky. There were supports around the edge of the room. And an archway, half collapsed, that led further into the mysterious darkness.

She tried to force her mind to ignore the pain and think. Had she seen ruins on her maps in this area? Vi couldn't recall, but likely not. She trusted her memory of her maps more than their accuracy, especially when it came to Northern ruins. No one seemed to think them important enough to mark. Or, if they were known, they were taboo—either too sacred or too cursed to traverse. The two facts combined resulted in precious little information on them.

"Vi!" Ellene's face appeared in the hole above. "Oh thank Yargen." Worry melted instantly into relief. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Vi finally stood, fighting a small wince. Her left elbow ached the worst. It was her non-dominant arm, but also the one she used to hold her bow. "Bruised and scraped is all."

"I'm sending down a vine."

"No, wait." Vi took a step forward. "This is some kind of ruin."

"So?"

"None of my maps have ruins anywhere near this area."

"Vi, *really*?" Ellene groaned. "Forget about your maps this one time and come back up."

"Don't you want to know what this is?" Vi looked up at the girl. "It looks like it's from the early days of Shaldan."

"I'm sure it's old if it's completely buried and unmarked. Do you ever consider that maybe there's a reason for that? Some things are best left uncharted and undisturbed."

"I don't know if that's true..." Vi turned her eyes back toward the archway, peering into the darkness beyond. It was utterly impenetrable

from where she stood. There would be only one way to know what lurked in that blackness. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Vi, no, please," Ellene whined softly. "Don't go exploring, come back up. We need to get going."

"I'm sure Jayme isn't far behind." Holding all the packs likely slowed her down. "I'll only be a minute and I'll be back before she gets here. It won't slow us down and then I can mark my maps."

"It looks dangerous," Ellene said, even though she could barely see the whole of it.

"It's been standing for a while like this. I think it can stand a little longer." Vi took a step forward, toward the edge of the circle of light the hole cast on the floor.

"Vi—"

"I'll only be a minute," Vi said firmly, looking back up at her friend. "Just wait there."

Ignoring the soft whimper from above that was equal parts worry and frustration, Vi stepped into the shadow.

Her eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light as she stepped over rubble, heading first toward the carvings on the walls. There were men and women, standing among trees, carving the land and building civilization. Always among them was the single figure of a woman, an axe in hand.

She paused at the threshold of the arch, taking Ellene's concerns to heart. Half of it had collapsed, a giant tree root stretching through the holes it'd punched in the stone. But that same tree root seemed to be helping support the ceiling of the narrow tunnel that led farther underground.

Even with her eyes continuing to fight to adjust to the dim light, it became harder and harder to see. The room opened up again; Vi felt it more than saw it. For now there were only the ghosts of light catching on the outlines of stone before her. The still, dank air felt expansive around her and Vi had the sensation as though she'd stepped into the mouth of a slumbering beast.

Taking a breath, and raising a slightly quivering hand, Vi carefully brought her spark to the surface. It shot up her forearm, running along the tendons under her skin. Vi focused on condensing the sparks into a single flame as they arced between her fingers and palm like tiny bolts of lightning. It was barely more than a candle, yet against the darkness that had rested undisturbed for countless years, it may as well have been a torch.



Before her was an expansive hall. Rows of columns at least three stories tall sloped down and away from her. Vi couldn't tell if the room had always sloped, or if it was the weight of the jungle above it, pressing down for years on this forgotten place.

The damp aroma of water filled the air. But it wasn't stale or moldy smelling. Instead, it was bright, fresh, as if fed by an underground spring. She'd heard of such underground channels feeding the jungles of the North from a great reservoir, but Vi had never seen one with her own eyes.

Vi moved her hand to get a better look at one of the carvings on the walls and her eyes were drawn to the flame. Suddenly, it was as if invisible fingers had grabbed her face and were stretching her lids upward and downward at the same time, holding her head in place. She felt the spark creeping up her neck, magic rattling in her skull. The flame brightened, going white hot.

*No!* Vi struggled against the sensation. She didn't want a vision here and now. But all her muscles were rigid and locked, her mental resistance quickly thwarted. The fire was all she saw as it quickly consumed her senses.

All at once, Vi was no longer standing in that dark underground ruin, but in a city she'd never seen before.

The day felt sickly hot, and the aroma of death clung to the square where she stood. Her eyes darted from the sun-shades that looked more like sails extending up from the white-washed stones of the walls. Orange and red roof tiles dipped into gutters made of steel, embellished with faces that had wide open mouths to pour rain from.

To her left was a row of chairs, a throne in its center. A woman, dressed in whole bolts of draped silk, sat with an ornate crown of gold on her head. At its peak was a sunburst, pillars supporting it. Vi squinted, trying to make out the face hidden underneath the long veil attached to the base of the crown. It looked almost like the sun crown of the Empire, yet not... Vi was certain it wasn't her mother sitting before her.

Flanking the queen were men and women, all dressed in finery with badges pinned over their left breasts. They each stared down a few short steps to the center of the square. There, kneeling before them, was a man Vi recognized.

*"Father!"* she called out. Her voice was muffled, smothered by the whole atmosphere of this strange place. It was then that she noticed there was no sound at all. She could hear nothing, despite seeing it with nearly perfect clarity.

Aldrik wore clothing she'd never seen him in before. It was embellished in patterns from his heels up to the long panels of the coat fastened with silver closures up to the neck. The sleeves were tucked into gloves, billowing at his elbows. She couldn't recognize where such a cut would hail from.

*Where was he?* And who would the Emperor Solaris kneel to? He alone was the ruler of all civilization.

The queen spoke, her words silent, and waved her hand. Aldrik stood, looking behind him at double doors pulled open by men posted to either side. Vi squinted; the vision was growing hazy.

A burly man—no, a *monster*—emerged. While he walked on two legs, and had two thick arms attached to broad shoulders with a single head between them, the similarities with “human” ended there.

He had a snout much like a lizard, and his skin was armored with plate-like scales that seemed to grow naturally underneath his flesh. They extended up in small horns along his snout, running along his brow. They also extended in the opposite direction, down his long tail. When he spoke, two rows of razor-sharp teeth glinted in the light.

Vi could not hear the words, the silence suddenly suffocating.

He pushed forward a cage and within it was an even more horrifying sight. A man was slamming his head against the bars, white oozing from the splits in his skin. His eyes had gone milky, streaked with pulsating red veins of unnatural magic that bulged from his skin and ran down his cheeks like tears.

She could not hear every sickening thud of the diseased man's body as he slammed it against the bars, but she could see her father's wince. She could see his hands clench at his side as he no doubt fought to stand rigidly still. The vision continued to fade, the details blurring, slowly blotting out as though it were overexposed—burned away.

In a blink, Vi was back in her body.

She landed hard on her knees, hands digging into the slightly moist stones beneath her. Vi gasped for air. Her equilibrium reeled. What was real? *What was that?*

“It's you.” The words were smooth and rich, and colored by a soft lilt. The voice's timbre was deeper than the lowest string of a cello, more resonant than a war drum.

Vi slowly rose her head toward the sound of the voice.

When she had fallen, her flame had extinguished—thankfully. But the room was now lit up by the man himself standing before her. Concentric circles of light spun slowly around his feet, raising up to his

knees before fading into the darkness; every few moments a new one repeated the cycle. He gave off his own illumination, and every movement seemed to trail sparks of magic through the dark air.

She recognized him from the first vision—dark purple hair, nearly black; his green eyes, the overall liveness about him. The Vi of the future had been on some clandestine meeting with this strange man who now stood before her.

“It’s you,” Vi whispered back, certain now that she’d hit her head and this must be a dream.

The man moved slowly. Every wisp of light caught along his hair and trailed off of him as he knelt before her. Eyes at her level, he stared at her, through her, with irises that glowed with their own strikingly green inner light. He looked at something in her that Vi wasn’t sure if she’d ever even seen.

“You... you are the champion?” He continued to stare at her. Vi slid back slightly, trying to put more distance between them. Her elbow ached from the fall, but the only thing she paid attention to was the man before her.

“Champion?” Vi shook her head. “I’m the Crown Princess of the Solaris Empire.” She’d look a lot more the part if she picked herself off the ground. But her muscles wouldn’t obey her commands. She felt frozen under his gaze.

“Solaris...” He scrunched his nose with what Vi would dare say was disgust. He looked her up and down one final time. Vi knew when she was being sized up, and this was certainly one of those times. She also knew when she didn’t measure up. “Why would she choose one of the Dark Isle as her champion?”

“I have no idea who you are or what you’re talking about. I’m not the person you think I am. What I’d like to know is—”

“I know who you are,” he said quickly, sharply. His accent had a harshness when whispered that silenced her immediately. “You are the one who has tortured me, year over year.”

“You have the wrong girl.” Vi stressed every word, as if that would somehow get it through his thick skull. “Who are you?”

“I am the voice.” A frown crossed over his lips. “You do not know who I am. You don’t know who you are. Do you even know you stand at an apex?”

“Do I dare ask a question or are you just going to berate me and not answer it anyway?” Vi asked with a frown. Frustration and anger were beginning to win out over the wonder and fear at the mysterious visitor.

He wasn't answering her questions. She doubted he was even listening to them.

Vi thought she saw a small smirk cross his lips, but she couldn't be sure, for it was gone as quickly as it came.

"You're useless to me as you are now and time is running short." He stood, taking a step backward.

"Useless? Excuse me?" Vi tried to push herself off the ground. Her whole body felt heavy. "How da—"

He lifted a hand. Magic spiraled out from his palm, a swirling glyph similar to the one around his feet—similar to what had glowed before her watch. "*Samasha*," he whispered.

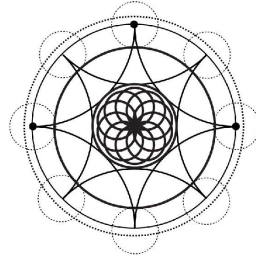
The word struck her like a punch to the gut. It knocked the wind from her, leaving Vi gasping and doubled over once more. She squinted up at the man, fighting for words. But behind her eyes were explosions of light that rippled across her skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

"Wh-what did you do to me?" she forced out the words. Her whole body rattled, her flesh searing hot against the ice-cold air of the underground.

She was going to be incinerated from the inside out. Her magic was going to break free of its tethers and, somehow, she would be burned by it. Firebearers could only be burned by the flames of stronger Firebearers, levied with the intent to harm. It should be impossible, but every searing nerve ending screaming in pain told her otherwise.

"Find the apexes. Seek me out." The man vanished, taking his unnatural light with him, leaving Vi gasping, struggling for consciousness against the bone-rattling tremors that shook through her, alone in the darkness of what she hoped would not be her tomb.

## CHAPTER NINE



IT COULD'VE BEEN SECONDS, or hours.

But eventually, the shakes faded. Her jaw had been locked, preventing her from making any noise greater than a whimper in the darkness—forcing her to suffer quietly. Yet when those bolts of agony finally vanished, Vi felt better. Great, almost.

She pushed herself away from the ground, straightening. Behind her, the hall stretched onward, but she'd had enough exploring for one day and didn't exactly feel like going for a swim in the dark. She wanted to put it all behind her, for now, and return to the world above where things made sense. Where she knew what was up, and down, and most importantly... what was *real*.

"... maybe five minutes now?" Ellene's voice echoed back to Vi as she emerged from the collapsed archway.

Five minutes? Had it really just been five minutes? She felt as though she'd lived an entire lifetime, died, and been reborn in that cavern.

"That's it, I'm going down there," Jayme declared.

"There's no need for that." Vi stepped back into the circle of sunlight, looking up at her friends. "I'm right here."

"What happened to you?" Jayme gasped.

Well, if that wasn't a question with an answer worthy of a thousand gold. Vi didn't really know where to begin. But she knew Jayme was focused on the bruises, scrapes, and blood still rolling down her knees from where the wounds had been ripped open again.

"I fell into a hole." Vi shrugged. Her friends wouldn't understand—or believe her—if she'd told them what she'd seen. Frankly, Vi didn't believe herself. Standing in the sunlight, it all truly felt like a dream... more like a nightmare. "I got banged up a bit, but I'm fine. Ellene, can you help me out of here?"

“Gladly.”

A vine slithered down into the hole, bending itself unnaturally into a U shape. Vi grabbed her bow and sat on it like she would a swing. Holding on to both sides, the vine lifted her up and out, depositing her on solid ground next to both of her friends before falling limply behind her.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Jayme asked, looking her up and down.

“It’s not as bad as it looks. It’s all superficial—bruises and cuts—nothing serious,” Vi assured them. “I just may be a little slow getting back.”

“I can still carry your pack,” Jayme said, even though it was already slung across her back.

“I can manage.” Vi held out her hand. “I’m certainly not going to be attempting to hunt anymore.”

Jayme just shrugged, starting into the forest, Vi’s pack still over her shoulder. Ellene and Vi shared a look, a non-verbal agreement that sometimes it was best not to even attempt argument when Jayme had made up her mind. Ellene started first behind their friend, and Vi followed.

“At least now we have a good excuse for why we’re taking the whole four days,” Ellene mused, clearly trying to gild the tension with a silver lining.

“I’m sure they expected us to take the whole time regardless.” Jayme glanced over her shoulder, as if making sure they were still following. “You two will always run to the end of whatever leash you’re given.”

“I think I should take offense to that.” Ellene’s tone clearly conveyed she didn’t.

The two continued on talking, but Vi stayed focused on her feet and the ground below her.

*What had happened in those ruins?*

Small tremors still shook her hands, and she wished Jayme had let her carry her pack so she’d have something to hold on to. Instead, she balled them into fists, trying to use the tension to still the shaking. The embers within her were now an outright blaze.

She stared down at her fists as if waiting for them to ignite with the raw power that was steadily filling her. *Fists*. It reminded her of her father’s motion in her vision.

“What is it, Ellene?” Jayme had stopped walking. Vi had been so lost in her thoughts that she almost went face-first into Ellene’s back, who had also stopped dead in her tracks.

“What’s wrong?” Vi rested her hand on Ellene’s shoulder to jolt her from her thoughts.

Ellene gazed eastward, the same direction the bird had when it’d been initially spooked. The movement was so similar, so instinctual, that Vi knew instantly the correlation was not by chance. Whatever the animal had sensed then, Ellene sensed now.

“What is it?”

“Something big.” Ellene crouched down, digging her fingers into the earth. She closed her eyes. There was a quiet pulsing of magic rippling out from her. “It’s odd...”

“What is?”

She seemed startled, as if she’d somehow not realized she’d spoken aloud. “There’s an odd feeling in the trees around us, all of them.”

“Odd *how*?”

“As though the earth itself is shuddering.”

“How can the earth shudder?” Jayme asked

“I don’t know.” Ellene’s tone matched Vi’s thoughts. A flight of birds took to the skies in the distance, punching through the canopy of trees with chaotic squawking. The branches of the trees swayed and Vi wondered if the rumbling she felt was only in her mind, brought on by Ellene’s words.

“What do you think it is?” Vi was almost afraid to ask.

“Nothing good.” Ellene went from perfect stillness to motion. She sprinted past them, calling over her shoulder. “We need to go, now!”

They didn’t question, running immediately behind her.

A rustling in the distance grew to a cacophony of snapping tree branches and crunching undergrowth. With a roar, a hulking noru cat burst into view. Vi turned, and froze with a mixture of fear, fascination, and stomach-churning recognition.

The beast oozed white globs from open sores that *plopped* sickly to the ground. It was as if every drop of blood in its veins had been replaced by the grotesque liquid. Its eyes were glossed over and pale, with familiar red streaks bulging in them. In fact, the magic-filled veins pulsed upward from its fur across its body, casting an ominous glow on the tree bark around it.

“The White Death,” Jayme uttered from behind her.

It suddenly made sense. What Vi had seen in her vision, what she was confronted with now. They’d said the plague was in the North. But it hadn’t seemed real until the moment she stared it in its unnatural, white eyes.

“Grandmother,” Ellene whimpered, her voice nearly as frozen with fear as Vi’s feet.

The beast slammed into a tree, as though it were drunk. A new wound burst open in the center of its head, as though its skin had gone brittle; chunks fell off like chips from a sculptor’s chisel. It shook its head, swayed, and picked itself back up slowly.

“Ellene,” Jayme whispered. “Can you take us up to the treetops? It hasn’t seen us yet, maybe we can avoid it entirely.”

Its hulking head turned slowly. Two orbs, like polished stone, stared right at Vi. A shot of energy ran straight up her spine.

“It saw me,” she breathed, panic flooding her.

“How do you—” Jayme never finished her thought. The beast turned, charging right for them. “Ellene, we have to go!”

Jayme lunged for Ellene in an attempt to get her moving. Vi watched as the girl buried her hands in her hair. She knew what was coming next—Ellene’s magic would act on instinct to protect her. A stone shell, like a turtle’s carapace, shot up from the ground around her. Jayme was close enough that she was encased in it as well.

But Vi... she’d been two steps too far away, and now she was alone with the charging Noru.

“Let me out!” Jayme’s muffled shouts could be heard.

“Mother, mother,” Ellene cried. If it were possible, the rock seemed to thicken. The voices vanished entirely.

Vi’s eyes turned back to the still charging Noru.

*This was how she was going to die.* That was the prevailing thought that ran through Vi’s brain, muffling everything else except for her heartbeat. Why was her heartbeat so loud? She couldn’t hear the snapping of wood or the snarls of the beast. All she could hear was the sound of her own vital signs. Well, at least as long as she heard that, she knew she was alive.

And if she was alive, she’d do everything in her power to stay that way.

Turning, Vi began to run. There was no way she could outpace a noru, so she’d have to try to outsmart it. Vi slid, gripping a tree root to swing into a shaded alcove at the base of the tree. She pressed her back into it, hoping to confuse the maddened animal and hide from it.

The tree rumbled, bark snapping, as the beast ran head-first into its trunk. Vi bit back a scream. The noru roared. Vi curled her legs, digging the balls of her feet into the earth, seeking some purchase underneath the thick covering of leaves. Her toes slammed into a root and her thighs



wrapped under her chest, exploding with power as she began running again.

*Fire.* She had to make fire. Surely they were close enough now for the watchers to see a warning.

Her side burned from her heavy breathing; her knees ached. The only thing keeping her moving was the knowledge that if she stopped she would be a snack for the giant cat trying to kill her. Darting between the trees, trying to out-nimble the large beast, Vi swung in a wide arc, trying to dredge up her spark in the process.

A paw, twice her size, came out of nowhere. Vi dodged inward, narrowly avoiding the claws, but was batted across the jungle like a toy. Her body slammed into another tree and stars exploded behind her eyes for the second time in one day. Vi fell limply to the ground, trying to push herself up as the creature stalked closer.

*Get up.* She had to get up. She was the daughter of Aldrik and Vhalla Solaris—cut from a cloth that couldn't be sheared so easily. Even if the giant saber-sized claws were about to prove her wrong.

"Get up!" Vi cried. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She would die before ever having the chance to live with her family—without ever finding her true home.

The noru's breath was hot on her face as it leaned down. A row of razor-sharp teeth glinted. The cat reared back, and dove in to eat her whole.

Vi screamed, and fire exploded from her.

Like a sailor watching a lifeline slip over the deck-rail, Vi watched as her control over the magic escaped her hands. Just as Ellene's magic had sprung forth to craft a shell to protect her, so did Vi's. Except hers was an inferno. Flames spread across the ground, fed by her magic and uncontrolled.

Too much. She had to get control of it. Her mind was frozen, unable to do anything but look on in horror as her magic took over.

She felt like she could burn the world down if she wasn't careful.

Vi continued to fight to stand, the ground beneath her ash and barren already. Her clothes had burned off entirely, as they had the last time, and the only thing she saw was white-hot flames.

*Withdraw, withdraw,* her mind urged in panic, mirroring her uncle's words. She would hurt her friends if she didn't. But the fire was too big. It had spread too far, too fast, and was beyond her control now. There was too much magic.

There were screams—distinctly animal. Hopefully Ellene’s rocky shield protected her from the blaze. Vi curled into a ball, holding herself, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Find the void. *Find the void*, she chanted in her mind. Vi closed her eyes, but there was no darkness. Instead there was only light, and the unstoppable tide of her magic. She felt every expanse of flame, as though it was a part of her. It filled her lungs and seared in her ears, as though trying to lick her mind itself.

The screams cut through to her. How was the animal still alive? Or was it perhaps Ellene and Jayme?

Vi’s head jerked up and she looked around frantically. But it was the same as behind her eyes. It was as though she had been dropped into the sun itself.

Her friends, confidants, the two true allies she had. She would kill them with her own hands. Vi looked down, already seeing their invisible blood staining her skin.

What Vi had always seen as fire was replaced by strands of magic peeling off her flesh. They unfurled as though spinning from a spool of magic within her. Vi watched as they stretched off her, flowed into the air, and knotted into tendrils of pure fire.

What was this power? It wasn’t anything like she’d ever witnessed before. Yet it was as if she’d known it all along.

*Samasha.*

The word echoed through her like the peel of a bell, bringing crystalline clarity to the chaos roaring around her. All at once, Vi realized she’d never truly seen her magic before. This was not future sight. This was not fire magic at all.

Her power was light itself, and all the possibilities of the world stretched within it—the code of the universe writ large. Just like the glyphs she’d seen winding around the man, and around her watch—*this* was her magic. Vi took a breath and slowly brought her hands together, pressing her fingertips to make a cage. Narrowing her eyes, Vi focused on channeling the wild tendrils of light and fire to condense, to form a knotted ball of those same incomprehensible glyphs underneath her palms.

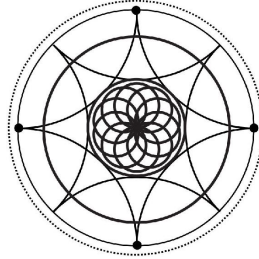
The fire subsided, her magic focused on one place. When it was squarely under her control, Vi merely pulled a string in her mind, and watched it all harmlessly unravel. Just like that, the flames vanished.

Vi blinked into the black, barren, smoking field, her eyes adjusting. They barely had a moment to come into focus on the charred bones of

the noru, all flesh burned away, before darting to where Ellene's protective cocoon of rock pulled up from the earth.

It had been split open, and Vi let out a scream of anguish—a sound unlike any she had made ever before.

## CHAPTER TEN



SHE HAD KILLED HER FRIENDS.

Her magic had broken free and unleashed its true nature—whatever that thread-like power had been—and it had been deadly to the two people who had been closer to her than any others in the world.

Vi buried her face in her hands, wishing she had been the one to burn instead. She stayed curled up on the barren field, naked and uncaring in her grief. The Empire would carry on just fine without her. She'd served her purpose as a ward in the North to keep peace. Romulin could take the throne and her parents—

“Vi!” Jax’s voice broke through her thoughts.

Vi lifted her head, turning. Off to the side, at the edge of the burnt ring, a group stood. Her eyes widened as she looked past the noru—the non-diseased kind—past the two warriors who were still mounted, and landed on Sehra clutching tightly to Ellene, with Jayme standing awkwardly off to the side.

Sehra was saying things Vi couldn’t hear from this distance. Her green eyes, on occasion, would flick Vi’s way. But neither woman made any motion to bridge the gap between them.

Better Ellene angry with her than dead.

“Vi,” Jax repeated, panting as he came to a stop before her. He stood bare-chested, eyes turned up toward the sky. His tunic was clenched in his palm. “Here.”

Vi looked from him to the article of clothing he’d removed to give her. Vi took his shirt and hastily slid it over her shoulders. He waited an extra second with his eyes averted, then looked back. She could see the relief that flooded his expression.

“By the Mother.” He dropped to his knees before her, wrapping his arms tightly around her shoulders. Vi winced slightly from all the cuts

and bruises, but his embrace was welcome support. “What in gods’ names happened?”

Where should she begin?

She’d banged herself up falling down a hole. Had an out-of-body experience tangling with the future, *again*, and then met a man who’d seemed to be more light than matter. She’d been chased and nearly eaten by a diseased noru. And then saw a magic she didn’t even know how to describe unraveling from her.

If she’d been tasked with imagining the strangest, most exhausting day possible, Vi wouldn’t have been able to come up with half of it.

“There was a noru that had the White Death and—”

“The White Death?” She hadn’t thought his tone could get more serious, but he proved her wrong. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Vi affirmed without doubt.

“How do you know?”

“Jayme saw it,” Vi explained, avoiding mention of the vision of her father and the caged man. She’d tell her uncle eventually. But right now, her head was already swimming and there was only so much she could process at once. “She said she knew its signs from the capital. But even without her account, I had no doubt as to what it was.”

“This close to Soricism...” he muttered. Jax’s dark stubble folded in around his mouth as he pressed it into a thin line. “Let’s head back. We can discuss this with Sehra.”

He brought his fingers to his lips, letting out a shrill whistle. Gormon, the noru Sehra had gifted Vi a few years ago, came padding over. Vi watched it come close, swallowing hard. She’d had enough noru for one day. But she also knew when she was being ridiculous; Gormon was a loyal beast.

Crown princesses did not have the luxury of clinging to past emotional distresses.

She’d already learned that the hard way, multiple times. Whatever trauma life threw at her, she had to bury it, push forward, and move on, or else risk being suffocated by her own self-doubt. No one would understand, or have any sympathy, if she complained.

“Come on, up with you.” Jax held out his hands. “Can you stand?”

“I think so.” Vi took his hands, trying to pull herself to her feet. She let out a yelp of pain in the process and her left knee folded. Her uncle quickly caught her, using his strength to support her so Vi didn’t have to put her weight on what now seemed likely to be broken. “Or, not.”

“First, cleric. Then we speak with Sehra.”

Vi gripped him tightly, looking back to Sehra at the mention of the woman. The scolding would be well deserved, but Vi wasn't looking forward to it.

"Are Ellene and Jayme truly all right?" she whispered.

"Shaken up a bit, but Ellene's magic protected her, barely. If you hadn't stopped the fire when you did, this might have been a very different day."

"A day I don't want to think about."

"But you did have control at the end, didn't you?" Jax murmured. "The fire stopped before we reached it."

"I don't know how," she confessed. "My magic seemed... strange."

"I'm not surprised. Given that display, Vi... You're Awoken." It seemed much more than that to her. "We'll discuss it when we're back. Let me help you up." Jax laced his fingers and held them down, granting her some relief and not pressing further about her obvious hesitation. "I know you're more confident riding these things than I am. But that's usually without a bad leg."

Vi hesitated, staring at the animal, balancing as best she could on her good leg. Gormon turned his furry head toward her, and Vi saw the dead eyes of the noru layered atop his bright, clear ones. She flinched.

"He's the same Gormon you've always ridden," Jax said encouragingly, soothingly, as if reading her mind.

"I know." Vi tried to roll her eyes as she placed a hand on the beast's dense fur. "I'm not afraid of him."

"Of course you're not."

"I'm merely debating if I can endure your help mounting. But I suppose I shall this one time." Vi made an attempt at the dramatic for a laugh and her uncle indulged her. Together, it distracted her from the pain as she got astride the animal. Her leg screamed in protest, but could still be moved—marginally—so perhaps it wasn't entirely broken.

"You settled?" Jax asked with a grunt, mounting behind her.

"Yes, and more than ready to get this mended."

The cat sprang to life and they bounded back in the direction of the capital of the North. Uncle Jax muttered to himself the whole time.

"It's a miracle you're all right. Thank the Mother. I couldn't have imagined what might have happened if something befell you or Ellene. We should've never let you go. *I* should've never let you go. The Senate advised against these hunts of yours as you got older and there was less supervision. I should've listened. Mother knows what that boy is going to write in his reports of his.

“But... to think, your magic is Awoken and you’re already learning to control fires of that power and size. We may be able to work with this before you return south...”

The words blurred like the trees passing to either side. Vi stared at nothing, letting her eyes glaze over. She could see her father, kneeling before a foreign queen in strange clothing. He had to be on the Crescent Continent in her vision... so how far in the future was that? Tomorrow? A month? A year? She wasn’t sure how long ago his farewell letter had been written.

Then there was her other vision... and that man. The voice, he’d called himself. He’d done something to her and then left with nothing more than a command to find him again.

Vi didn’t know where to start—the fact that he would command her... or the fact that even if she wanted to summon him, she had no idea how.

Soricium emerged before them. The buildings with bases of stone and second stories of wood blurred past them as the noru bounded down the main streets of the city, heading to the large castle-like fortress at its center. The street forced the noru closer together, close enough that Vi could speak with Jayme and Ellene.

“I’m sorry,” Vi called over. They both turned, startled. “I didn’t mean —”

“What’re you sorry for?” Ellene shook her head. “We’re glad you’re all right!”

“Likewise.” Vi breathed a sigh of relief, knowing there were no hard feelings between them.

The noru came to a stop and Jax immediately swung his legs over, reaching up to help her off. Vi allowed herself the assistance once more. She was far too tired and in too much pain to object. His hands fell on her waist and he eased her down. Vi put all of her weight on her right foot, allowing him to shift an arm around her back to help support her.

“Call for Ginger,” he shouted, loud enough that Vi was certain half the castle heard. “The Crown Princess is injured.”

“You don’t need to make such a fuss. I can manage,” Vi muttered, hobbling alongside him. She hadn’t even crossed halfway to the castle when said cleric ran out.

“Princess, what has happened?” The blue-eyed woman fussed, eyes immediately drawn across the constellation of bruises and scrapes across her body, then to her leg. “Goodness, just what have you gotten yourself into this time? The older you get, the worse shape you’re in when you

return from these hunts of yours.” She dropped to her knees, setting her basket down, and began rummaging through it. She continued muttering as she worked. “Hunts, why do we even still call them that? We all know they’re just excuses for you to have a few days out exploring.”

*Could she be blamed for it?* Everyone had their limits in captivity. But Vi held her tongue. She’d caused more than enough trouble for one day.

Ginger, a Waterrunner, had been sent from the South with Vi from the very beginning. Waterrunners made some of the best clerics due to their abilities to manipulate the water in the body as well as change the properties of salve. She’d been the best cleric Vi could ask for—overall focusing mostly on mending her after she fell, or reviving her when she was ill, rather than the recklessness that usually brought those things about.

“When we saw the flame, I prepared. I just knew you’d come back worse for wear.” Ginger paused, hands sticky with salve. “It was you, the fire, wasn’t it?”

Vi quickly tried to weigh the scales of answers in her head. As trusted as Ginger was, she was also a Southerner with deep ties to the capital. However, any word she could send back wouldn’t make it before Vi was headed back as well, which meant she and Romulin could thwart any nefarious uses for information.

Then again, who else could’ve started and stopped a fire like that?

“It was me behind the fire. There was a threat to my person and the Chieftain’s daughter,” Vi answered ambiguously. If there was one thing Romulin had stressed, it was that she owed no one more explanation than she wanted to give.

“A threat? Goodness, of what kind?” Ginger paused. “But that also means you’ve finally Awoken, princess. How exciting!”

“Thank you, Ginger,” Sehra interrupted, as if somehow sensing it had crossed into sensitive territory. Vi hadn’t even noticed her walking over. “When you are finished seeing to the Crown Princess, would you mind tending to my daughter and Jayme?”

“Not at all.” Ginger gave a smile and a small nod. Of all of Vi’s staff and tutors, Ginger had integrated the easiest. Perhaps it was her clerical demeanor—that she saw all people as patients, nothing more or less. Or perhaps Ginger was a better soul. Either way, Vi trusted her more for it. “Just one more second and I’ll have finished sorting the worst of it.”

Vi closed her eyes, feeling the thick salve Ginger had coated her swollen leg with chill to a temperature that was almost ice-like. As it



warmed back up in the heat of the air, the pain was significantly reduced, swelling gone. Vi placed her weight on the leg delicately. There was stiffness, some stinging, but, as Ginger put, the worst of it seemed sorted. Luckily the injury hadn't been too severe.

"It may feel better, princess, but it is still mending so do take care. No running, jumping, riding, fighting, or whatever it is that you find yourself inclined to, cleric's orders."

"Yes." Vi gave a nod to the mostly white-haired woman. She was one of the few who had never seen an issue ordering Vi around, despite their difference in status.

Ginger gave a nod, stood, and departed, leaving Vi with Jax and Sehra.

"I apologize for not checking on you more promptly, princess," Sehra began and Vi couldn't tell if she meant it, or was merely saying what would be expected in such a situation.

"It's I who should apologize to you." Vi turned to face the woman. "Know I would not have endangered Ellene with my fledgling magic if were it not for the noru afflicted with the White Death. Our lives were at stake."

"An infected noru? The plague has spread to animals?" Sehra turned from Vi to Jax.

"I was already planning to send word of it to Lady Elecia in the West. She may be able to help get a message to the capital." Jax never failed to jump at an excuse to reach out to Elecia. The two of them were in a hopeless orbit around each other. But Vi couldn't read too much into this particular suggestion, given the circumstances.

"I think her mother, Ambassador Amrosah, is still in the southwest region of Shaldan. I can send couriers there."

"Certainly. I'll draft a letter."

A thought crossed Vi's mind, briefly, that perhaps her uncle would leave her when they arrived south. She would no longer need a guardian and Jax would be far happier with Elecia, Vi would bet. It settled an ache in her that she was ready to ignore the moment Sehra spoke again.

"Thank you for handling it." Her uncle gave a small bow of his head. Sehra turned to face her, and her alone. "More pressing, for now... Go clean yourself up, and meet me in my throne room."

Vi kept her face passive, keeping her worry at whatever punishment would be levied against her locked within. "Understood, Chieftain."



The stronghold of Soricism could be maze-like for the uninitiated. She'd heard of the castles in the south being rather twisting as well... but it was hard to think they could twist a person more backwards than branches that became bridges that connected to wide platforms before disappearing into the trees themselves in a series of hollowed out tunnels.

It could easily set a person on the wrong course. That is, if they weren't like Vi, and hadn't grown up among them. So she had no excuse for any delays other than purely dragging her feet.

Now, Vi stood before an intricately carved door at the end of a long stone bridge, set against the trunk of the center-most tree in the fortress. This was the oldest tree in the world—so the wrinkled men who sat around fires said—and they called it the Mother Tree. It was this tree that was said to have caught a falling star—a shard of the Mother's light—in its branches. By the time the star finally reached the ground, it had absorbed life from the tree and became a woman. The same woman cut civilization from the boughs of the Mother Tree, forming all of Shaldan.

Briefly, the ruins she'd landed in appeared in her mind. But Vi pushed them from her thoughts. She had more important things to focus on now.

Lifting a fist, Vi gave a few raps of her knuckles against the wood. The doors peeled apart, opening inward by a magic force. Inside, the hollowed center of the tree arched above in a dome. Flowers and vines hung from the ceiling, giving off a cloyingly sweet smell that hung in the room despite half of it being open completely to a wide balcony.

"Come in, Vi." Sehra was standing several paces in front of her throne, right at the edge of where the tree-trunk vanished and the balcony extended, uncovered, underneath the open sky.

Vi swallowed, accepted her fate, and stepped inside. The doors closed behind her, leaving Vi little option but to cross over to the Chieftain of the North—the woman whose protection Vi had been destined to rely on before she was even born.

"Are you wondering why I summoned you?"

"I honestly find it quite clear." Vi stepped beside the woman, looking out into the expansive archways and paths of the fortress before them. "You showed me kindness, allowing me to leave. And when you did, I abused it, going farther than I should have. In the process, I endangered your daughter."

"You went farther than you were supposed to?" Sehra interrupted her list of transgressions with a look of genuine surprise.

“I figured Ellene would’ve told you.” Vi cursed her luck. The girl used to tell her mother everything. But it seemed, with age, she was learning how to keep a secret.

“I expected it, as did Jax.”

“Yes, well...” Vi tried to find her previous thought. “Even still, I endangered Ellene and Jayme with my outburst. I should have stayed here, and trained more after being so recently Awoken.”

Sehra looked straight ahead, out over the treetops of the fortress. She was rigid, regal, everything Vi hoped she could be someday; she had a long way to go.

“I am not going to punish you.”

“I may be the Crown Princess, but I should not be above punishment.” She didn’t particularly enjoy reprimands. But getting off, free and clear, felt wrong.

“There’s no time now for punishments,” Sehra said ominously. “We have too much work to do, you and I.”

“Work?” Vi repeated, glancing from the corners of her eyes at the woman. She had yet to move. She was hardly even breathing.

“Yes, I was waiting for today to begin. I was waiting to be certain, beyond all doubt, for the knowledge I will impart to you has never been heard by ears outside my lineage.” Vi had no idea what Sehra was talking about. “Why do you think it is that you have struggled so much with your flames?”

“I... I don’t know. Everyone always said I was a late bloomer, like my mother. But I have Awoken. And managed to find control in the jungle. My magic...”

The man in the cavern flashed through her mind, his glowing emerald eyes, the singular word he’d uttered. Something had changed with that man, that word. What had he done to her? What was that word that had echoed in her the next time her magic was unleashed?

“And?” Sehra pressed, reminding Vi she had stopped talking.

“And I think I have a better understanding of my magic. I think Uncle Jax will be able to teach me now and—”

“Jax can teach you nothing.”

“What?” Vi turned to face the Chieftain, anger bringing her spark to the surface faster than talking about it had.

“He will teach you as a Firebearer.”

“That’s—”

“That is not what you are. You are not a Firebearer, Vi. Not at your core. Certainly, you are able to create and manipulate flames, but this is a

manifestation of your expectations for your own magic and the expectations of those around you.

“Like nature versus nurture. You have been nurtured by Firebearers, so you and everyone else believes that is what you are. But that is not your nature. That is not your magic.”

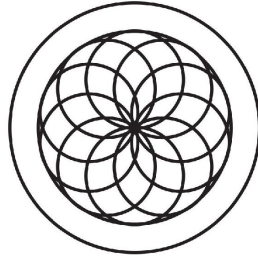
“I’m certainly not a sorcerer of any of the other affinities.” Something about this conversation felt like being backed against a cliff ledge, knowing she was about to be pushed over. Everything was about to change.

“No, you’re not. You are like me, like Ellene. You can control an element, but it is merely a fraction of your true power.”

“What?” Vi whispered. She knew what Sehra was alluding to before she said it, but it didn’t make sense. It was so jarring that her brain only interpreted the logical conclusion as confusion. Even when Sehra said the words, they sounded like a lie.

“You, Vi Solaris, are a Child of Yargen.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



A CHILD OF YARGEN, like Ellene and Sehra. One who could harness a strange and mysterious power. A power very few possessed—a gift rarer even than Windwalkers like Vi’s mother. But there was just one problem with Sehra’s claim...

“All of the Children of Yargen are in your lineage.” Vi shook her head. “Ellene is like a sister to me, but I don’t think that’s close enough to count.”

“Perhaps it is.” Sehra shrugged, an action that seemed far too light-hearted for the seriousness of her words. “We know that while certain lineages have similar magic, magic is not in the blood. Two commons can give birth to a sorcerer. Why not two who have no relationship to Yargen giving birth to a Child of Yargen?”

“Because it’s *never* happened,” Vi challenged. It was bold. Sehra certainly knew the history of her land and people far better than Vi did. But Vi knew this much. She’d talked with Ellene about it to the point of circles countless times before. All swirling around questions like, why didn’t the Tower of Sorcerers in the South recognize the magic of Yargen? Or, what really *was* the magic of Yargen?

“You are a special case,” Sehra agreed, as though such a simple explanation could put her concerns to rest. “But we always knew you would be. We planned for this.”

“We?” Vi repeated. “Who’s ‘we’?”

Sehra began to walk over to the far side of the room. “Your mother, father, and me.”

Everything went from not making sense to being downright impossible. “Let’s say I believe you, that I’m a Child of Yargen—which is an incredible amount to believe at face value, just as an aside. How

would my mother know? Or my father? Or you? Why keep this information from me all this time?”

Sehra paused, looking back. Conflict was written over her face at what her next words should be. She placed a palm on the wall before her, and the wood folded like an accordion, revealing a small sunlit study Vi had never seen before and certainly had never known was there.

“Perhaps it would be best if I started at the beginning... Come.”

Vi didn’t want to. She wanted to stand and demand answers, order them as the Crown Princess if that’s what it took. Yet she couldn’t seem to find words. Her arms hung limply at her sides and her spark seemed dull and quiet, even without her forcing it to calm.

*Her parents had known?*

Was this insane belief what had kept her trapped in the North for so long? That question alone, the need for the truth, was ultimately what drove her to follow Sehra.

The study was narrow, similar to Vi’s own, wrapping around the circumference of the tree. Windows, no bigger than archer’s slits, let in the midday sun through a lattice of woodwork. It reflected off bookcases filled with scrolls and manuscripts alike. It sparked off motes of dust, as though magic filled the air itself.

“When I was a girl, younger than you, even, I was engaged to be wed to your father...”

Vi knew the story. Shaldan was the last nation to fall to the Empire’s armies, becoming the Solaris Empire’s “North.” Vi’s grandfather, the late Emperor Tiberius Solaris, sought to tie subservience with blood and engaged her father—Aldrik—to Sehra. But when the Mad King Victor murdered the Emperor and stole power, the engagement was called off. In its place was the wardship Vi had lived for the past seventeen years.

“... it was just before the uprising of the Mad King. When the last Emperor Solaris was still alive and I was engaged,” Sehra continued the story, nearing the end, “I was visited by a traveler.

“She possessed the magic of Yargen, unequivocally, and knew the words of the Goddess, drawing the future from them. She told me of the Emperor’s impending downfall, the violation of the caverns, and the rise of the Mad King. She also told me that Vhalla Yarl must wed Aldrik Solaris, for they would give birth to two children. One would bear his forefather’s position in the capital of the Empire. But the other, the first to be born, would be a girl, a Child of Yargen—a daughter imperative for the future of our world.”

This was insane.

It was more than insane.

“She... This visitor... you said she could see the future? She was a Firebearer?” Vi swallowed, staying focused even as dizziness spun the room.

“No. I saw in her the power of Yargen and it was a magic that was far beyond even mine. She used it to tap into Yargen’s plan for us all.” Sehra motioned to two small chairs seated on either side of a circular table at the end of the bookshelves in the far back of the room. “Sit, you look weak in the knees.”

“No,” Vi whispered. “I—I don’t want to move until I know the truth.”

“Which is what I’m telling you.”

That was not the truth she wanted to know. They were not the words Vi wanted to hear. The truth she was after was far more personal than prophecies or mysterious visitors.

“Is this why I have been kept in the North all this time? I was supposed to go home at fourteen. All those times it wasn’t the logistics of travel, the timing being wrong, or the plague. It was stalling because of something a traveler said to you?”

Sehra paused, shifting slightly to face Vi directly. She didn’t back away or hesitate. It would be admirable, if her words didn’t suddenly feel like they carried the weight of Vi’s collapsing world.

“Yes.”

She couldn’t breathe. The air in the room was gone. It was only the spark in her lungs, rattling around them. She would spit fire if she wasn’t careful.

“I was *trapped here* for seventeen years because of what some woman said?” Her voice was rising with her anger.

“She was not just ‘some woman,’ she was a Child of—”

“I don’t give a damn what she was!” Vi seethed. The thin veneer of royal decorum had cracked and fallen away. All that was left was a frustrated, utterly unapologetic, and extremely tired young woman standing among its pieces. Meanwhile, Sehra calmly folded her hands before her, unflinching, taking Vi’s searing verbal blows. “She—I could’ve had a life with my family. I could’ve known my brother. I would’ve had a home rather than being the Empire’s latest territory to lay claim to!

“I am too Northern to be Southern. I am too Southern to be Northern. Eastern to be Western. Western to be Eastern. I belong *nowhere*, and to no one, and it’s all because of some stupid magic and the words of one

person—whose name you don't even know." Vi guessed on that last point, and assumed she was right when Sehra didn't correct her.

Sehra's eyes narrowed slightly. Her voice was still calm, level. "Heavy is your burden, isn't it, your highness?"

Vi stilled. The rigidity in her spine relaxed and every vertebra rattled until she slumped. She gripped the bookshelf for support and left black smudge marks in the shape of her fingerprints.

She pressed her eyes closed, stopping the burning there so the books didn't catch. Even emotional, she managed some form of control. Her spark was burning her once again. But this time it was slow. She would die raked over coals rather than in a blazing inferno. She would keep it wound tightly in the spool that was her channel.

"You belong nowhere, because you belong to the goddess herself. You are her chosen child, more than even I or Ellene, as you were hand-picked outside her lineage."

"I don't want this." Vi opened her eyes narrowly, looking up at Sehra through her top lashes. The woman still hadn't moved.

"No child chooses the circumstances of their birth. Rich parents, poor parents, high and low. We are all handed the starting point. What you make of every step thereafter is what defines your life." The woman's eyes were as hard as the green stone they mirrored. "What do you choose, Vi Solaris?"

Vi pushed away from the bookcase, swaying slightly, and forced the jelly from her knees by tensing her muscles. The leg wounded by the Noru attack still ached, but the pain was a welcome momentary distraction. She took a deep breath, trying to find a corner of her mind that was cool and collected for her to curl up in. She wished she could throw her whole body into the void right now.

"You said my parents know this?"

"They do. They knew they could not teach you on their own. I am the only woman on this continent who knows anything about the power of Yargen, and it is my destiny to teach you."

Betrayal was dripping from her pores. Even when the logical side of Vi's mind tried to rationalize through it, all she could think was that thanks to some stupid traveler, she had been trapped away from her family—away from the place that should've been her home—for her whole life.

"I want..." Vi's shoulders sagged. She turned her head up toward the ceiling to keep the moisture welling on her bottom lids contained.



She didn't even know why she was crying. Perhaps it was the fact that the veil of the unknown had finally been ripped off. Or perhaps it was the agony of knowing what could've been if it were not for some woman. If Vi should ever meet that traveler, then she too would know the full extent of Vi's agony.

"I want to handle this with grace, Chieftain. I want to remain poised and listen. But how can I? How am I supposed to trust you after you've kept this impossible secret from me?"

"Because it was impossible," Sehra said simply when Vi's eyes fell back to her. "When I saw the flames today—white, not orange—saw how they rippled outward like strands of Yargen's pure light—when I felt them... I was given my proof and I knew that the time had finally come." Vi remembered how the magic had been spinning out from her skin like burning threads. "And you saw the light too, didn't you?"

"I don't know what I saw." It was a lie and Vi knew it. But she didn't want to admit to this impossible truth.

"Yet the fact remains that you saw enough for what I am saying to seem believable to you. Before today, if I had told you I had met a traveler who foretold your birth—you, a Child of Yargen, despite one *never* being born outside of my lineage—and it was my destiny from the goddess herself to teach that child... would you have believed me?"

"I hardly believe you now," Vi muttered. Then, she let out a heavy sigh. What was the point of continuing to fight this? "You truly believe it's your destiny to teach me the magic of Yargen?" Sehra nodded. "So much that you gave up your engagement to my father, the potential to sit as the Empress?"

"Having an heir to the throne sympathetic to my people from growing up in my care was a fringe benefit," Sehra remarked almost a little too coolly.

"You have to understand, this is all very hard to believe."

"And you must understand that, thanks to the endless impatience of the Senate and your delay in Awakening, we have less time than I would've wanted for the actual teaching, so I cannot afford you the luxury of processing this slowly. Your mother and I could only stall them for so long. That was the one thing the traveler got wrong; you were supposed to show signs of this magic much younger."

"Why not just teach me earlier?"

"As I said, and as you already know, because this knowledge is sacred. Ellene won't even learn it for a few years yet—when she is mature enough to handle it. You shall be the first outside my family to

know it. I had to be sure.” One thing was becoming painfully clear. Sehra had never done anything she didn’t want to. Vi had always thought her engagement to Aldrik at thirteen had been cruel. Now, she wouldn’t be surprised if Sehra was the one to have suggested it.

“Will you truly let me go in the spring?”

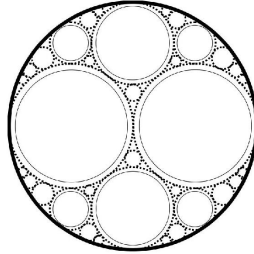
“Only if I have fulfilled the destiny set out for me by Yargen. Only if I have fulfilled the promise to your mother and taught you what she entrusted you to me to learn.”

Vi took a deep breath through her nose, letting her eyes flutter closed, and exhaled through her mouth. She didn’t want to hear one more mention of her parents from Sehra’s lips. Every word she spoke of them made Vi’s stomach churn and the last thing she wanted was tension from the first moment her mother arrived in the North.

If learning this magic was what it took to return home smoothly—for Sehra to let her go, for her powers to remain under control, for her parents to be pleased, then Vi would do it.

“All right then, where do we begin?”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



“WOULD YOU CARE TO SIT FIRST?” Sehra asked, motioning to the chair once more.

“Very well.” Vi finally acquiesced, crossing over and sinking into the plush chair. She rested her elbows on the armrests, watching Sehra as she went to skim the shelves, her many braids swaying back and forth between her shoulders. The gold beads woven throughout clinked together softly.

“First, you must learn about the world. Nothing will make sense about the power of Yargen until you do.” Sehra pulled a heavy tome from the shelf, set it on the table between them, and then started back to the shelves to retrieve something else.

Despite Vi’s outbursts, the Chieftain’s demeanor hadn’t changed. Vi had always thought Sehra was fond of her, given her calm and congenial nature around her. Now, after endangering Ellene, after all but yelling at her, Vi was beginning to think that Sehra’s tranquility was merely the woman’s fundamental nature. It was as though a veil was being lifted from her eyes and she was seeing the world as it truly had been all along.

She wondered if Sehra had ever felt any genuine fondness for her.

Likely not, Vi decided, still bitter. She was a means to an end for Sehra—whether that meant fulfilling her supposed destiny or seeing a sympathetic ruler sit the throne. Vi suspected that even her hunts were somehow a ploy for her to find her magic. For all she knew, Sehra’s traveler and the mysterious dark purple-haired man were in cahoots.

“I know a fair bit about the world,” Vi forced her voice to stay level. She would have no more outbursts. She couldn’t afford them. She was not a child and she needed her full mental faculties to think through her new situation logically.

“You do have an understanding of *this* world—our small corner of it.” Sehra walked back over with a dusty scroll in hand. “Which, as you’ll see, is quite different from *the* world.”

“What’re you—” Vi was cut short as she unrolled the scroll before her. “What is this?” she whispered.

“Aires. The world, as it’s known beyond our lands.”



Even her maps would betray her today, it seemed.

Before her was a world unlike anything Vi had ever seen. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing a person she’d never met before. There was the great crescent-shaped body of land that she’d always known as the Crescent Continent. But it had never appeared in any of the Empire’s

maps as more than a speck creeping in on the northernmost tip of the Main Continent, so Vi had always been left to believe it was relatively insignificant.

Yet on this map, the Crescent Continent—Meru, as it was labeled—was over four times the size of the Main Continent.

It was so large that there was a smaller island nestled in its watery eye. The barrier isles—called the Shattered Isles on this map—were far more detailed and expansive than she'd ever seen them. Trailing up farther northwest was a large body of land, almost the size of the Main Continent. To the southeast was yet *another* continent, with more islands surrounding it. More islands stretched out southwest from the Crescent Continent, or perhaps they were continents in their own right, with land in the bottom left corner only peeking on the map.

"Is this to scale?" she whispered. By her count, if it was, there were at least five continents, if the Main Continent was still even considered one.

"Roughly." Sehra nodded; her tone had become more serious, heavy even. "Close enough for what you're asking."

Vi ran her fingers over the map, her eyes scanning the names and her nails brushing over the ink strokes that designated islands and mountains, forests and valleys, that she'd never known existed.

"The Dark Isle—Solaris?" That was how the Main Continent was marked. The man had said something about the Dark Isle as well. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"The Dark Isle is what the rest of the world calls us."

How could a man from off the continent be communicating with her? Nothing was adding up and all Vi wanted to do was curl back up in her library where things made sense.

"I don't understand... If this is real, why have I never seen it? Why have I never heard of it before?" Questions swirled in her mind, all beginning with *why*.

"Only those of royal blood, and the lords or ladies that oversee each of the Empire's parts, know this truth. You would have found out eventually, before you took your throne, but it is now relevant to everything you must learn."

"Not why haven't *I* learned of it..." Vi shook her head, trying to rephrase her question. "Why is this not taught to everyone? Why isn't it common knowledge?"

"Many reasons, but two reign among them. The first is that Meru seeks to keep us cut off from the world. They govern trade and travel

with an iron fist, and should any vessels from our lands stray too close to them without proper approval, they're immediately sunk without question. Some say they even employ the pirates that terrorize the Shattered—Barrier—Isles."

"And the other reason?" Vi barely glanced up from the map, already trying to memorize it.

Now that the initial shock, and irrational feelings of betrayal toward an inanimate object, had begun to fade, fascination was taking over. She needed a distraction, and her mood could rarely stay sour around a new map. Every curve of the cartographer's brush left Vi wondering. Wondering what was there, what stories were out there to unfold... and why she felt like even though this was certainly the first time she'd learned of the greater world, she could already count every island in the Shattered Isles with her eyes closed.

"Power." How many times in history had that been the reason for doing or not doing something? "As far as the people of the Solaris Empire know, the 'Main Continent' is the world—the only one that matters, at least. I'm sure you've heard the rumors that the Crescent Continent is filled with nothing but dangerous and barbaric peoples and things?"

"But it's not... is it?" Vi whispered, her vision coming back to her of the queen draped in silks, and the courtyard that looked like it belonged in her dreamscape of the Southern castle, not on a land declared by the Empire to lack civilization. Of course there was more to it. Her father had set out to meet with their leaders about a cure. That didn't seem like something he would do if the Crescent Continent was nothing more than roving bands of disorganized peoples.

"It's not. As you can see, we are a very, very small portion of the world. But by giving the people of the Solaris Empire pride—pride in seeing themselves as the pinnacle of the world—they strive to fight harder, to follow the rules, and to oblige their Empire."

"Doesn't it seem... dishonest?" Vi frowned, looking up from the map. All her life she'd been complicit in the greatest lie of them all without even knowing it.

"Perhaps, but then we return to reason one—the world is, overall, hostile toward us. Keeping the people here is for their own safety as well."

Passing judgment that would affect people she'd never met, but declaring her actions were for their best interest. If that wasn't the burden of royalty, Vi didn't know what was. It's what her parents had

done with her, wasn't it? Made a decision that impacted Vi's whole life before she was even born and declaring it in her best interest.

"Why are they so dangerous?" Vi chose to ignore, for now, the reasons behind the rest of the world's dislike for them. She found hatred rarely had good reasons.

"Because of the magic they possess... The same magic you and I possess—the magic of Yargen."

"What is the magic of Yargen?" Vi finally asked. "All I've seen is... light? Light that you seem to be able to do almost anything with."

"It's a fairly apt description, in all honesty." Sehra sat in the chair across from Vi, the small table between them. "The rest of the world has a magic far more complete than ours. What we know as magic being elemental affinities, is merely a mutilated fraction of the true power—the power the goddess herself bestowed on mortals that we here on the Dark Isle have lost control of."

"You're saying that sorcerers on the Crescent Continent—Meru—all have the power of Yargen?" That could certainly be an explanation for her mysterious visitor.

"That is what I have been led to believe," Sehra affirmed. "Naturally, I have not stepped foot off this continent... nor have I met with anyone from Meru."

"The traveler you met... she wasn't from Meru?"

Sehra paused at that question for what felt like a long time. The silence stretched and Vi leaned forward, the anticipation helping the earlier frustrations fade away. She hung on Sehra's next words, but Vi didn't know why. Perhaps she just wanted to hunt the woman down and find justice for what she'd done to her.

"I could not tell. She truly seemed a woman of the world—ageless, nameless, one who had seen many things."

That was utterly unhelpful. Vi relinquished herself to the fact that finding information about a woman who approached Sehra mysteriously years before her birth would be hard to track down. "If you've never met anyone from Meru, how do you know all this?"

"Because of this." Sehra rested her hand on the book she'd retrieved. "It has been passed down in my family for generations and is the only primer I have on Yargen's magic from the rest of the world."

"It came from Meru?"

"I don't know where it came from, but I assume so."

Vi bit back asking what Sehra *did* know. Little and less, it seemed, the more questions she asked.

“All right, let’s go back to the power of Yargen itself,” Vi suggested. Asking about the history of it was getting them nowhere. “It’s a magic not based on elements?”

“Indeed. Think of it as all the elements combined—a pure form of power that can be manipulated by the will of those who wield it.”

“I don’t understand...” Vi shook her head, rubbing her eyes tiredly. Sorcery wasn’t overly common in the Empire. One in ten people, likely less, possessed some kind of magic. And those magics were directly linked to a single element. Firebearers could do nothing but manipulate fire—even the affinity of the self required fire to stare into to see the future.

“It will become clearer as you learn, as you master these powers for yourself. We will begin tomorrow afternoon, following your regular lessons.” Sehra stood and Vi followed suit, deeming the conversation finished. “For now, you’ve had a long day. So rest, recover, and we shall start tomorrow.”

“I take it these lessons will be a regular occurrence for us henceforth?”

“Yes, we have already lost enough time. From now until the time you leave, you will spend the hours you would have been training with Jax—those hours, and then some—with me, learning the magic of Yargen.” Sehra paused, looking down at the book that still sat out between the two chairs. “We have lost enough time, indeed,” she whispered, mostly to herself. Then, as she lifted the small tome, handing it to Vi: “I shall lend this copy to you. Perhaps you can get a head start tonight reading what you can of the magic.”

Vi accepted the book mutely, running her fingers along the spine. She was forced to admit that there was something reassuring about having a book involved. For now, she could trust that all her answers were somewhere between the front and back cover. They stepped out onto Sehra’s balcony and the accordion entry to her study folded back in place, melding seamlessly with the wood of the trunk.

“I shall see you tomorrow, princess.” Sehra raised a hand and the doors of the throne room opened.

“Until then.” Vi gave a bow of her head and departed.

She should apologize for her outbursts; her feet almost faltered as she considered doing just that. But they carried her out of the room, and the closing of the heavy doors marked the end of her window of opportunity—for now.



Vi wandered back to her room. She was exhausted and worn down to the bone. So tired that she couldn't tell if the exhaustion in her eyes was from the strain of keeping them open for so many hours in a row, or if it was the raw emotions still were churning through her, mingling with her spark.

The fatigue kept her silent as the servants attended her. Faceless hands placed themselves on her body, scrubbing everywhere, checking on her leg. Vi allowed herself to be moved along mindlessly until they left her alone in the dark room.

She should sleep.

But her eyes were wide open.

Vi stared at the ceiling, frozen in place, as if the whole day had perched itself on her chest. The visions... her magic... the noru. She squeezed her eyes closed to block them out, but the darkness there was no more forgiving.

No, if she could focus on all of that instead, it would be a blessing. What was really keeping her awake was the lingering feeling of betrayal. When had Sehra told her mother the truth? How long had they kept her here needlessly? Mother above—did Romulin know?

The questions swirled in her mind until Vi was forced to scare them away by lighting the candle at her bedside.

Vi looked to her letter box, slowly opening the top. The book Sehra had given her just barely fit within. She stared at it, competing feelings of contempt, anger, hurt, and... admittedly, curiosity.

"I should hate you," she whispered. She should hate it for all it represented. It was what had kept her from her family, from her home.

Yet she reached out and took the book into her lap, opening it to the first page.

"Words of the Goddess..." Vi softly read aloud. Her eyes devoured the forward at the beginning of the book. It spoke of the basic principles of words of power. That the goddess—Yargen—had bestowed magic on man through giving the words of divinity to mortals.

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*By invoking these words, by her holy light, a mortal hand can do her will.*

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Vi's eyes lingered on the last line of the page. The whole thing read more like a religious text than a magical one. Sehra had said it was from

Meru; perhaps there they had different opinions on magic. Vastly different... given magic in Solaris was feared by the average person.

She flipped the page and let out a soft gasp.

At the top was a glyph.

It was the same sensation Vi had felt when she had first witnessed the shining symbol above her watch during her first vision. Then, it had been a litany of noises she could hear but barely make sense of. This time, the chorus of sound sang in perfect harmony.

She heard the word, felt it in her bones. It was not a language Vi had ever seen—if it was a language at all. The symbol imbued her with a deep understanding that surpassed reading and made sense of the sounds it invoked within her.

“*Durroe*,” Vi whispered. The word tingled across her skin, as though she was sinking into a warm bath, or lying underneath a hot sun after spending an hour rummaging through the ice house.

She quickly flipped the pages. More symbols were scribed in the chapter for *durroe* and more sounds filled her mind as she skimmed the glyphs. Her hands stopped at the next chapter.

The symbol here was carefully drawn in red ink. Circles within circles, lines connecting between them, carefully drawn symbols encased among them. The moment her eyes lingered, she was met with the same sensation and then, clarity.

*Halleth*, to heal.

The lines on the page almost seemed to move, to come to life. It was as if they were begging for her to recreate them—though Vi didn’t know how.

No... what wasn’t quite true. Her breath was loud as she remembered being in her study after her first vision. She’d meant to write down what she’d seen in the flames, but she had drawn one of these symbols instead.

“Which one was it?” The pages slipped through her fingers as she searched, almost frantically.

The symbol above her watch during the first vision was the same that had appeared after the second. It was the same symbol she had sketched on the paper in her study, perfectly from memory—the very same glyph she’d seen swirl around that man.

Her fingers stopped.

“*Narro*, acts of the mind.” She stared at the glyph for several long breaths. No, she’d been wrong. It wasn’t identical... there was another

layer to it. Something wasn't quite right. Vi flipped the page. "*Haath*, communication."

Vi flipped back and forth several times. The two symbols blurred together, overlapping until something audibly *clicked* in her mind.

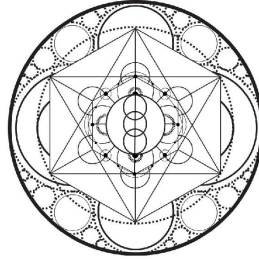
"*Narro haath*," Vi whispered aloud again.

The spark surged up her throat to form the words. Magic radiated out from her flesh—not as fire, but as thin, shimmering strands of light. They swirled before her, not quite taking shape.

Warmth rippled across her with the vibration of a voice that she felt as much as heard.

"You again?"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“WHAT?” Vi looked around quickly, trying to locate the source of the voice. Aptly, the disembodied words were undoubtedly from the same man who had called himself “the voice.”

“How...” He started a question but quickly abandoned it, as if trying to cover his own confusion. “This is different than before.” There was a heavy note to the statement, one Vi couldn’t read. “What magic is this?”

“Wouldn’t I love to know!” Vi wrapped her arms around herself. Every time he spoke it sent tiny ripples across her skin, prickling it into gooseflesh. “You told me to seek you out. Well, I did.” *Apparently*. She hadn’t exactly planned on this. “So, give me some answers.”

Vi hoped that, whatever connection this was, he couldn’t feel her emotions. Then he’d know that the demand was said with far more confidence than she felt. Outside, she could present all the confidence of the Crown Princess. Inside... Vi felt like a very tired and confused seventeen-year-old girl. But she really did not need anyone else to know that.

“You are not at an apex of fate?”

“I don’t think so. Not unless my bed has become one.”

“Unlikely...” There was a long stretch of silence and Vi seized the opportunity.

“What are the apexes of fate?”

“Places the world changed, or places where it still could be changed. They’re locations where fate was malleable and the future was—is—yet undecided.” His matter-of-factness surprised her. She’d been made aware of so many secrets in the past day, that to find someone willing to tell her the simple, unvarnished truth felt oddly foreign.

“Yes, my bed definitely isn’t one,” Vi muttered. She hadn’t intended him to hear, but a chuckle radiated through to her. So he could hear

everything, no matter how softly she said it—a good mental note. Vi cleared her throat, trying to ignore the fact that she was still radiating light and talking to a man in her head. “Why can I only see you at the apexes of fate?”

“Since I am the voice, and you the champion, we are intrinsically linked with the fate of this world. In those places, the distance between us is greatly shortened.”

“Then why can I talk to you here?”

“That same link between us, I would assume,” he said simply.

Vi resisted calling him out on the fact that he sounded as unsure as she felt. She also ignored the voice and champion bit, for now. He hadn’t really answered when she asked in the ruins. So, instead, she asked, “What is your name?”

“My name?”

“Yes, your name. You know mine from the last time we spoke... and, well, seeing as I’m talking to you from my personal quarters in the middle of the night, I think it’s owed.”

He scoffed. “I owe you nothing.”

“Just tell me.” Vi sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Taavin.”

*Taavin.* It was certainly a name she’d never heard before. Vi swallowed hard, looking down at her hands and watching the light trailing off her skin and disappearing into the darkness like the streaks of fireflies.

This was impossible to comprehend. Less than a week ago, Vi didn’t think she had any magic at all—or at least very little. Now, she wanted a whole lot less magic in her life.

“Do I dare ask if you’re real?”

“I am quite obviously real.” The offense in his voice brought a small smile to her lips. “I should be the one asking you that,” he murmured.

“I’m real too.” Vi sank back into her pillows. *Really tired*, more like. She stared up at the threads of light that unfurled from her. They looked thinner than they had before. “What’s happening to me, Taavin?”

“That is a question that will take a lifetime to answer.”

“This magic...” Vi paused and he didn’t fill the space with words. Silence stretched as her magic continued to fade. Vi looked down at her hand, nestled in the folds of her blanket. There were only a few threads of light clinging to her.

First, she had made fire. Then light that became fire. Now... this.

“This magic,” Vi continued, stronger. “Is it truly that of Yargen?”

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “When I used the word *samasha*, you were gifted the ability to understand Yargen’s gifts.”

The word washed over her, and with it the last threads of light left Vi’s body. Taavin sounded as if he had been about to say something, but Vi could no longer sustain the connection; for now, at least, his words would have to remain a mystery. The sounds of night flooded her ears; she hadn’t even realized they’d been muffled. Sehra had been right. The traveler had known Vi would have this power...

There were easily a hundred questions buzzing through Vi’s mind in that moment. But she found herself too exhausted to keep her eyes open a moment longer, let alone consider their answers.



The moment Vi knocked on the doors and stepped inside Sehra’s throne room, she heard an immediate, “You’re late.”

“I’m sorry.” Vi tried to avoid making excuses. “I slept late, so my lessons started late and I’ve been behind ever since.”

“Do make an effort to start on time, princess, because we have much ground to cover.” Sehra stood from her wood-and-leaf throne, starting over to the secret door that led to the study. “Come, we’ll work in here.”

“I slept late because I was up late reading your book.” Vi held up the small tome as she sat down in the same chair she’d been in yesterday.

“Were you?” Sehra sat as well. “Then perhaps you can give me a short summary on the magic of Yargen.”

“It is a magic the rest of the world has, that also extends beyond the elements. It’s somehow...all elements at once. The magic of Yargen is invoked with words of power.”

“A good, concise summary.” Sehra held out her hand and Vi passed her the book. “We’ll begin with the word I learned first.”

Sehra opened the book, holding it between them. To Vi’s immense relief, the page was not *narro*. She had no interest in confronting her mysterious friend in front of Sehra.

“*Durroe*,” Vi read aloud, eyes on the page.

“What?” Sehra looked up at her quickly. “What did you say?”

“*Durroe*?” she repeated, the word less certain. “I’m sure my pronunciation is off...”

“I’ve never heard it said that way. I pronounced it the way my mother did, and she pronounced it the way her mother did as well.”

“How do you pronounce it?” Vi was forced to ask.

“*Darol*.” Vi watched as Sehra’s mouth formed the word, making sure that she was hearing exactly what the woman was saying. It was an odd disconnect, because everything she saw in the woman’s moving lips was nothing like what was written on the page.

“*Darol*,” Vi tried to repeat it, but the word felt clumsy, awkward even. There was no magic hum to it.

“What made you say *durroe*?” Sehra asked, somewhat cautiously. Much like how Vi felt when she tried to mimic Sehra’s pronunciation, the Chieftain looked strange recreating hers—and slightly missed the mark to Vi’s ears.

“That’s what’s written.” Vi motioned to the page.

“You can read these symbols?”

“Yes...” Vi said cautiously. Sehra leaned back in her chair. The Chieftain’s eyes ran over her, cool and calculating. Vi shifted in her seat, crossing her leg and folding her hands. She waited as long as she could, but at a point was forced to ask, “Can’t you read it?”

“No.” The answer rung in Vi’s ears.

“But... how do you know what it says? Surely you must be able to read it?” Vi looked back to the book. Sure enough, *durroe* was still quite clearly written on the page to Vi’s eyes. She didn’t see how the symbols could be read as anything else.

“I told you, I learned from my mother, and she from hers. But what I did not tell you was that none of us could read these strange glyphs.”

“You do see the circles and lines, then?” Vi asked cautiously.

“I do.” Sehra thought a moment. “How did you come up with the word?”

“I don’t know,” Vi confessed, hoping Sehra believed that she wasn’t attempting to dodge the question—which, for once, she wasn’t. “I see it and I... I hear sounds? I see words? No, not quite... it’s as though the shape moves before my eyes and by the time it’s finished, it looks nothing like what I saw at first but somewhere in its shifting I see the meaning and know how it should be said.”

Sehra tapped the armrest of her chair, thrumming her fingers along its edge in quick succession. “I have no such sensation,” she said finally.

“I’m not lying,” Vi said hastily.

“I know you’re not.”

“How?”

“Grandmother said that her great grandmother could derive meaning from these symbols. But I never believed it, nor did my mother, for all

we saw were the strange circles and spirals. But you... you can read it?"

"I... I think I can? I can't say for sure I'm right..." Vi looked back to the page and then, as slowly as she dragged her eyes away from it, looked to Sehra. "What does it mean, that I can read it?" *Read* still seemed a generous term for the sensations Vi experienced when looking at the page. Perhaps it had something to do with Taavin's word giving her an "understanding."

"I cannot say yet. But I do think it will expedite your studies."

"Good... because all I care about is controlling my magic and keeping it hidden," Vi emphasized. There couldn't be any incidents like the one in the jungle with her fire getting away from her... or randomly glowing. Sehra gave her a hard look. "I mean no offense," Vi added hastily. "I don't want to keep it hidden because of..."

"I know what they will say of 'magic from the North' in that city of ice." Sehra gave her a thin smile.

"Truly, the most important thing is for me to control it. If I go back to the capital and start an inferno—"

"We will see that you establish control. That was my task in all of this, what the traveler told me; I am to teach you all I know about the magic of Yargen. Now, *durroe*... I recommend holding out your hand." Sehra held her palm up to the ceiling, her long fingers outstretched. Vi mimicked the motion. "I imagine this as a platform for my magic. On this platform, I will build *durroe*."

"Build it?"

Sehra outlined the glyph in the book with her finger. Then, she did the same about an inch off her palm. Her movements were precise, and shaped out *durroe* exactly as it was in the book. The ghostly outline of the glyph appeared, hovering midair above Sehra's skin; above the glyph was a round orb of light.

"You're not... glowing." Vi remembered the threads of light radiating from her body the night before.

"No." Sehra looked at her strangely. "I envision the illusion I wish to make—the orb of light. Nothing else would be glowing."

"Of course not," Vi murmured. Sehra continued to stare. Well, if she was raising suspicion, she may as well go all the way. "Have you ever heard voices from the magic?"

"Voices? Of what kind?" If Sehra had to ask, then she most certainly hadn't.

"Nothing." Vi shook her head. "I had a strange dream last night, that's all." She knew better. Nothing about that had been a dream. She



could still feel Taavin's words washing over her, rippling through her veins. Vi worked to push it from her mind and quickly mirrored Sehra's motions. "So I hold my palm out like this?"

"Yes." If Sehra was suspicious still, she gave no indication. "Now, you will attempt to conjure the essence of *durroe* above your palm. Try drawing it first—that was how my mother taught me."

Vi closed her eyes, summoning the symbol of *durroe* to the forefront of her mind. Lifting her other hand, she made an attempt at tracing the glyph in the air. At first, her skin, and the space above it, remained dark.

But Vi tried a second time. A third. And on the fourth, trails of light lifted from her skin, beginning to take shape before fading away frustratingly quickly.

She stared in wonder where the glyph had begun to form.

"Again, princess."

Vi took a slow breath, held out her hand again. By the time she completed drawing the symbol, the initial lines faded and there was no illusion—no orb of light, no strands peeling off her skin to hover in the air.

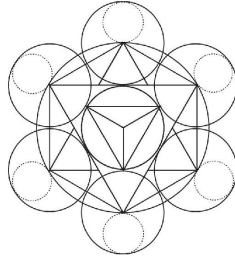
"What am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing, you merely need practice," Sehra assured her. "Try again." The Chieftain settled back in her chair, plucking a book off a nearby shelf. She flipped through it nonchalantly, clearly settling in for what she assumed was going to be hours of work.

Vi pressed her lips together in a firm line. Sehra may not know what she was doing wrong, but Vi would bet she knew someone who did. Taavin—a voice, a man linked with fate, and most importantly, someone who was from a region of the world that supposedly had intimate knowledge of this magic.

She'd summon him again tonight, and Vi wouldn't take no for an answer when she asked for his tutelage.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



VI'S HAND rested on her drafting table, turned upward.

Everyone else in the fortress was no doubt tucked safely in their beds at such a late hour. But she had stayed up, waiting and listening for quiet to take over the air and assure her that it was safe to slip into her study. She could've summoned him in her bedroom. But that had made her feel slightly... vulnerable last time. This was going to be a business transaction, and Vi wouldn't start it on weak footing.

She allowed magic to trickle across her skin. Sparks crackled between her fingertips and condensed into a flame in her palm—small and harmless. It was the same action she'd performed since she'd first manifested her magic. But now the flame didn't jump, or leap, or singe the desk as it had a mere week ago. The tiny fire was a mirror of what burned on the wicks of her candles and nothing more.

After a day of practicing with Sehra and making minimal strides, she needed this.

This was the reminder that, for the first time in her life, her magic was beginning to flow easily. Even if this wasn't the glyphs or magic of light. This much she could now do without fear, and that was progress.

Vi closed her fist, snuffing the fire.

Enough dreaming of things being simple. There was work to be done.

Taking a deep breath, Vi allowed the air to fill her lungs and feed the spark that she associated with the brilliant magic within her. She didn't bother with Sehra's instructions. So far, Vi had found the most success on her own, summoning the glyph and her mysterious contact in her own way.

*"Narro hath,"* she whispered. Just like before, light danced on her skin, and Vi felt the connection nearly instantly. *"Hello again."*

There was a long pause that drew a smirk across her lips. She would bet Taavin didn't expect her to be the first to speak between them, and Vi was glad she'd seized the opportunity.

"I see you decided to contact me again." He made it sound as if he'd been waiting on her. As if she'd been inconveniencing him in some way.

"You don't sound surprised."

"I'm not."

"Why?" Vi asked.

"Because you need me." His words were arrogant, yet they smoothed across her skin like sunbeams.

"I don—"

"And because I need you." That stilled her. There was a begrudging reluctance about the sentiment, and an undeniable sincerity. Vi stared up at the ceiling, looking at the intricately curved wood, waiting for what he'd say next. Fortunately, he didn't make her ask. "We need to find the apexes." He paused. "*You* need to find them."

"Excuse me? I'm not your errand girl." She'd contacted him to demand help and now he was trying to turn the tables on her.

"This is far greater than your ego," he said sternly. Vi wished she had a face to look at. Though, perhaps it was better. As a disembodied voice, he couldn't see the expression she was making at his words right now.

"Why are they so important?"

"In all the recordings by the voices through the ages, they have mentioned apexes of fate as the places where Yargen's will is at work. You, as the champion, and me as her current voice, must go there and learn of her wisdom."

"Her wisdom." Vi snorted. "All I've seen at one of these apexes is a vision of my father and you."

"A vision of your father?" Taavin's voice rose with obvious interest. "Tell me of it."

"Maybe..." Vi didn't want to share her family with this disembodied man. That was a subject far too precious and personal. But... as he needed her, so she needed him. Which gave her an idea. "What do I get in return?"

"You're withholding the visions of Yargen from me?" He sounded positively aghast. Vi grinned wider.

"I need a teacher, to make sense of this magic I have." The sooner she did, the sooner she could put all worry about returning to Soricism to bed and merely be excited about being reunited with her family.

"I am not some lowly tutor. I am the voice," he said haughtily.

“And I am the champion—” Whatever that meant. “So unless you want to find these apexes on your own, I suggest you work with me.”

There was another long pause. If it weren’t for the magic radiating off her skin, Vi would’ve thought he had disappeared entirely. But he was still with her. She could almost feel his breathing.

“Very well. You find the apexes based on my direction and tell me your visions there... And I shall endure the questions of a resident of the Dark Isle about Lightspinning.”

Vi remembered Sehra’s map. *The Dark Isle*... that was how the rest of the world had labeled the Solaris Empire. This confirmed for her beyond all doubt that wherever Taavin was, he wasn’t in the Empire. Which meant he really did need her to find these apexes. Vi could work with that leverage.

“You have a deal, Taavin. I’ll find your apexes in the Solaris Empire and you teach me... Lightspinning.” It was an apt name for the magic, she supposed, thinking about the swirling glyphs she’d seen surrounding him and what Sehra had conjured.

“Now, tell me of your first vision.”

Vi obliged him, recounting what she had seen in the ruins. She spared him her emotions at seeing her father, and stuck to the facts. Taavin stayed oddly quiet throughout, not even a hum of affirmation that he had heard her.

“I see... Then, the next apex you should seek will be in a tomb marked by Yargen. I would suggest—”

Vi interrupted him before he could finish. “Wait a minute, I told you my vision, now it’s time for you to tell me how to make use of this light.”

There was an audible sigh.

“My teacher here, she can draw these glyphs in the air to use the magic.” Vi barreled ahead before he could make any kind of objection again. “All I can do is make it radiate off my skin like tiny threads.”

“You’re not focusing it carefully enough, then,” he said, after what seemed like forever.

“That doesn’t help me.” She pursed her lips together. “‘Focusing’ is too vague.”

“You said you have a teacher there, on the Dark Isle?” She couldn’t tell if he was impressed or horrified by the fact. “Why not consult with her? She’ll be able to help you far more than I can, being physically present.”

“Because I’m asking you, remember? You need me.” *And because Sehra doesn’t know very much*, Vi refrained from saying. She’d allow the other noblewoman some pride. “She draws the glyphs with her fingers in the air, but I—”

“No, physically drawing them is a fool’s endeavor.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Vi tried and failed not to take offense at his tone. She suddenly felt very silly trying to doodle in the air with her index finger for hours.

“Yargen’s words are too complex for a mortal hand to draw efficiently—maybe it’s possible to achieve *something* in that way, clearly your teacher manages. But that seems an utterly ineffective means to harness her power... You must, instead, understand the glyphs beyond all doubt. Know them in your soul—more than your eyes and ears can tell you. Know how the words resonate with your will. Only then can you gain mastery of them.”

Intent was what this magic seemed to boil down to. Not unlike the elemental magicks of the Solaris Empire, she supposed. Vi flipped open Sehra’s book, looking thoughtfully at the random page she opened to.

“When you say words... you mean the glyphs?”

“Yes, we aren’t equipped to fully capture the language of the gods with mortal means. The best we can do is through the markings—glyphs, as you call them,” he said, matter-of-fact. *A godly language*, that would explain why she saw them come to life on the page and resonate sound in her mind. Though if Vi hadn’t had the week she’d been having, she would’ve scoffed at the notion of these words of power entirely.

“So you’re saying I just need to memorize them more?”

“Yes and no. When you say the word, you will not draw the glyph with your hands, or ink, or by any other means. But with your mind. You must know it there. Like a musician knows his pieces, inside and out, well enough to know how it must be played in his own style.”

“Yes, intent... That should be doable,” she mumbled. If there was one thing Vi could do, it was amassing useless knowledge derived from books.

“It’s not as easy as your tone tells me you think it is.” He chuckled.

“Don’t underestimate me.” She hated how condescending he sounded. No stranger would speak to the Crown Princess that way, voice or no voice.

“Don’t underestimate Lightspinning,” Taavin fired back. “After all, if it were easy, you wouldn’t be asking me for help.”

Vi chewed the insides of her cheeks. He had a point. She'd spent hours with Sehra today and hadn't made much progress. But those had been hours working in the wrong direction; now she had a headway.

"All right," she started with renewed determination. "I'll begin really committing them to memory."

"With what?" His question reminded her that he couldn't see the book she was looking at.

"My teacher has a tome with a great number of these glyphs."

"Interesting..." Taavin's voice went low. "You know that's contraband to have on the Dark Isle. The person who delivered it could be put to death under the Queen's law."

"I'm the Crown Princess. All knowledge in Solaris is open to me." Vi wasn't sure if it was a lie or not. The map of the world—the true map—had been kept from her until recently. What other falsehoods of her world did she unquestioningly accept as fact?

"And that distinction means so very little to the rest of the world." The statement stilled her. His words weren't harsh or cruel. It was simple, factual. He wasn't trying to tear her down, merely state truth.

"Regardless, it is what it is. I have it, and I will make progress," she vowed.

"And while you make that progress, you shall seek out the next apex—a tomb marked by Yargen."

"Yes, I remember our deal." As if she could've forgotten so quickly. "Until next time."

Before he could get another word in, Vi released the magic and took a moment to breathe. That had gone well. She'd accomplished her goal, at the very least.

Leaning forward, Vi began to pour over the glyphs and symbols in the book before her. *Memorize them.* She'd look over every line and circle, feel the words they invoked, until she dreamt about them.

She'd prove to Sehra and to him that this wasn't something she was going to be daunted by. But, more importantly, she'd master the only thing standing between her and going home. Vi flipped the page and took a breath.

"*Durroe*," she repeated, time and again. Vi didn't have her hand outstretched—she wasn't even trying to conjure the orb of light. She merely said the word and allowed her ears to become accustomed to the syllables as her eyes ran over the glyph that came to life on the page before her.

She said the word fast, slow, soft, and as loudly as she dared. With every utterance, Vi seemed to notice something new about the symbol in the book. There was a line she hadn't understood before or a juncture she'd overlooked.

Snatching up paper from the side of her desk, Vi began drawing on it as she repeated the word. Just like after her first vision, her hand seemed possessed. It moved flawlessly over the page and crafted lines that were at first clumsy and smudged, but became flawless with practice and cemented in her memory.

By the time Vi finally leaned back in her chair, papers scattered the floor, *durroe* drawn across them. Her voice was hoarse from countless repetitions, her eyes bleary. Dawn streaked the sky, competing with the fading candlelight that now burned low. She needed to go to bed—if she was up much longer, she'd risk running into a servant coming to attend her and arouse suspicion.

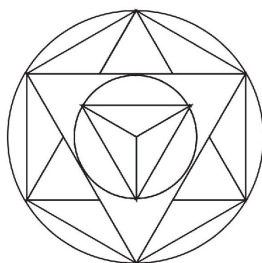
"But first..." Vi lifted her hand tiredly, palm flat. The open air was now her parchment, her words the ink; her mind and will together formed her pen. With a word, she combined them all, and willed the illusion to take shape. "*Durroe*."

The tiniest of threads lifted off her hand, coalescing into lines that Vi knew inside and out. For one brief second, the symbol flickered faintly above her hand, an orb like Sehra's atop. As quickly as it came, it disappeared.

A small blurt of sheer joy rolled into laughter as Vi's hand went limp at her side. She stared at the ceiling, the back of her head against her chair. Slowly, Vi turned her head, looking at the sketch of the rose garden Romulin had sent her.

"One word closer to mastery... only a dozen more to go," she whispered to the blueprint tacked up against her shelves. "I'll get this, I promise. Then, I'm coming home to all of you."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



SHE WAS GOING to summon him again tonight, Vi decided.

It had been two days since her first lesson with Sehra. Two days, two more lessons later, and Vi's progress had been minimal—but it had been there. Her glyph was becoming stronger, slightly more stable, but it seemed to unravel all too quickly as if there was some knot she needed to tie in the light that she couldn't find.

Summoning balls of light was still proving difficult, but she knew she could summon a voice in her head. So that was where she'd return to. As mysterious as that man was, he knew about the magic and his help last time had been invaluable. This time she'd insist he tell her some way to expedite—

A shadow blocked out the sun as Martis's back-lit silhouette moved in front of her line of sight. Vi sat straighter, called to attention. But before she could mutter an apology for the distraction, he started in on her.

"Princess, please pay attention." Martis tapped the desk in front of her with the pointed end of the long stick he favored. She wondered if it made him feel authoritative to hold a mini scepter before the Crown Princess. In a way, he had more command over her life than she did.

The scratching of a pen from behind her brought Vi's mind fully back to the present. She glanced over her shoulder at Andru, who sat in the corner. He glanced back at her, as if sensing her attention. Vi swept her hair over her shoulder as she turned forward, fussing with the ends of her braids.

She couldn't be as relaxed as she used to be anymore. Whatever rapport, however small, she had built with her tutors was gone now. She was under the watchful eyes of the Senate. After her magic got out of



hand, she shouldn't take any more risks. Especially not before she had her new powers sorted.

Vi could imagine what the Senate and Southern nobility would say if she was discovered to have a rare magic only passed down in Sehra's bloodline. They would make her out to be so Northern that even the magic had worn off on her. Claim that Sehra had adopted her outright and she was no longer heir to her birthright. No, on second thought, they'd likely invent far worse lies than that.

"Yes, Martis. I am sorry. While it is no excuse, this past week merely has my mind preoccupied." She made an effort to enunciate her words properly, draw them out even though she was so tired from days of double lessons. "I shall endeavor to be a better student."

"You had four days off from your tutelage. You have six months—at most, likely less—until the parade arrives for you, and you are expected to return South with full and proper knowledge of your station. Now is not the time to add delays by daydreaming, however tempting it is to preoccupy your mind with all that has yet to pass."

"I understand." Vi folded her fingers, avoiding doing anything that could land her in further trouble.

"And you are by no stretch a bad student," he mumbled softly. "In any case, perhaps a change of topic would refresh your energy for what remaining time we have."

Martis crossed over to the desk opposite Vi's. He shuffled through his papers, selecting a letter.

"Ah, yes, let us discuss the War in the North."

"Did we not cover that last year?" Vi hoped she came off as curious rather than obstinate.

"Every year you can learn something more, because you are older, wiser, and more mature."

"Right, of course." Vi picked up her quill and promptly put it down. If she was holding any kind of writing utensil, she'd be at risk of scribbling cartography lines or magic circles on her page, either of which Martis certainly wouldn't appreciate. "So what are we going to begin covering this year about the War in the North?"

"How the War in the North was a precursor to the rise of the Mad King Victor. So we are, in effect, drawing new connections between the two topics we have previously discussed."

Vi tilted her head to the side. "The connection is plain, is it not? The War in the North directly preceded the uprising. It was the last war of Emperor Tiberius Solaris."

“More than that. For it was an article collected by your mother during the War of the North that enabled Mad King Victor’s rise to power.”

“What?” He had her attention now. “But, the Mad King... he tried to slay my mother and father. My mother would not have helped him.”

Vi had seen the raised and angry scar that ran from her mother’s shoulder to the center of her breast. Vhalla had let her run her fingers over it as a curious child, and said a wicked man had given it to her, but never elaborated further. When Vi finally had a name for the “wicked man,” she never asked again.

The scar was not unlike the one on Taavin’s face, Vi realized. Then instantly shook it from her thoughts. She had to remain focused or Martis’s limited patience for her would run out.

“He did. But *how* he did it is of great import, for it was the start of the end of the Crystal Caverns.”

“So, how did he do it?”

“Do you remember the lore of the crystal weapons?”

Vi nodded. Long ago there were said to be four crystal weapons, one in possession of each of the unique geographical regions of the Main Continent. They seemed to be things relegated only to tall tales... yet two of those crystal weapons surfaced, marking the rise of the Mad King. But that was all Vi knew. As she conveyed the fact to Martis, it suddenly seemed a glaring deficit in her education.

“Just so,” he affirmed. “One of those weapons the Mad King Victor used was a crown that had been in your family’s possession for centuries.” Vi wasn’t sure how a crown could be a weapon, but she did know that crystals were strange, powerful, and extremely dangerous. “The other was an axe that was retrieved from the North.”

“An axe?” Vi repeated, her mind spinning, trying to recall every fireside story she’d been privy to and every mention of lore from Ellene. “Like the axe Dia, the fallen star, used to carve civilization from the boughs of the Mother Tree?”

“If you believe these Northern stories.” Martis’s sniff clearly conveyed that he didn’t.

Vi bit back a retort asking why it was so unreasonable to believe Southern histories of crystal weapons and a power that could turn men into monsters... but similar Northern oral histories were mere “stories” to be dismissed. Even if she felt in the right, arguing with Martis would get her nowhere. Vi had long since learned that some minds, once made up, could not be changed.

“I think, perhaps, it is more than just coincidence that an axe shows up in their stories and our history.”

“Yes, well, I am not here to speak about that. I am here to speak about what your mother has passed on to me in her letters.” Martis tapped a series of papers on the desk. What Vi wouldn’t give to leaf through it. But her parents’ correspondence with her tutors was as private as their correspondence with her. “She would have me tell you of when she retrieved this weapon with the intent to benefit the South, and protect it from falling into the wrong hands. But all she did was foolishly—her words, and I think them far too harsh—think that she could make the axe safer than its own people had by placing it in a Northern tomb.

*Tomb.* Vi sat a little straighter. She’d heard the word before, and recently. Perhaps too recently to be a mere coincidence.

“She was here during the encampment, and on the edge of the city...”



Ellene and Jayme were waiting when Vi finished with Martis. Seeing people occupying her sitting room was truly a welcome anomaly.

Jayme had made the long table in Vi’s sitting area her weapon smithy. She currently had a whetstone atop layers of rags; the sound of the metal sliding over stone made a soft yet sharp *shhing* noise that had the hair on Vi’s arms standing near immediately.

The young heir to the Northern throne was lounging on a sofa, clearly much less bothered by the noise as she hummed to herself a tune that was scribbled out on a sheet of paper. Vi vaguely recognized it as something she’d heard being sung recently among the city commoners. But she didn’t recognize the words.

Both perked up immediately on seeing her.

“You’re done for the day now, right?” Ellene asked eagerly.

“Not quite.” Vi hated to see her friend deflate, but there was nothing she could do. “I promised your mother I would work with her on something.”

“On what?”

*What, indeed...* Vi had been half hoping Sehra would’ve told her daughter something to explain their new tutoring arrangement, and spare Vi the lie she’d now be forced to think up on the spot. “Going over details for when my family comes to collect me.”

“That sounds tiring.” Ellene flopped back onto the cushions.

“But necessary,” Martis interjected from the doorway, pausing briefly to give Vi a bow. “Thank you for your work today, princess.”

“Yours as well.”

“I look forward to continuing our discussions. Hopefully, next time, they will not be so one-sided.” He gave a thin smile, and left.

“Rude,” Ellene muttered. “Is he allowed to talk to you like that?”

“Given all that I’ve put Martis through over the years, I’m going to say yes.” Vi ran a hand through her hair, sorting the carefully plaited braids.

“Careful, you give that kind of leeway to the Southern court and they’ll walk all over you,” Jayme said without looking up from her work. It sounded like something Romulin would say.

“I’ll deal with the Southern Court when I have to.” Romulin’s letters had painted the court as a garden of roses—fresh smelling, beautiful at a glance, but with thorns attached and filled with vipers at the root.

“An apt advisement, I’m certain Prince Romulin would say much the same,” Andru interjected, as though he could read her mind. Vi nearly jumped out of her skin. The man had an innate and unnerving quality to go unnoticed—which was unusual for a man as equal parts handsome and awkward as he was. “They can be quite brutal.”

“More or less brutal than the Senate?” The question left Vi’s lips before she had time to even think.

“That depends on who you ask.” Andru did not look at her when he spoke. He was so transfixed on the other corner of the room that it drew Vi’s attention as well. But there was nothing there, and when her eyes swung back, his attention was solely on her.

“Senates and courts, boring and far away.” Ellene shifted to the edge of her seat. “Can you go over things with my mother later, Vi? The Winter Solstice market is beginning to set up and we’re going to see this year’s layout.”

“Given our incident in the jungle, I’m not going to push my luck.” Plus, the sooner she got these lessons out of the way, the better. Vi needed to master her magic and be done with all of this Yargen business.

“I could go with you,” Andru said suddenly. All three sets of eyes were on him. “I would be happy to see the market.”

Vi stared at him. Just what was he trying to do? She didn’t think for a moment he was genuinely interested in the market.

“It’s a girls-only trip.” Ellene spared Jayme and Vi having to turn him down.

“Any particular reason?” Andru was back to looking in the other corner of the room. But he quickly brought his eyes back to Ellene.

“You don’t ask girls what they’re doing during girls-only time.” Ellene laughed.

“Is there anything else we can do for you?” Vi asked, trying to give Andru a graceful out.

Luckily, he took it. “No, I shall be off.”

With that, he all but bolted for the door, head held high. The momentary discomfort Vi had observed was gone entirely.

“Goodness, he’s strange...” Ellene murmured. “Did they send him to try to make you so uncomfortable you’ll heed the Senate’s every word just to get rid of him?”

“You could be nicer,” Jayme chided.

“You said yourself he was unbearable on the road,” Vi pointed out. Jayme merely shrugged.

“Anyway! Back to the market.” Ellene was like a dog with a bone. It was times like this that Vi recognized she was just toeing the line between girl and woman, not decidedly one or the other. “Jayme is going to meet Darrus for the first time.”

“I met Darrus in the spring.” Jayme stole the words from Vi’s mouth.

“Briefly. And he’s changed so much since then. He’s *grown*,” Ellene said with a somewhat dreamy look, clutching the sheet music to her chest. That motion alone made Vi suspect that the song had something to do with the young man.

*He hasn’t*, Vi mouthed to Jayme while Ellene wasn’t looking.

Jayme hid a snort of laughter with a particularly swift movement of her blade over the stone. “It’s hardly been seven months.”

“Practically a year.”

“Seven months is more like half a year.” Jayme rolled her eyes and began to pack up her things. She paused, looking to Vi. “Should I go with you?”

“Go with me? Why?”

“I am your sworn guard.” Jayme had a small smile, one Vi hoped was from pride at the fact.

“I’m staying in the fortress. You go make sure this one’s feet stay on the ground so she doesn’t fly away with that boy.” Vi pointed to Ellene.

“Hey!”

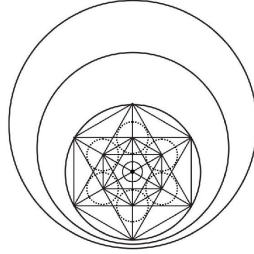
“Understood.” Jayme gave a mock-serious salute.

“I’ll catch up with you two later.”

“Don’t be too long!” Ellene was off the couch, pulling Vi in for a quick squeeze. “If you’re quick, you can join us. But we’ll be happy to go again later, too.”

They were out the door in a blink. Vi wasn’t long behind them. One more set of lessons with Sehra... and then the real work would begin when she summoned Taavin.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



VI TAPPED her fingers along her drafting table, debating with herself. Martis's words about the tomb still lingered in her mind from the morning. Compounding with that was some genuine progress made with Sehra, assuring her that another night of Taavin's tutelage wasn't essential for her at this moment.

She had promised him she'd hold up her end of the deal.

"Oh, fine, let's get this over with then." Vi threw up her arms and uttered, "*Narro hath.*"

She felt the connection thrum between them. It came to life with vivid sensations that culminated in an awareness of Taavin's existence somewhere across the world. But, for this brief moment, that distance didn't seem so impossibly large.

"You again?"

"Hello to you too." Vi huffed at the curt introduction.

"Back for more elementary explanations on Lightspinning?"

"No," she said firmly to the disembodied voice. "I think I know where this tomb of yours is located."

Silence. Stillness. And then, with a nearly quivering eagerness, "You do?"

"Yes. I think so, at least... How will I know?"

"When you arrive, merely repeat the process of the last apex and receive the vision. If it truly is a place where fate was malleable, that should be all you need."

"That's a bit vague, don't you think?" Vi mumbled.

"I think it's perfectly clear."

He would. He wasn't the one having to conceive a way to get to these apexes. "After I do this for you, we need to discuss how to stabilize these glyphs. I keep losing them too quickly."

“The fate of our world hangs in the balance and you’re focused on Lightspinning technique?” His voice went low, almost growl-like.

“The fate of *my* world counts on me learning this,” Vi insisted. She’d keep up her end of the deal, but she needed him to know that she wasn’t going to be distracted from his in the process.

“I think you need to—” Taavin never got the chance to finish.

A knock on the door startled Vi to the point of nearly jumping out of her seat.

“Vi, may I come in?” Ellene called through the door.

Vi looked at her skin. It was back to normal. The startle must’ve jostled whatever connection had been there. Given how he’d begun his final statement, the productive part of the conversation had ended anyway.

“Yes, come in,” Vi called back, lifting her quill in an attempt to look as though she’d been pouring over her maps.

The door of her library cracked open, and Ellene peeked her head in before emerging the rest of the way. “Maps? Is that seriously what’s kept you this whole time?” Vi couldn’t tell if she was frustrated or pleasantly amused.

“Yeah, I realized I hadn’t had a chance to incorporate my sketches from the hunt onto my main maps.” Vi felt bad for lying to Ellene. But she was in so far over her head when it came to this mysterious power that she didn’t even know where to begin.

Ellene crossed over to her desk, looking down. She dragged her fingertip along the winding lines that Vi had sketched weeks ago, the dry ink staying securely in place. “You really do have a knack for this.”

Vi glanced up, her pen stilling from the three strokes it’d made on the page. There was a softness to Ellene’s voice that Vi was unaccustomed to hearing. If she had to attach a label, she’d call it sadness, and that fact wrenched a corner of her, twisting to the point of pain. But the reason for Ellene’s sorrow or her own was unclear until her friend gave it words.

“Soon, you’ll finally see some of these places with your own two eyes.” Ellene’s finger tapped on the Crossroads in the Western Waste before trailing down to the southern capital. “It isn’t long now, until you leave.”

“We have a whole winter.” Vi caught her hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Don’t spend it here cooped in your room alone with your maps,” Ellene whispered. “Don’t let the idea of places you want to see, that you’ll see soon enough, take you from me in these final weeks that I have you.”



“I won’t.” It sounded like a promise, but Vi didn’t know if such a promise was fair to make. She could never control what consumed her attentions. And it seemed, now, that learning the magic of the world beyond was going to quickly absorb all free thought if she wasn’t careful. Could she go that quickly from merely wanting control of her powers to wanting to excel in them?

“Promise?” Ellene must’ve heard the reservation, too.

“I promise.”

Ellene was right; soon enough she would be taken away. Then, she would have a whole lifetime to spend in the South, years as an Empress going on tours across her territories to attach visuals of locations to the names on her map. She could find tutors for the magic that was already intriguing her, bring them from the Crescent Continent, if she must. She would have far more clout as Empress than Sehra had as Chieftain; she might have better luck as a result.

“Good. I’m going to hold you to it.” Her voice was much brighter, a smile sneaking on her lips.

“You already have something in mind.” Why was she not surprised?

“Well, you missed the market today with Jayme, Darrus, and I, *and* dinner. You owe us.”

Vi gave a snort of laughter and decided to play along. She owed everyone something right now it would seem. “Okay, I owe you... how can I repay my debt?”

“Tomorrow, after your lessons, come out with Jayme and me. We can walk through the market—show you what you missed—on the way to the outer ring.” The outer ring was the burnt stretch that still remained like a scar on the earth from the Empire’s occupation during the War in the North.

“And what are we doing in the outer ring?”

“Noru races!”

She suppressed a shiver at the mere mention of noru. After the incident in the jungle, Vi was quite content not interacting with the beasts again for a while. But she already promised Ellene...

“They’re the preliminary races for the winter solstice festivals,” Ellene continued. “Darrus asked me today to join the first heat with him. But, of course, I played coy and told him that I’d have to see if you were planning on joining. Since you’re the Crown Princess, I had to be deferent to you and all.” Vi snorted at the idea of Ellene showing her proper etiquette. Ellene clearly had the same idea as she giggled with laughter. “I was thinking we could take Gormon out—he’s faster than

mine. Mother still insists I ride the old slow Stanos for safety or some such."

"Some safety may be good for us," Vi muttered.

"Vi, don't take their side."

"Okay, okay, continue this plan of yours," she conceded.

"So, we'll say you race, and we take out your noru. Then, when we get there, I'll let Darrus be disappointed that I'm not riding with him because you wanted to. And you can say that you won't ride because... Well, I don't know. You can decide that there. You're sick or something." Ellene giggled. *Sick of noru, more like*, Vi thought flatly. "Think of how surprised he'll be when I'm astride. How impressed he'll be when I come in first on your noru." Ellene clasped her hands over Vi's hand. "He'll fall in love with me then and there, Vi, and we'll live together happily for forever."

"How can I argue with true love?"

"So you're saying you'll do it?" Ellene squeezed tighter.

"There's not much I need to be 'doing.' More what I need to make sure I'm not doing." Vi chuckled. "Yes, I'll do it. I'll tell the servants first thing in the morning to saddle Gormon—full Imperial leathers. Just think how impressive that will look for Darrus."

"I knew I could count on you!" Ellene clapped her hands. "I'll let Jayme know in the morning that you agreed to the plan."

"Not tonight?" It wasn't like Ellene not to immediately rush off and tell everyone involved of her latest schemes.

"She wasn't feeling too well after dinner. Said she might have ate something her stomach wasn't familiar with in the market." Ellene shook her head. "You know her, no matter how many times she's been to Soricism, her stomach just refuses to agree with something at some point."

"I'll send Ginger."

"I already offered to get a cleric." Ellene raised her hands and shoulders in a dismissive motion. "She said she needs to sleep it off and that she doesn't need help."

"Well, we'll see how she feels in the morning, and if we have to we can force some clerical help on her." Vi gave Ellene a wink that was returned with a laugh.

"You can do that. I'm not going to be the one to test Jayme. She can be scary when pushed!" Ellene paused in the door frame. "Thanks again, Vi, for helping me. It'd be nice to have a friend in Darrus, at least, after you leave."

Before Vi could comment on the sentiment, Ellene was gone.

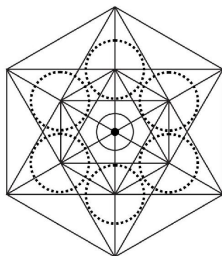
She stood at her desk, tapping her fingertips on it thoughtfully. *Darrus, at least.* That was one more thing she needed to keep an eye on before leaving—how Ellene would handle it all. She didn't want to see the girl running into a relationship purely to fill a void of companionship brought on by Vi leaving.

Then again, Sehra would be certain to ward against that as well. She would not allow her daughter to fall into despair, or resort to less-than-wholesome means to fill the gap.

Vi stood, extinguishing the candles in her study and starting for her bedroom.

It was then, in the silvery moonlight streaming through the windows, that Vi's eyes landed on the outer edge of Soricium. All Vi wanted was a good night's rest. But it seemed that would elude her yet again.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



VI CLUNG to the walls and interior passages of the fortress as much as possible. Some were usually reserved for servants only, but they were vacant at this time of night. If she did run into someone and kept her head down, no one would suspect her to be here.

She hoped.

Because if she was conspicuous... anyone in the fortress would stop her. That person would take her to Jax, and there was no way she could explain what she was doing. Or, perhaps, she could *maybe* get them to take her to Jayme, who would either not believe her or insist on coming as well—and this was something Vi felt certain she needed to do alone.

She'd never attempted to sneak out before. It was all very cloak and dagger—quite literally. She wore her darkest and heaviest cloak, hood pulled high and tight.

Yet despite all her worries, Vi stepped out of a back door at the end of a long stairwell and vanished into the city proper without issue. She glanced back, looking at the fortress in relief.

Her feet slowed and she stared up at the silent giants that extended their leafy arms to the heavens. All her life, she'd stayed put, exactly as intended. Never questioning, never wondering what would happen if she did venture beyond the confines set out for her.

Some part of her felt silly for not doing this sooner. It was so easy to slip out unattended. Likely because she had never really attempted it. There was no guard posted at her door or individual on duty watching her room at all hours of the day.

A smile crossed her mouth, an expression that quickly vanished when two small glints of reddish light flashed into view.

It was only a glimpse, and yet it felt as though someone was staring down at her. Vi scanned the bridges and walkways of the fortress,

stretching upward with the trees to merge with the dark sky above. There was no indication of anyone watching, no other bright red spots, and yet she had the distinct, sinister sensation of being observed.

She was imagining it, surely. Maybe she'd never snuck out before because she didn't have the proper constitution for espionage. Paranoia was her just reward.

Turning quickly, Vi crossed through alleyways and wove around small trees that curved to support signs and rooftops. Vi kept her face down, hood up, and hunched slightly. She'd braided her hair and tucked it away. No one should be able to recognize her... Unless they recognized the cloak itself. But outside of the fortress, no one knew Vi well enough that they'd know her by that alone.

Several times, she could've sworn she heard footsteps behind her. But when Vi stopped, so too did the sound, forcing her to believe her mind was just getting the better of her. Still, one time, she called out softly, "Jayme?" thinking that perhaps her friend had sneaked out behind her in an effort to keep her safe.

A response from behind her nearly had Vi jumping from her skin.

"Princess, is that you?"

Her eyes landed on a robed man. Long sleeves were tucked into heavy gloves that went to his elbows. On his face was a pointed mask, crafted in heavy leather, extending like a long beak away from his mouth. The inset glass goggles shone in the darkness, like some kind of terrifying monster.

She took a step back. The voice hadn't been hostile, yet given the strange garb the man wore...

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." The man quickly pulled off his mask, revealing a handsome face Vi instantly recognized.

"Darrus?" Vi blinked from the mask, to the heavy gloves, to his face—indents of the inside of the mask lingering on his flawless skin. "What are you wearing?"

"You haven't seen one yet?" He lifted the mask slightly. "I would've thought..."

"There's been much going on of late," Vi answered cautiously.

"Oh right, Ellene mentioned, you're going back to your home soon."

Vi resisted correcting him that she'd never actually lived there. The North could be as much her home as the South... if she had ever been fully accepted.

"What is it?" She pointed to the mask, reverting the topic back to safer territory.

“They call it a plague mask. There are medical screens the clerics have made on the inside of the beak to help filter out the White Death. We don’t know if it’s effective yet... but it feels a lot better wearing one than not when you’re around the infected.”

“White Death...” Vi swallowed hard, remembering all the words of panic her tutors had used when her travels were first starting to be delayed due to the plague. She couldn’t get sick, the Empire needed her. “Why are you wearing one? Is someone in your family ill?”

“Thankfully no... I’m helping the clerics. We set up a building for the ailing over there.” He pointed up to the outer ridge of Soricium. Vi couldn’t see the building from where she stood, but she gladly took his word for it. That was one area that, for all her curiosity, she knew better than to explore.

“Are there that many ailing?” Vi asked. She didn’t want the answer, but she owed it to her people to pursue it.

“Again, thankfully no...” He paused, cleaning one of the lenses on his mask. “There might be, though. They expect it to get worse with time. They’re already talking about if we have to move it—the infirmary, that’s what they’re calling it—where the next, or new one, will be.

“But we think we have a handle on the spread. Giving the infected a place to go and be treated, keeping them sequestered from the masses seems to have stunted the spread.”

“What can I do?” Vi asked.

“Unfortunately, nothing.”

“I’m the Crown Princess,” Vi needlessly reminded him for the sake of emphasis. “I have resources, I can get you what you need.”

“I misspoke.” He gave her a tired smile. “There’s nothing anyone can do. The clerics have no idea what’s causing the plague, how it spreads, who it chooses. It’s seemingly random... as if people’s bodies just... give up and die.”

“That’s... terrifying,” Vi whispered.

“It is.” Much like in Ellene, Vi saw two different forces existing in Darrus. There was the terror of the boy she’d seen dancing with Ellene in the spring. But there were also the makings of a man who had the bravery to face his fears. Perhaps Ellene was right, and he had actually grown some.

They fell silent, Darrus looking from his mask to her. Then, as if remembering what he’d stopped her for initially, he asked, “What are you doing out so late? Is everything all right?”

“Yes, just... I needed some air.”

“I see.” He did not sound convinced in the slightest and his blatant disbelief made her feel awkward. His emerald eyes set on dark skin were striking, and they reminded her of a similar set she dared hope to see again.

“Please, don’t tell,” she whispered. “Not even Ellene.” Her and Darrus had never been particularly close. But she could only hope the man had enough favor for her as a friend of Ellene, or enough fear of her as the Crown Princess, to oblige.

“Should I come with you? Is everything truly all right?”

“I have to do this alone. It’s important. It’s for the crown.”

He gave a small nod, clearly still unsure. “Well, I need to get back to my work. I’m the lowest rung, so that means I’m stuck taking the late shifts. They’re expecting me.”

“I didn’t know you were so interested in being a cleric,” Vi said thoughtfully. She’d only seen Darrus through the context of Ellene’s gaze—a handsome man who was a good dancer and charming to no end. The fact that she’d never invested more time in learning his true nature, his hopes and dreams, when her friend was so invested, made Vi’s insides tighten slightly with guilt.

“I’m not sure if I am, to be honest.”

“This must be a bit of trial by fire.”

He chuckled. “Spoken like a Firebearer.” Vi’s mouth quirked into a small smile. If only he knew how wrong he was on that. They both knew precious little about each other, and were now unlikely conspirators in Vi’s nighttime jaunt. “But yes, these are rather hard conditions to learn under. I’m not sure if I’m cut for it, but I do want to help people and it seems to me that this is the best way to do so presently.”

The words he spoke now were in stark contrast to the free-spirited boy she’d seen originally become the target of Ellene’s girl-like crushes. Darrus was fast becoming someone Vi could respect. Perhaps, if this gentle and heartfelt manner was Darrus’s true nature, she should be less worried about the idea of Ellene drifting even closer to him after Vi left.

“Thank you, on behalf of the crown.” Vi hoped he took both her meanings: gratitude for his work in dealing with the steadily spreading White Death, and for his silence on her being out long after dark.

“Yes, your highness.” He paused, right before putting his mask back over his face. “Perhaps you can return the favor by putting in a good word with Ellene to dance with me at the winter solstice? She still has yet to give me a response.” There was the boyish grin she remembered.

“Consider it done.” He turned to leave and Vi stopped him. “And Darrus, don’t worry so much about Ellene. She’s crazy about you.” They shared a small smile.

“That’s good to hear.” Just as Vi turned to leave, he caught her by her shoulder. “One last thing...” His voice had dropped low and was tense.

“What?” Vi whispered in reply.

“I could’ve sworn I saw someone following you. I thought it may have been Jayme but...”

“I’m alone,” Vi insisted. She wasn’t sure if she was informing him, or saying it out of hope that the fact remained true.

“Keep your hood up, and be careful, okay?”

“I will.”

They parted ways, then, and she slipped into the night on her hasty path.

At the edge of the city was a ruin so ancient it was nearly taboo. Everyone had always been hushed about the worn and ominous structure. But with Martis’s lesson, Vi now knew why. If she was right, and this was the place her mother had retrieved an axe that had changed the course of history... then she could understand why it was willingly being expunged from memory. *Expunged*, just like her parents had decreed the dangerous Crystal Caverns following the Mad King’s uprising.

She scrambled up a hill and into the trees that surrounded the city. A shadow began to loom against the starlight winking through the leafy canopy. Vi paused to look up at the tall, pyramid-like ruins that towered above her. She didn’t know if it could be called a tomb, but she would say based on the embellishments that it was made by the same people who had crafted the underground ruins she’d discovered—just far worse for wear, having been exposed to the elements.

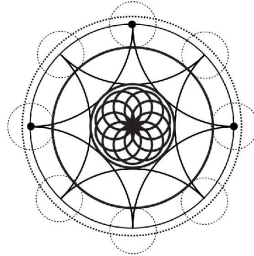
It couldn’t be coincidence that Taavin had used the word *tomb*, then Martis, and it all added up to this particular place. Looking around for any who might be watching, and finding none, Vi dared to hold out her hand.

“Repeat the process,” she whispered. Only one way to find out if this was her next apex of fate...

Fire ignited in her hand. Vi stared, and waited for the sensations of future sight to overtake her.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



NO VISIONS CAME.

“Why?” Vi whispered, as though the fire would answer. It didn’t, and she extinguished it, looking around. “This has to be the place...” She looked up at the ruins, hoping they would give her the answer, and was surprisingly rewarded.

“Repeat the process—I have to be inside,” Vi mumbled. Of course it wouldn’t be as easy as standing at its base. She had to be inside the last set of ruins and assumed this to be the same. “Now... how to get in?”

Vi took a lap around the structure, then doubled back to where the remnants of an old cave-in could be found. Time had taken its toll on the collapsed rubble, as with the rest of the weather-worn ruins. Roots and vines pulled it apart, creating an opening barely large enough for her to wiggle through.

Taking a deep breath, Vi debated if she was extremely brave or stupid to go into something so dangerous-looking, and began to clamor over the rubble anyway. Just as she suspected, it was barely large enough for her to fit through. A narrower portion dug into her wide hips and made her twist and contort her legs to get her thighs through. But get through they did, and with a small tumble she landed in a hollowed alcove eerily similar to what she’d seen in the jungle.

Shards of what looked like obsidian scattered around her, leaving Vi to pick a few from indents in her hands with small wincing. Miraculously, they did not draw blood. She stared at the glass-like stones, lifting up a larger piece for inspection.

Martis had said that following the fall of the Mad King Victor, the blight of the Crystal Caverns had been put to an end, once and for all, on the Main Continent. According to his telling, the crystals, once

illuminated with their strange and twisted magic, had gone dark, fractured, and broken.

“This will work,” Vi whispered into the darkness, letting the shard fall from her hands.

Readying herself once more, she held out her hand. Already, the atmosphere around her felt vastly different than it had outside. The feeling of sinking into the flame, of being consumed by it, of not being able to tear her eyes away even if she tried, was already on the edge of her consciousness.

As if drawn from her by an invisible string, her spark rushed forth the moment Vi allowed it freedom. It hazed into the air over her palm, condensing into an open flame. When Vi looked at it, the world went white; like last time, she was quickly overcome.

Shapes were slowly drawn into existence.

While white threads of magic continued to blur at the edges of her vision, the scene she was presented with was one of night.

A man stood atop a dais, a curving silver blade with runes etched along its flat side was gripped in a fist. In the other he held a hand up to the full moon overhead, blood streaming down his palm. It mingled with blood from a secondary source—on an altar behind him was a figure, distinctly human and wrapped in what looked like burlap, whose blood was soaking through the fabrics covering them and dripping into a channel that ran down to a symbol painted on the ground.

She tried to make out who the sacrificial person on the altar could be. But they were wrapped tightly and immobile. Dead, more likely, given that she couldn’t see them breathing. For some reason, Vi couldn’t move; she was positioned in one location in the vision and no matter how she tried, she couldn’t change her vantage.

Ignoring the body, altar, and bleeding man, Vi followed the channel of blood that was flowing down to a symbol Vi recognized near instantly.

It was a dragon, curled in on itself to form a perfect circle. A line had been drawn through the middle, cleaving it in two, off-setting the halves. It was the broken moon of the Tower of Sorcerers. But Vi had never heard of a place like this in any sorcerer lore she knew. She certainly knew there were no sacrificial rituals codified at the Tower.

Men and women were bowed around the outer edge of the glyph. They rose in unison, slowly, chanting under their breath in time with the louder calls of the man bleeding at the dais. At least, what she assumed were louder calls, based on the red of his face and the gulping breaths he took before opening his lips wide for each chant. To her, the world was

silent, just like the last time; she could observe only but not interact further.

She couldn't gasp in her bodiless state. But Vi felt the shock ripple through her as she saw more clearly the faces of the men and women beneath the large black hoods. Most possessed sharply angular features—not unlike the queen she had seen in her last vision—but their skin was ghostly pale and they had bright red eyes that glowed in the darkness.

Whatever they were, Vi had the distinct feeling it was not human.

There were some who had snouts like a lizard—identical to the man she had seen carrying the cage before her father. More, still, looked like normal humans, but with no eyebrows. Instead, glowing dots lined their foreheads.

It was a mix of races Vi had never seen before—never even imagined—and only further cemented that what she was looking at couldn't be some secret Tower ritual in the South. This felt like a different world entirely.

They turned their eyes skyward, lifting their arms up. The man slowly descended from the dais, his unnaturally glowing crimson eyes gaining in brightness till they were nearly white. The moment he reached the center of the symbol, everything reached a crescendo in a bolt of blood-red lightning.

It struck the man, sparking off and sending the other men and women around him flying back. Their bodies, dead, littered the ground. Magic arced through the air like the rebirth of a cosmos, all condensing on a glowing figure slowly rising from where the leader of this dark ritual had once stood.

It was the same man, but changed. He wore the red light as a second skin, seeming to grow in size before Vi's eyes. She knew she was witnessing true, but Vi couldn't fashion words or sounds. He turned; Vi could all but feel his sightless white eyes on her. They were like the noru. They were worse than death.

A scream—her scream—broke the trance of the vision.

Vi collapsed back, scrambling away, as though there was something physical she could distance herself from. She pressed her eyes closed, but all she saw were the scattered bodies, and the nightmarish figure emerging from the collection of their sacrificial essence. Vi shook her head, as though she could dispel the images.

She let out another yelp of startled surprise when a hand landed on hers.

Opening her eyes, Vi locked gazes with Taavin. He was there, closer, sharper. His hand was on hers with a warmth that was not quite real—as if he was touching her soul, housed under her skin, more than the skin itself.

“You actually found it... So you’re not totally worthless like most on the Dark Isle.” Suddenly, as if realizing he’d reached for her, his hand lifted and the sensation of the ghostly touch vanished.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” Vi muttered. There was another retort in her mind, but it vanished when his other hand rose, hovering just above her face, as though he was about to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear. Vi quickly did it herself, and he ignored the motion entirely.

“Are you all right?”

The question was surprisingly sincere. Vi blinked at him, swallowing, and gave a nod. The vision still lingered on her, uncomfortably heavy. Was she all right? Likely not. Her world had been shaking at its foundations for weeks now. But the only option was to press forward. She was in too deep.

“Tell me what you saw.”

“A ritual, men and women with red eyes, a sacrifice, a man made of lightning... I think he saw me.” Vi shook her head, trying to rattle her thoughts back into place, trying to make her words make sense. But there was no sense to be found. The whole thing felt impossible and she felt insane the second she vocalized it. Despite the fact, she tried to recall as much detail as she could for him.

“Elfin’ra.” The man cursed when she’d finished her more detailed recounting, and shook his head.

“What are elfin’ra?”

“Those men and women you saw with red eyes worshipping the evil god Raspian. They should be sealed away, but with the barrier that had been holding Raspian broken...” He cursed softly under his breath again, this time in a language Vi didn’t recognize. As Taavin shook his head, his hair shifted, and Vi noticed something she hadn’t before.

She shifted back involuntary. “You... are you one of them?”

“Do I look like one of them?”

“You have pointed ears like they did.” Sure enough, the pointed tips of his ears extended out from the waves of his hair. How had she never noticed it before? Likely because there were about a thousand things she needed to focus on and she’d only seen him twice... but still...

“But do I have pale skin and red eyes?” Taavin asked dumbly.

“Well, no, but—”

He explained as though she were a child. “I am elfin. They are elfin’ra.”

“And that means nothing to me,” Vi stated, deadpan. She was pleased that, despite his general look of frustration and tedium, a small smile graced his lips at the remark. But it was quickly abandoned.

“The elfin’ra are a splinter of elfin... their worship of Raspian has twisted them, changed their magic, their bodies. For it, they were banished to Salvidia over a thousand years ago.”

“Salvidia...” Vi repeated. Her mind instantly summoned the map Sehra had shown her. “An island, far off to the south?”

“I’m impressed you know that, being on the—”

“Dark Isle. Yes, I get it. I’m very impressive for an uncultured swine,” Vi said hastily, trying to keep them on track. “This ritual they are performing... what is it?”

“To give their god a mortal casing, and bring about the end of the world when he walks among us once more.”

All she had wanted was a little bit of magic, and a little bit of control over it. She had wanted that magic to ensure that she could be reunited with her family without issue. Simple, clean, easy.

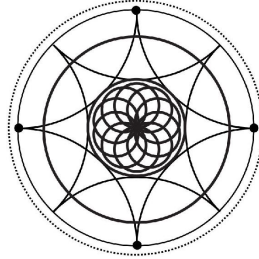
Yet, somehow, she was facing a man with glowing green eyes, in the middle of ruins, discussing the end of the world.

“Do you understand the severity of what’s at stake now?” Vi studied his face. His frown caused the crescent-shaped scar that ran along his cheek to shift. His eyes were serious, tired, more tired than she had last seen him. “Will you help me find the apexes without question? I need your visions to know what path we’re on, and what the future will hold, so I can prevent the elfin’ra from achieving their dark goals.”

“The deal still stands,” Vi whispered softly. “Help me learn how to control my magic, and I’ll find your apexes.” She didn’t want a place in all of this. She just wanted to be reunited with her family.

“Yes, you have your deal.” He gave a small nod. “Because you will need the full power of Yargen as her champion when the end of the world comes.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



IT WAS ALMOST as if the Mother herself had conspired with Ellene the night before, for Vi couldn't imagine a more perfect day for preliminary noru races leading up to the winter solstice. The weather was good enough that Vi didn't even feel exhausted waking early with very little sleep.

The North was always so warm that, even in winter, the trees never lost their evergreen leafy boughs. But the heat did relent, some. The nearly perpetual stickiness of the air vanished, and there was almost something that Vi would dare call cool on the front end of every breeze.

The changing seasons—fall to winter—brought out new smells and animals. Birds that migrated up from the south flitted between the railings of the walkways Vi traversed as she headed down to the stables. There was the usual fresh scent of greenery, mingling with the earthy aromas of wood, but as new flowers bloomed, so too did they give up their perfumes to the bouquet of the atmosphere.

Vi worked to put her lessons and magic behind her. She'd promised Ellene she'd be present in the moment during their final weeks together, and Vi would do her best to honor that promise despite all that was going on. She also, admittedly, needed a break after the night she'd had. While there had been no issue sneaking back into the fortress, her vision and encounter with Taavin had left its mental mark on her already exhausted mind.

"Why are you following me?" Vi asked dryly. Andru hastily caught up with her.

"It is my job to observe you."

"In my lessons."

"In general."

Vi sighed heavily. "I am too tired to argue with you today."

“Are we arguing?”

“Banter, then.” Stupid semantics.

“That’s what Romulin would’ve called it,” he said mostly to himself with a soft chuckle. “I hear you are going to partake in noru races this afternoon.” Andru took a step behind her, allowing Vi to lead them down one of the spiraling wooden stairwells as she made her way to the stables.

“Where did you hear that from?” Vi glanced over her shoulder.

“I have my ways.” He looked out the windows as they strolled.

She was too tired to pry. Even though she’d made haste after her lessons, she was still the last one to arrive at the stables.

“Sorry, I tried to get out as fast as I could,” Vi called over to her friends the moment her feet met the packed earth.

“Apparently you still have yet to escape.” Ellene shot Andru a look.

Vi fought a smirk and failed. But she made sure it was off her cheeks when he could see her face.

“Escape? Am I truly so terrible?” He looked to each of them.

“Of course not. We’d merely planned this to be a girls’ outing.”

“Oh, like last time.” He smiled, once again ignorant of the dismissal.

“How are you feeling?” Vi asked Jayme quickly, eager to change the topic. Her friend looked as she always did—brown hair tied back in a bun, straight posture, sword on her hip, usual Eastern golden-tan skin, nothing betraying any cause for concern on her face.

“Much better.” Jayme gave a small nod, recognizing the source of Vi’s concerns. “I don’t know what did me in, but I’m pleased to report that it will not keep me from performing my duty as your guard today.”

The formality brought laughter to Vi’s lips, amusement that was mirrored by a quirk of Jayme’s own. “I am lucky to have one so loyal in my service.”

“Now, ladies, you both know the plan for today.” Ellene clapped her hands and brought them to task.

They both gave a nod, leaving Andru in the dark.

“One small deviation,” Jayme started hesitantly. “After the position it put me in yesterday... I have no interest in returning to the market.” She turned to the saddled noru. “And while this beast is nimble, perhaps not nimble enough to go through the market. So I’m thinking that I’ll take it out on the main road, and meet you both on the outer circle.”

“We can go with you,” Vi offered.

“Don’t you want to see the market?” Ellene linked her arm with Vi’s. “A caravan arrived from the West two days ago. All the way from Norin,

so there's a whole host of unique goods to peruse."

That thought hadn't crossed Vi's mind. Just because it was near impossible to get in and out of the southern capital didn't mean the rest of the world was shut off.

"Just agree." Jayme tried to fight a laugh and failed. "We all know how much you love Western spices."

"Fine, fine." Vi held up her hands in agreement. "You two know me far too well and I concede." She looked to Jayme. "You're sure you don't mind? And that you can handle Gormon? A noru is a lot different than a horse."

"I think I'll be fine. Yours is far better trained than the one we met in the jungle." That much was certainly true. Jayme turned to Ellene. "I'll help build suspense for you. Talk about what a shame it is that you decided not to race this year, to allow our Crown Princess to shine."

"You're the best." Ellene threw her arms around Jayme's neck. "We'll see you out there soon."

Jayme left first, noru reins in hand. Gormon was a fairly gentle beast, so Vi didn't worry too much for her handling him. Ellene was right: he was faster than her noru, but only because he was younger. Vi watched as his long tail swayed back and forth with the sort of prowling sashay that marked all noru.

She looked away quickly, reminded of the last time she found herself on the receiving end of one of the beast's paws.

"Well, it is a good thing I'm here then," Andru reminded them of his presence.

"How are you so quiet?" Ellene nearly jumped out of her skin. "I'd forgotten you were there at all."

"I am not sure if I should take offense to that," he muttered, then continued, louder, "You two will need an escort through the market, now that your guard is gone."

"We could easily get a warrior."

"Do not be silly. It is no trouble." Andru smiled.

"Thank you," Vi said, earning a look from Ellene. "That is kind of you."

"Is it?" Ellene murmured under her breath.

It was Vi's turn to give the girl a pointed look. She hadn't received Romulin's missive about the importance of Andru. Vi hastily returned her attention to the man in question, hoping he missed the nonverbal layers of communication. Fortunately, he was staring off at the noru in their pen.



“You have yet to properly see the city, right?” Vi dared to ask.

“I have been out a few times.”

“Well, allow us to show it to you from our point of view.” She didn’t know when, exactly, he’d been out.

“Is it very different? Your point of view?”

*Did he want to come or not?* Vi plastered on a wider smile. “I shall let you reach that conclusion on your own.”

With that, they started off with Andru in tow into the city proper.

They wound around the many unorthodox structures of Soricium. Some short, some as tall as tress. Some made of masonry, others of carved woods, and most magicked into existence with the help of Groundbreakers. Vi did her best to point out things along the way to Andru. In the back of her mind was her brother’s letter—he was important, and she had to be on her best behavior. She’d done an admittedly poor job of it so far, so perhaps she could recover some ground today.

There was an amphitheater to the north of town where most of the performances and lectures for the solstice would take place. The area around it was mostly residential, unused for most of the year, but built with wide roads and space to accommodate the city converging on the spot for those special times. That made it a logical place to pop up the market for the solstice.

“It’s even larger than last year,” Vi appraised.

“Mother says it’s the biggest year yet. The merchants filled all the open space here, they’re overflowing—some are even forced to stay back by the main road. I can’t imagine how full the city will feel when others come in for it.” Many of the smaller towns and cities in Shaldan poured into Soricium for the solstice events.

“What do you think?” Vi asked Andru as they started down the makeshift market stalls.

“It is very different, indeed.”

“Different... in a good way?” She tried to lead him along.

“I think so. It is a shame your brother will not arrive before this festival is over. I do think he would enjoy seeing the collection of so many cultural notes.”

Vi folded her hands before her thoughtfully. She’d never thought of what her brother would think of the market—of anything in the North, really. It had always been such an impossibility for him to be present that she never even considered what he’d enjoy about the life she’d lived.

“Does my brother enjoy learning of different cultures?” Vi knew the answer already, but she was curious what Andru would say. How closely had he positioned himself to the royal family?

“Oh, incredibly so. He practically bounces off the wall when a new batch of texts arrives from the library in Norin, Hastan, or sent from you. Especially if it’s sent from you.” As Andru spoke, he looked nowhere in particular, eyes darting from stall to stall. His words were fond, but his eyes were distant.

*Did he care for her family or not?* Vi couldn’t put her finger on the answer.

“Do you spend—”

“Oh, look at that,” Andru interrupted her. More like, hadn’t even realized she’d started speaking. “Now *that* is something Prince Romulin would find fascinating.”

Andru wandered off toward a leatherworker’s wares. Vi started in his direction but was stopped by a hand on her sleeve.

“There’s a Western spice seller.” Ellene pointed in the opposite direction. Vi looked between the two locations. “Unless you’d rather go with him?”

She was curious what Andru thought her brother would find so fascinating. There was an uneasy feeling about the notion that Andru might know things about Romulin she didn’t, merely by virtue of his usual proximity to her brother. That fact soured her stomach.

“No, no... he’ll be fine on his own for a moment. Besides, I want to get Uncle Jax something.”

“I thought you might.” Ellene hooked her arm with Vi’s leading her toward the stall.

A woman sat in a folding chair, surrounded by baskets that Vi recognized as Northern make, but filled with the bright colors and smells of the West. There was a pile of what looked like sand, next to small hard black nuts. Vi didn’t know what half of it was for, but she did know that Jax loved almost all of it; whenever he prepared food with these spices, it had the most magical taste.

“Hello, young princesses.”

“I’m not a princess,” Ellene insisted. “I’m a future Chieftain.”

“Good day.” Vi gave a small nod of acknowledgment, ignoring how, exactly, the woman had identified her as a princess. She wasn’t wearing any sort of circlet or other royal regalia, though perhaps proximity to Ellene was enough. “May I have a scoop of this one?” Vi pointed to what appeared to be a coarse-ground, reddish spice blend.

“Do you have your own bag, or will you need one?”

“I shall need one.”

The woman took a metal scoop from a small bucket at her side and filled a tightly woven satchel with Vi’s selection. The bag plumped and their nostrils were assaulted with the tangy aroma. She tied it off at the top with a short length of twine.

“How much?” Vi fished out a few coins from the pouch at her side.

“For the Crown Princess, nothing.” The woman handed her the bag and sat back in her chair, a thin smile on her weathered lips.

Vi continued to ignore the slightly unnerving feeling she was getting from the merchant, focusing instead on extending out a thin silver coin. “I can’t possibly take something without payment.”

“Seeing you is payment enough.” The woman’s beady black eyes looked her over from top to toes. Vi’s arm went slack. “I heard the stories, but had to see it with my own two eyes. You really do look just like her, our dear, late princess Fiera.”

“My grandmother?”

The woman nodded. “You have her hair, her voice, her blood, and her fire, too, from what I hear.”

Vi bit back a correction. One of the reasons she needed to learn the magic of light from Sehra and Taavin was to keep that illusion alive—that she was a Firebearer like her predecessors. It gained her far too much favor in the West to allow the perception to slip.

Still holding out the coin, Vi tightened her elbow and extended it further. “Truly, I insist.”

“Very well. I shall consider it a boon from our princess returned.” The woman leaned forward and took the coin from between her fingers. “Do you have her tastes as well? Do you like Western spices?”

“I enjoy cuisine from all across the Empire.” Romulin would be proud of that response, Vi decided. She’d have to tell him about it in her next letter—but no, there would not be a next letter. She would merely tell him in person. An odd rush overtook her.

The woman hummed and Vi got the distinct feeling that she saw the response for the politically approved statement that it was. “Well, perhaps when you are in the West enjoying our cuisine, you will enjoy other aspects of our culture.”

“I am sure I will.” Vi made a motion to leave.

“Perhaps a curiosity shop.”

“A what?” It was Ellene who paused now, clearly intrigued.

“A curiosity shop,” the woman repeated, answering Ellene but continuing to stare directly at Vi. Her eyes felt like they would never leave her for the rest of her days. “In the West, the Firebearers among us with the power to peer among the Mother’s lines of fate and look into the future will sell this ability to those who seek them out. The places they use their future sight for profit are called curiosity shops.”

“Can you see the future?” Ellene asked eagerly.

“We should go. Darrus is waiting.” Vi stopped the conversation there. She’d had enough talk about future sight. She still hadn’t told her friends, or Uncle Jax, about her visions. Vi was juggling too many things—too many secrets—for her taste, and didn’t want to stand here and be reminded of them.

“Right, right.” Ellene gave a small wave to the elderly woman, clearly not as unnerved as Vi was. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.” Her black eyes stayed stuck on Vi. “Should you ever decide to go West, seek me out at my curiosity shop in the Crossroads. It has been passed down in my caravan for generations, the key to it said to have been gifted from Lady Fiera herself. You may find it enlightening, princess. The lines of fate are wound so tightly around you that they could strangle you if you’re not careful.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper, but Vi heard perfectly. The day suddenly felt far, far colder.

“What is it, Vi?”

“Nothing.” If she insisted it firmly enough to Ellene, perhaps she’d believe it as well. Vi plastered a smile on her face. “Nothing at all. Let’s get to the noru races. We don’t want to keep them waiting, and there’s only so much talking up Jayme can do.”

Just as they were leaving the stall, so too was Andru leaving his. He also had a small satchel in his hands, though it was canvas, not leather. Whatever he had purchased was concealed within.

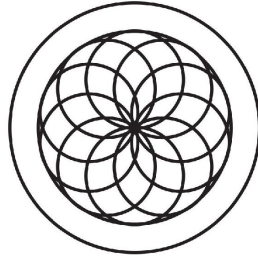
“What did you buy?” he asked.

“Some spices for Jax. What about you?”

“A little gift as well, for when I return home.” *A gift for whom?* Vi wondered, but didn’t get the chance to ask. “Shall we continue to these races?”

Without another word on fate, future seers, or gifts, they did.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



EXPECTEDLY, they were the last to arrive at the noru races, and Ellene seemed to relish in it because it meant all eyes were on her for her grand entrance.

“I wasn’t sure if you were really going to come.” Darrus wasted no time in crossing over to them.

“I would never abandon you,” Ellene said smoothly.

His emerald eyes drifted over to Vi. She braced herself, remembering him in his mask from the night before. Would he out her now? A tiny, knowing smile crossed his lips, and then he carried on as though nothing was out of the ordinary. “I heard you were racing?”

“Well, I’d fully planned on it.” Vi rested a hand on her stomach, hunching slightly. “But I think I ate something in the market that didn’t agree with me. It’s coming on quickly.”

“What, no!” Ellene gasped, bringing her hands to Vi’s cheeks.

Jayne rushed over to Vi’s side, resting a hand on her back. “The same thing happened to me last night. Was it something from the cheese stall? The wheel with all the bright colors marbled underneath the wax?”

“Yes, that one!” Vi leaned into her friend.

“I do not remember you stopping at a cheese stall,” Andru murmured.

“We must have gone when you were distracted,” Ellene said with a glare.

“I only remember the spice stall.” He shrugged.

Vi gave a loud groan of mock pain, trying to bring the attention back to her. “And after I’ve saddled my noru and everything.”

*Did this sound as fake to everyone else?* Vi couldn’t help but wonder. It was a good thing they were all born nobility or in service to nobility, for none of them were about to win any acting awards. Even still, Darrus

seemed to be believing it, and that was all that mattered. Then again, he hadn't taken his eyes off Ellene for more than a minute and the two gravitated closer together with every second.

"Should we get a cleric for you?" Darrus asked, concern coating his words. "I may have some potions on hand. One of my friends is a Groundbreaker with a gift for healing and I think they—"

"No, no. I'm fine, or I will be." Vi made a show of wincing.

"It passed quickly for me as well," Jayme affirmed. "But, as your sworn guard, and in the interest of your safety, I must insist you do not race. Doing so could agitate things, and the unsightliness of being sick astride a noru..."

"But Jayme, my noru is all saddled and ready to ride." As Vi finished, she glanced at Ellene from the corners of her eyes, waiting for the girl to jump in and be the hero she wanted to be... *any second*... But Ellene was too busy making looks of adoration at Darrus. Looks he was returning, so at least he didn't consciously hear the conversation running head-first past awkward. "If only someone could—"

"I could ride the noru for you!" Ellene returned to the realm of the present at the last possible moment. "If you do not mind, that is, princess."

Vi fought a blurt of laughter at Ellene's display. "Are you certain you don't mind?"

"Princess, for you, anything." Ellene gave a low bow.

"Are you sure you don't want to try?" Andru asked.

Vi looked at him sideways. They'd all but settled the matter. This was overkill even by the most histrionic standards. Unless he was that dense and hadn't figured out what they were doing?

"No, I think it is best I don't." Vi straightened, trying to make sure she still looked appropriately ill in the process, as though standing tall was a struggle she was willing to endure for the sake of her station.

"But you have given your word, princess," Andru continued to press. "Prince Romulin has said that a royal should always keep to their word."

"It is very unfortunate, yes," Vi ground out. "But I think I must sit out."

"But—"

Vi outright interrupted him this time. "Ellene, if you are to race for me, then I must command you to win."

"It would be my honor." She turned to Darrus. "If this last-minute substitution is accepted..."

“Of course it would be.” Darrus didn’t miss the chance to take Ellene’s hands. Vi couldn’t fight a smile—a smile that quickly vanished when she remembered Taavin’s nearly identical motions the night before. As though he too hadn’t wanted to miss a chance to... *Focus*. Vi forced her mind only on the present. “For the Chieftain’s daughter, for you, anything.”

“Thank you, Darrus. I really don’t know what I’d do without you...” Ellene was saying, as the two walked off toward the noru along a starting line drawn with gravel in the barren dirt.

“They are so cute, it is a little disgusting, is it not?” Vi murmured.

“He is certainly cute,” Andru said so softly under his breath that Vi wasn’t certain she’d heard it. She looked in his direction, but her thoughts were near instantly diverted when Jayme let out a large snort.

“We’ll see if it lasts a season this time.”

“Must you be so cynical?” Vi laughed at Jayme’s remark. “Let the girl have her romance.”

“I’m being reasonable. Is he of a good family? Will her mother approve? What marriage must she make for the sake of alliances?”

“The North is not as concerned with such things as the South,” Vi reminded her. Jayme might look Eastern, but she’d grown up in the South. Her concerns and sensibilities were distinctly Southern as a result.

“They must not be,” she murmured.

“Are you concerned with such things?” Andru asked.

“I know that when it comes to my romantic life, it is best if I am not concerned. My opinion of my match will be the lowest rung on the ladder of considerations when the time comes.”

“Spoken like Prince Romulin,” he said softly. Vi turned, catching his icy blue eyes. It was spoken like her brother, because he was the one to have given her those words. “Do you find your brother’s counsel wise, princess?”

“More than any other’s.”

“He would make a fine ruler, had he been born first.” The words were said like agreement... but there was something that felt akin to a knife twisting in her.

A similar sensation to the one in the market returned, sweeping across new corners of her. Andru clearly thought Romulin was more fit to lead. He knew Romulin better—the whole of the South would. Romulin was their darling child and she was...

Vi swallowed.

She was the faraway heir no one knew anything about and likely no one wanted. Vi opened her mouth to speak again, though she didn't know what she wanted to say. Did she want to confront him about the sentiment surrounding her and her brother? Did she want to somehow try to see if the Senate was keeping tabs on Romulin as they were her? Was the Senate trying to pit them against each other?

Whatever she might have asked was cut short by a man walking along the center line. He stared up at the different noru, all shoulder to shoulder.

"This preliminary heat will be one lap around the outer circle," the man boomed. "The first two will advance to the finals to be held during the winter solstice festivities. There is no attacking, or intentionally bumping into other noru. Claws to anything but the ground equals immediate disqualification. Are there any questions?"

The riders shook their heads.

"Good luck, Ellene!" Vi cupped her hands around her mouth and called.

"You're sick, remember?" Jayme mumbled.

"I'm sick, not mute." Vi rolled her eyes.

Ellene gave them a small wave, then settled further into her saddle. She looked like a proper racer. Everything Vi would expect for someone who'd grown up in the North. It was almost comical to imagine her sitting on a saddle even half as confidently.

"Get ready." The man who had outlined the rules lifted a small green flag. "Mark... Go!"

He dropped the flag, and they all moved at once.

There was a unified rallying cry from all the riders. Some yelled the word "go" at their massive cats. Others cried out their own, unique words. Most said nothing at all, a wordless shout that could easily be interpreted as a mix of excitement and exhilaration filling the air.

The noru lunged forward; dust kicked up off their hind legs, pluming in the air like smoke. They charged forward, alight with the crackle of magic. Vi realized, then, that the leader had never specified any rules about magic for the race.

Beneath Gormon's feet, two large pillars of stone emerged at a forward angle. Vi was forced to give all the credit to the animal that he was not unnerved by it, and merely adapted to the new terrain. Gormon crouched, and the noru leapt forward, capitalizing on the momentum Ellene's magic had bought him.



He soared through the air in a massive leap, gaining a lead on the pack quickly.

“Go, go!” Vi couldn’t help but cheer, even though Ellene likely couldn’t hear.

Ellene was making headway, a solid lead. Perhaps Gormon was faster than Vi had given him credit for and she just didn’t know how best to ride the animal. But he was pulling ahead with nothing but open track before him.

Vi began to run alongside, hoping for a vantage to see the finish.

“You’re supposed to be sick!” Jayme repeated.

“I want a better view!” Vi retorted.

“Do you think you can keep up with the noru?” The question was a half laugh as Jayme was already running behind her.

Vi knew she couldn’t. The track was long, and she could only see the noru for just a bit longer, even with the time running would buy her. But she wanted to see Ellene for as long as she could.

And see she did, as the straps on Gormon’s saddle broke all at once; as the leathers flapped limply in the wind; as the small silhouette of her friend was airborne. Time seemed to suspend. Leather and girl alike hovered mid-air.

If Vi had been a Windwalker like her mother, she could’ve caught Ellene before she even neared the ground. But she was useless as a Firebearer and as a Lightspinner. All Vi could do was watch in horror as Ellene’s body met the ground with a sickening bounce.

“Get up!” Vi screamed. “Ellene!” Excitement turned to panic. “Stop, stop!” The other noru were coming in fast. Surely they’d seen what had happened? Surely they’d see Ellene on the ground through the dust cloud?

The riders were struggling to swerve. The heat had too many noru, and the pack was confused between riders who saw and those who didn’t, bunched together with shoulders bumping—no one could coordinate who was going left and who was going right.

Ellene was going to be trampled.

Vi lifted a hand, debating with the precious few seconds she had. Did she try to make a fire and spook the giant cats, divert them into the woods? Could she trust herself not to burn Ellene and everyone else alive? She hadn’t learned enough of Yargen’s magic yet to use that confidently.

At the last second, Ellene raised her head.

There was a scream before Ellene curled in on herself, face to the ground, hands over her head; once again, her magic reacted on instinct. Large curls of stone rose from the ground, creating a cocoon of rock around Ellene.

The other noru bounded over top of it. Vi watched as they leapt off of it, continuing forward until their momentum was spent and the riders could get a better handle on the beasts. Vi ran, crossing the distance.

“Ellene! Ellene!” Vi cried out, even though she knew, logically, that her friend was all right. If she could survive the inferno Vi had made in the jungle, her rocks could hold up against some noru weight.

The rocks retreated, like an egg cracking, revealing the precious girl within. Vi only ran faster toward her dazed friend as Ellene straightened. She slid to a stop, wrapping her arms around the girl’s shoulders.

“Ellene, are you all right?” Vi held her fiercely.

“I’m fine...” she muttered. “Not so loud... I think I hit a rock... or something. My head feels funny.”

Vi straightened away. Sure enough, a river of blood ran down the side of Ellene’s face. Vi looked over her shoulder in a panic. Jayme was on her way, but slower in her military garb. She turned in the opposite direction, to the riders that stared on in shock and horror.

“Darrus!” Vi stood and called. He was there in a second. “Take Ellene back to the stronghold. Summon Sehra and Ginger. And try not to jostle her too much.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine...” Ellene’s mutterings faded when she was solidly in Darrus’s arms.

“She’s not. Don’t let her say otherwise and avoid being checked out,” Vi commanded.

“Yes, princess.” There was not one mention of the mysterious disappearance of Vi’s aforementioned sickness. Darrus shifted his weight in his saddle, making sure Ellene was situated. In a tone that he clearly only meant for the girl to hear, he whispered, “I’ll take care of you, I swear.”

With that, the noru was off.

“What, what happened?” Jayme panted.

“I sent Ellene back.” Vi turned to Gormon. He was off walking as though nothing had happened. Then, she looked down to the saddle. “What in the Mother’s name happened here?”

“A terrible or brilliant stroke of luck.” Jayme frowned at it. “If you had been on that saddle, as we’d said was the intent... then you would’ve been the one trampled.”

It was true.

If the riders couldn't stop for the daughter of the Chieftain, Vi didn't think they could've for her. Even if Vi technically outranked Ellene, in the eyes of most Northerners, she was merely the daughter of the man and woman who had brought them to heel. *Disliked in the North, disliked in the South*, the day's realizations compounded. Knowledge she'd always had, on some level, of her position made real.

No... if she'd been astride Gormon when the saddle straps broke, her only hope would have been for Ellene to have made a shell to protect her.

But Vi had seen what had happened with the other noru bounding above the stone with such ferocity that the ground itself rumbled. And she knew Ellene's control of her magic was not mature enough to be relied on beyond the instinct of her own self-preservation.

"We'll see if it's brilliant luck... if Ellene is all right," Vi muttered, picking up the saddle. "Now, to bring this back and have a word with the leather master... let him know there's something faulty in his design." Jayme's expression darkened as she stared at the saddle. "What?"

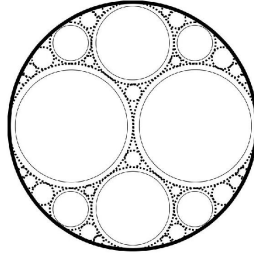
Jayme crossed over, holding up the girth. Right where the leather curved into the buckle was a straight line—impossible to see once the saddle was in place, but now undeniably sinister. Vi stared at it, knowing what she was seeing. But she couldn't process it. It didn't make any sense. It *couldn't* make sense.

"Someone, I think was hoping you were on that saddle..." Jayme said. "Because this has been cut nearly all the way through."

"What?" Vi whispered. But what she really meant was *why*?

"Someone wants you dead, princess."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



ON SOME LEVEL, Vi had always known she'd lived a sheltered life.

When she was less than a year old, she'd been transported to the North and placed under the care of Sehra's mother. When that Chieftain died, Vi's protection fell to Sehra herself, the same woman who had struck the deal for her life. While both relationships had never been particularly warm and the people's opinion overall reflected their leader's, Vi had always felt *safe*.

Now, staring at the tampered saddle leather, she wasn't so sure. Yet another time in a terribly short period, her world felt different, inexorably *shifted*. Vi swallowed hard. Staring at the saddle would do her no good. There were no more answers to be had here, for now, and staring at them would only rouse suspicion from the others.

"We'll bring it up with Jax when we get back. Tell no one else."

"Understood." Jayme slung the saddle over her shoulder. The cut pieces swung harmlessly, no doubt unassuming to anyone who didn't know to look for the betrayal. Her eyes drifted over to Andru, who was still staring at the tree line. "Not even him?"

"Not even him."

"Is the Chieftain's daughter all right?" The man who had gone over the rules finally ran over. The racers still perched on their noru were finally becoming brave enough to venture forward as well.

"Ellene was dazed, but she seems all right, thank the Mother. I sent her to be looked over by Chieftain Sehra and my personal cleric," Vi reported, putting on an air of authority.

Suddenly, everyone looked suspicious through Vi's eyes. Every eye trained on her was one looking for her death. She forced herself to quell the feeling; these were the men and women she'd grown up alongside. She couldn't see them as lurking enemies now... But she also couldn't

stop herself from wondering how many had access to the castle, to her noru?

The old wars had left deep scars, even on the children of those who had fought, How many of them would want her dead for the crimes her parents committed against theirs? How many knew she was supposed to be the one in the race?

Vi glanced back to Andru. He had known she was intended to ride... and he had pressed for it.

"Praise Yargen." The man gave a small bow. "And thanks to her that it wasn't you on that saddle."

"Yes, well... If you'll excuse us, I'm going to return and check on your future Chieftain."

"Take care, your highness."

Vi gave a small nod, and began to lead the way back toward the main road. She gave a shrill whistle and Gormon trotted over, falling into step behind them. Lumbering along, getting distracted by the birds flitting in the trees, he seemed a gentle giant; Vi felt silly for ever being nervous around him. Especially when she had something far more tangible to worry about.

"Who do you think it could be?" Jayme asked only when they were far out of earshot of anyone else.

"I don't know."

"Truly?"

"Why does that surprise you?"

Jayme paused, thinking to herself. "You're in the North, the granddaughter of the man who conquered this land and put it under the heel of the Empire. There are many, I'm sure, who remember seeing their loved ones die at the hands of a man bearing your name. I would have thought someone might have been exceptionally cruel, enough to be a suspect, at some point."

"The North has been good to me," Vi defended. She didn't know why, however. Hadn't she followed the same line of thinking in her own mind? But she still wanted to reject the notion that she'd been sleeping alongside enemies all along.

"Certainly... But the North is wide, and full of people. Sehra has been good to you, surprisingly so, all things considered. Ellene is like your sister. And that goes far with many. But..." Jayme paused, picking at the saddle straps. "There are many who cannot forgive the sins of the father. Some would argue that perhaps those sins shouldn't be forgiven

until justice is exacted... regardless if that justice falls to the children to bear.”

Jayme’s voice took on a hard, protective edge—one that nearly surprised Vi. She glanced over, but decided it best to leave the woman to her thoughts for a moment.

“It’s impossible to say for certain it’s a Northerner.” Vi remembered keenly the old, Western woman in the market. “The solstice has brought a flood of strangers to the North.”

“But the East and West see you as their own, given your parents.”

Vi couldn’t argue that. Her mother was born and bred Eastern. Her father was the grandson of the last great king in the West. And given how the woman in the market had claimed she’d come all this way just to lay eyes on Vi...

She shook her head and heaved a heavy sigh. “I don’t know. Everyone seems as likely and unlikely as the next. Perhaps we’re making something from nothing and it was an accident?”

“This—” Jayme held up the straps again. “—is *not* an accident. Not knowing who to suspect is one thing. But don’t be ignorant, princess. Someone is out to get you—someone with access to the fortress. I’m going to find out who.”

As if on cue, Andru strolled over to them. He had a small frown on his face, but his overall lack of urgency made any concern he laid on seem insincere.

“Is everything all right?”

“Everything is fine,” Vi answered quickly.

“Those beasts, the riders could not even get them to stop for their future chieftain.” Andru looked back at Gormon. “Wild things.” Vi wanted to argue and explain that it was a deadly combination of momentum, the shroud of a dust cloud, and the overall excitement of the race. But he continued before she could. “If you had been on that saddle, you would have been dead.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

The road dipped down, heading back into the city proper.

They came up to the stables and Vi directed her noru into the pen. Gormon leapt over the fence, heading to a back corner of sun, and stretched out with a massive yawn. He rolled half on his side and promptly forgot about Vi’s existence, distracted by a low-hanging branch he batted at like a kitten with a ball of yarn.

“Vi, thank goodness you’re all right.” Jax’s voice cut through the heavy silence that had been hanging over them like a cloud. He crossed

over quickly, resting his hands on her shoulders.

“We can agree on that.” Vi turned to Andru. “If you will excuse us now, please. I would like a word alone with Lord Jax.”

“Yes, of course.” Andru gave a small bow of his head, starting in for the fortress. *Now he takes the hint.* They all watched him go. When he was far enough out of hearing range, Jax turned back to her, a frown on his face.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened? I can see it on your faces.”

Jayne held up the saddle straps. Jax walked over and, judging from his deepening scowl, saw what Jayme had before she spoke. “They were cut.”

Jax held out his hands and Jayme passed him the saddle. He flipped it over, placing it on the ground, and knelt to get a better look. Vi wasn’t surprised when his investigation didn’t yield more than theirs had. There weren’t really clues to speak of.

“I’ll have a word with the stable master,” he said grimly, standing. “Find out who has access to this area.”

“Do you think there’s any way it could’ve been an accident?” Vi asked, ignoring the look from Jayme. So she was hopeful that someone wasn’t trying to kill her—that should hardly be surprising.

“I pray it is. But I’m forced to act like it’s not. You are not to leave the fortress again, even with guards, until we get to the bottom of this.”

She felt as though the remark should upset her, but Vi was too focused on the notion that someone was trying to kill her. She’d never had that much freedom to begin with, and she was leaving the North soon enough. The idea of further confinement was more palatable than Vi thought it should be. If anything, it felt normal.

“Are you going to raise an alarm?”

“Not yet. Whoever did this, I want them to think they got away with something. Perhaps that way, we can catch them in the act.”

Vi gave a small nod, ignoring the feeling that she was so much bait on a hook.

“How is Ellene?” Jayme asked, unintentionally making Vi feel terrible for not asking sooner.

“She’s fine, up and about. It was just a small bump, a bit of daze, a potion to help clear her head and a salve to mend the spot. But you did right sending her back.”

They both gave a small nod.

“Now, try to put this from your mind and allow me and Sehra to worry about it. Focus on your studies and stay in the fortress. You’ll be

safe so long as you stay here and take no unnecessary risks.”

Vi felt odd about the notion that someone was lurking in the shadows, searching for a chance to kill her, and she was doing nothing about it. But for now, Jax was right. With no leads, it was all she could do. She had to wait until they made their next move... And hope it wasn't the move that killed her.

“I'm going to return to my quarters.”

“Jayme, would you stay and help me investigate?” Jax asked her friend.

“Yes, sir. It's my duty as guard.”

Vi gave them a wave goodbye and headed in.

She had just started up the stairs when she realized she wasn't alone. Slowly, Vi turned, seeing Andru standing two steps behind her where he previously hadn't been. There were no alcoves he could've hidden in, or doorways to emerge from. That meant he had to have come up from the first landing area. But she hadn't seen him there either.

It was like the man appeared in mid-air.

“What is it now?” Vi asked, ignoring the tingling feeling creeping up her spine.

“I wanted to stress caution to you, princess.”

“I think I have had that stressed to me enough.” It was all she'd heard for the majority of her life. Be careful. Stay in line. Don't venture too far.

“I know Prince Romulin has stressed it to you, but I am not convinced his warnings were heeded.”

“And why is that?” There was something about his whole demeanor that had her hair standing on end. Vi shifted her feet on the step, trying not to let her discomfort show.

“Someone who fully understands the danger they could be in would not go wandering at night.”

Her blood ran cold. Vi suppressed a shiver. He'd known she'd been out.

“Was it you?” Vi whispered, remembering the feeling of someone following her. Darrus mentioning possibly seeing someone on her tail. Andru had a knack for fading away even when he was in plain sight. What could he accomplish if he *tried* to sneak?

Andru started up the stairs and Vi took a step back. He paused, one foot on the step she was on, the other below. Vi leaned away, trying to put as much space between them as possible.

“Be careful. You never know who might take advantage of your carelessness.”



“Is that a threat?” Her racing heart nearly drowned out her words.

“Merely fact.” He studied her face. “Remember why I am here—because people do not have faith in you.” There was the dagger again, the one only he could twist in her stomach. Had those words ever been said so directly? Vi was grateful for the cool wood of the wall at her back supporting her. “As far as many are concerned, there is another heir, nearly equal in birthright, only minutes behind you. Some would argue your brother was meant to sit the throne.”

“Are you sure this is not a threat?” Vi’s hand balled into a fist. She allowed her spark to crackle around her knuckles. If he made a motion, she would be faster. He wouldn’t know what hit him.

“Again, merely stating facts.” Andru straightened away, starting upward. “Watch yourself, your highness.”

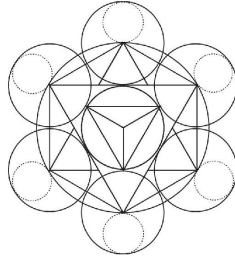
Vi watched him leave, letting any possible argument go with him. This was one conversation she didn’t want to pursue. Not right now. Not when she had so recently stared her own mortality in the face.

Andru had said he was loyal to the Empire above the Senate or crown.

Vi had written it off at the time as hyperbole. But what if he’d been speaking the Mother’s honest truth? And if he had been... What did that mean he’d do if *he* suddenly thought she wasn’t good for the Empire? What if the Senate had already made up their mind that she wasn’t the best heir for the throne?

Would he go so far as to remove her himself?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



JAYME AND VI joined Ellene in her room in the evening.

Vi shared with them her interaction with Andru, effectively moving him up to “suspicious person number one” on their list. Even Jayme, who didn’t want to jump to conclusions, admitted his actions were questionable. She was already working with Jax to seek out any suspicious persons and volunteered to keep a close eye on Andru without raising any undue alarm.

During her lessons, Vi tried to do the same as well. But it was as if the incident in the staircase had never happened. Andru said less and less each day, focusing mostly on scribbling away during her lessons and leaving promptly at their conclusion. He wasn’t even trying to linger anymore when Jayme and Ellene lounged in Vi’s room after.

A week passed.

Seven days of relative calm. A deceptive normalcy Vi tried to lose herself in by day, because by night her dreams were torturous, filled with men who had white glass orbs in place of their eyes, or horrors rising from sacrifices and red lightning. It was as if the sight had been imprinted on her soul, so much that she was even incapable of losing herself in her lessons.

As a result, she refrained from contacting Taavin. She didn’t want to think about her visions and he would, no doubt, force the subject. He’d given her enough of a starting point, and there were plenty of words for her to pour over in Sehra’s book. Vi dedicated hours on hours trying to get lost in mindless memorization at night, avoiding sleep, avoiding thinking of anything at all.

“You’re distracted today,” Sehra appraised. “Your magic looks like it did the first week we began this process... not the progress you’ve made so far.”

“I am distracted, I’m sorry.” Vi shook her head and rubbed her eyes. The faint orb of light that had been hovering in her palm vanished. *Durroe* was undoubtedly becoming easier, even if she couldn’t seem to keep the magic steady for long periods of time. “I’ve been having trouble falling asleep lately. And if I do, I have strange nightmares.”

“Nightmares?” Sehra repeated.

“Why do you sound surprised?”

“I’d heard word from your tutors that you had been distracted lately, more tired than usual. The winter solstice tends to be a special time for men and women your age... I thought perhaps a suitor had finally caught your eye.”

Vi blurted out laughter. “Excuse me,” she said hastily, realizing how rude she’d been. “I’m just a little too busy and too confined to find a suitor right now.”

She barely had enough time to spend with her friends, and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d sat down with Jax for dinner. Guilt collected in a haze around her. She had to be better for the ones she loved... but with what time? How did she even begin to prioritize with all that was going on? Her mind wandered down a brief tangent, wondering if this was how her parents felt between caring for her and Romulin, and their Empire.

“Very true.” Vi appreciated that Sehra took her words at face value, rather than pressing further. “The dreams... are they of any specific variety?” Sehra asked, likely an innocent question. But it put Vi on edge.

“Not particularly. Just run-of-the-mill nightmares,” she lied. The smothering cloud of guilt grew thicker. Vi didn’t appreciate lying outright; at the worst she much preferred a half-truth or deflection. Not that those were any better in practice, and she knew it, but they *felt* better. A blatant lie had her sitting so uneasily that she crossed and uncrossed her legs.

“I can’t say I’m surprised.” Sehra sighed heavily, leaning back in her chair as well. Her shoulders sagged slightly, and there was a bit of a slouch to her. Vi had never seen the sturdy woman look so worn. It seemed as if all at once the weight of the Chieftain’s position had come down on her shoulders. “Given everything that’s going on, I’m having a hard time sleeping myself. The White Death is coming, I can feel it in my bones. I merely hope we can last out the winter solstice and give the people one more celebration.”

Vi remembered Darrus’s talk of the infirmary. It seemed forever ago now. Had it truly only been a week since that night?

“I’m sorry. Taking time out for lessons with me must not be helping.”

“Well, our lessons may be severely cut back soon enough,” Sehra said gravely.

“What? Why?” Vi leaned forward in her chair. Sehra had seemed so determined to teach her at the start. Now, only a few months in, she was already cutting back their lessons?

“Between the solstice and the construction of the infirmary, along with the spread of the White Death, my attentions are needed elsewhere.” Sehra ran her fingers along her lips thoughtfully, as if debating her next words. “No... not merely that. I am already seeing you progress beyond what I can teach, princess.”

“That’s not true,” Vi whispered. “I still have so much to learn.”

“But I only have so much I can teach.”

“You told me you would help me control my magic.” Her voice rose slightly.

“Foremost, I told you I would teach you all I know of the power of Yargen... which I have. Between the fundamentals and the tome you have been pouring over, you know as much as I do. No, more than I, for you can read the glyphs and I cannot.”

Vi swallowed air down a dry throat. This couldn’t be right. There was so much more to this magic, so much she didn’t understand.

“But... my fire, at the capital they will expect... I need to masquerade as a Firebearer.”

“Do you think you cannot control your magic?”

“I...” She thought of the small motes of flame she had conjured from time to time, reminding herself that she was gaining more control. “Not well enough.”

“I doubt that.” Sehra stood. “Come.”

Vi couldn’t do anything but follow. Leaving everything behind, they walked down to the back edge of the castle. Vi hadn’t ventured down this way since her lessons with Jax had ended in favor of her tutelage under Sehra.

“Leave,” Sehra commanded. The warriors heeded their Chieftain, but Vi heard them grumbling. Sehra must have as well, but she led by example in ignoring them, moving once they had the area to themselves. She pointed to the nearest stone pit. “Vi, down you go.”

As Vi descended, Sehra stood on the upper edge of the ring, held out her palm, and the nearest tree branch arched unnaturally down, as if trying to shake her hand. Vi watched as the Chieftain broke off a few smaller sticks and sent the branch back on its way. She tossed one

nonchalantly into the pit. The stick landed unassumingly in a small puff of dirt.

“Set it on fire with *juth*.”

“*Juth*.” As Vi repeated the word, the symbol appeared to her with perfect clarity, her hours pouring over the tome paying off. After practicing so much with *durroe* and the subtle vibrations that word left behind, this was like the crackling of a coming storm just beneath her skin. Vi had ignored it from the start; this was the one word she didn’t want to embrace. “To destroy. I think that’s the last thing I need. All I want is to make sure my fire *doesn’t* destroy things.”

“Perhaps the best way to ensure that you do not reap destruction accidentally is by learning how to destroy things intentionally?”

Vi stared at the stick. She’d never felt so daunted by something so harmless as a twig.

“If you wanted a simple fire, I could summon one.” Before Sehra could speak, a thought occurred to her. Vi’s head jerked upright. “How can I make fire without words?”

“It is what I explained to you foremost... Your first relationship with your magic was with the understanding of a Firebearer. On some level, we learn magic the way we learn anything else—by imitation. Everyone expected you to be a Firebearer, demonstrated it for you...so your malleable magic did its best to imitate what it saw.

“For small feats, it is only natural that you can channel the magic to use it in that way,” Sehra said in a manner that assured Vi she spoke from experience—though with Groundbreaking, Vi would assume. “But could you create an illusion as a Firebearer?”

“No Firebearer can.” That was squarely a Waterrunner skill.

“Do you feel confident creating a large fire you could control with those methods you use to make a spark?”

“No...” The small sparks in her palms were one thing. But the only way she managed to control any large amount of magic—like the fire against the diseased noru—was by looking at her magic as light.

“Then destroy it with *juth*.”

Vi stared at the stick, sliding out her feet to hip-width as though she was facing off against an invisible opponent. Lifting one hand in the air, the symbols attached to *juth* were already swirling in her mind.

She allowed the glyph to encompass all her thoughts. It pushed aside Jax’s former tutelage—the instincts she’d had drilled into her for years about how to summon fire. She was not making fire—she was making a channel of light that would *become* fire.

Vi's eyes dipped closed as she tried to imagine the power seeping forth from her fingers, spinning from a white-hot invisible spool deep within her. It didn't radiate off her skin without focus. It was like a candle-wick, ready to burn.

"*Juth.*" Vi's voice went low with dangerous intent.

She knew this glyph—inside and out. Her upbringing as a Firebearer gave her an additional lens to understand it that Vi did not have with *durroe*. Fire was something she understood or, at the least, had ample practice with.

Just like Taavin had said... The words were not just words. They weren't mere sounds or symbols. They were meaning combined with understanding brought to life with intent. It was greater than the sum of any individual part.

Woven lines and circles appeared above her hand, streaking through the air in bright beams of magic. It carved the pure essence of destruction itself. Vi may not understand everything yet, when it came to being a Lightspinner.

But she understood how to make something burn.

Power sparked up her chest, little crackles like tiny fireworks exploding behind her ribs. It was as though they were rushing along her arm in a race where the finish line was somewhere behind her fingertips. A similar glyph appeared surrounding the twig. Her magic had never looked so bright—so confident.

As quickly as it came, it went, snuffed out with an almost audible *crack*. The scent of smoke filled the air and there was a small pile of blackened ash where the twig once was. Vi turned up toward Sehra, balling her hand into a fist.

"On your first attempt... Just like I said, princess, you will soon surpass all I can teach."



Back in her room, sweating and exhausted, Vi locked her door. She'd sent all her servants away—reassuring them several times over that she could, indeed, bathe and dress for bed on her own. It was early for her to be secluding herself for the night, so they gave her strange looks, but eventually agreed.

*Let them gossip to Andru about the strange princess,* Vi thought bitterly. He may well be trying to kill her anyway. Did it really matter

what he thought?

There was something she wanted to try without an audience.

Something had changed in her, in that fighting pit. There was a different feeling about her—her magic specifically. A feeling of control, of a deep understanding she'd never quite mastered before.

Taking a deep breath, Vi held out her hand and let her magic lift off her skin. It hovered in the air, almost gracefully, tiny wisps of bright white light woven into threads that only she could command. For the first time in her life, Vi thought there might be something beautiful to magic. Not just any magic, but *her* magic.

"*Narro hath*," she uttered, and willed the symbol to take shape just as it had with *juth* in the pit. She knew the words. She knew her intent. And, most importantly it seemed, she now understood how to draw out her power in a stable way.

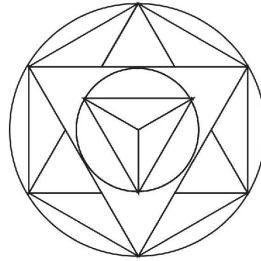
The two magic words left her mouth, but all Vi thought was, *show me*. She wanted more than a disembodied voice. She wanted a stable connection—an opportunity to truly talk to Taavin face to face as she did at the apexes.

This time, when she summoned Taavin, Vi made it clear to her magic exactly what she was expecting.

The glyph lifted off her hand. For a brief moment, Vi worried she was losing control. But the supreme sense of rightness surrounding the words *narro hath* continued to fill her and Vi trusted in her act. She trusted in her magic.

Starting near the ceiling, the magic circles spiraled downward. They gave off strands of magic that took form. And in the next moment, Vi's black eyes met a pair of bright green ones.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“How... WHAT...?” He stole the words from her lips as he looked around her room, shock on his face. “How did you—?”

“I did what you said to—”

But before she could finish, the magic sputtered. The symbol unraveled and vanished from her grasp like a line cast out to sea, slipping through her fingers as it caught on a tide. She stared at his eyes as they widened by a fraction, and then he was gone. The light vanished.

Vi widened her stance some. She wasn’t about to give up that easily. Not after she’d come so far. She raised her hand and repeated the process. “*Narro hath.*”

The light spun out, and she watched him appear once more. So she could confidently make the glyphs now—brighter and more complete than before. But she still couldn’t seem to sustain them.

“Anchor it,” Taavin said quickly, as if reading her mind. “Keep the circle around you, connected to you. Yes, closer to your hand, don’t project it out so much. It’ll be more stable that way.”

Vi took a deep breath, focusing more on the magic pouring from her fingertips than on the man himself. She tried to imagine it winding around each finger, tying it there like a kite string. Only when it seemed secure did she dare shift her gaze to him.

Taavin was focused on her arm. He was still cast in light, mostly transparent, shifting between there and not. It was less than the connection they seemed to have at the apexes, but far more than what she’d managed thus far.

“How are you doing this?” he whispered after a long moment. His eyes trailed up her arm and to her face, searching. Vi dared to meet them, searching back.



“The same way I have been talking to you until now—*narro hath*. I’ve just managed to actually make a glyph this time rather than the haphazard approach I’ve been doing until now.” Vi spoke slowly, trying to keep as much focus as possible on keeping her power stable. “I’m getting better at it.”

“No, that’s not how this works... this type of connection...” His gaze shifted from her hand to her chest. Vi followed it, looking down. There, just like during her very first vision, like the ruins, was a faded symbol shimmering over her watch. “You have an imprinted token of mine.”

“A what?” Vi’s free hand rose to the watch. The magic stuttered with the motion and Vi fought to keep it.

“To communicate with *narro hath* requires an imprinted token of the other person.” He took a step forward, looking down at her over the narrow bridge of his nose. Vi studied his features—they were sharp, not unlike hers, but with a distinctly inhuman edge to them. “I had thought our communications were merely a result of our relationship as the voice and champion. But now I know this whole time it’s been *narro*... How do you have a token of mine?”

“I don’t know,” Vi answered honestly.

“Is it because of this you were able to torture me all these years?” His voice deepened, becoming deathly serious all at once.

“Torture you?” she whispered in shock. “I wouldn’t—”

“Your voice haunts me.” The solemn statement stilled her. His eyes searched hers, as though he’d find answers there. “I know your face better than my own mother’s. You’ve reaped destruction on my mind with the mere sound of your voice. I lose days behind my eyelids and wake, only remembering your form.” His eyes fell back to the watch. “Why? Is it because of this? Or because you are the champion?”

He wasn’t lying. There was too much pain there for him to be lying. This wasn’t some joke or test. It was real suffering he had endured. Suffering, apparently, *she* was responsible for. How had she not seen it until now? Why hadn’t he told her from the start?

Vi was overwhelmed with the sudden urge to help him, but she didn’t know where to begin.

“I’m sorry... But I don’t know.” She held the watch tighter. “This was a gift. It was my mother’s—not even mine until months ago.”

He looked away, toward her window. Vi wondered if he could see her room. For her, it was only him. Wherever he was remained hidden.

“Maybe she found it somewhere?” Vi suggested, taking a step forward. The light around her hand flickered again and his form almost

blinked from existence.

“That would be quite impossible, as I have not stepped foot beyond Risen since I was a child.” There was a note to the longing in his voice that resonated with her own. She knew well what it was like to be trapped somewhere, tortured by things she could read and see through her maps but never reach.

“Where is Risen?” she asked softly.

“Meru. You know it as the Crescent Continent.” He turned back to her and once more Vi found herself transfixed by his ears.

“Are the elfin common on Meru?” Vi asked.

“You could say that.”

“How about vague answers? Are those common?” Vi frowned in frustration.

“That may only be me.”

The magic flickered once more. He blinked out of existence and Vi stretched her arm further, as if she could push more magic out that way. Taavin re-solidified, looking back to her hand.

“You’re losing strength.”

“I can manage,” Vi insisted. There was so much more she wanted to talk with him about.

“You’re lying.”

“And you’re a little annoying.” Vi didn’t expect him to smile at that, but he did. The shortest upturn of his mouth.

“Rest, Vi. If you’ve managed this connection now, it will be there still for you to continue bothering me with when you’ve replenished your energy.”

“I haven’t done anything to you—” Vi paused, then quickly corrected herself, “—until recently.”

He looked at her for a long moment. The argument Vi expected never came.

“You’re not what I expected you’d be,” he said softly, thoughtfully. His gaze was almost... tender. How could the same person look at her with equal measures compassion, skepticism, and pain? It was a mix of contrasts that shouldn’t fit together.

“I suppose it’s mutual,” Vi whispered in reply. “I didn’t expect you at all.”

They simply stood, staring, for a long moment. In him, Vi saw a portal to a world she’d barely imagined. She saw truth, and secrets of the universe she hadn’t fathomed weeks ago. And she couldn’t help but wonder what he saw in her.

“Does our deal still stand?” Vi asked finally. “Even though I have this supposed token of yours... will you teach me how to use this magic if I find the apexes for you?”

He paused for a long moment. Briefly, her heart raced in fear that he was going to say no. But then...

“Yes, it still stands. If anything it’ll be more effective now that you’ve mastered this much.” He looked away again. “Besides, it’s not as if we have any choice. We have roles to play, you and I.”

That sense of duty was one Vi knew better than any other. “Taavin, I —”

“Rest now, Vi. Summon me again when you have the strength.”

It was as if her magic had been waiting for his permission. The threads, worn down like her energy, snapped, and the light disappeared into the darkness. Vi staggered back, collapsing on the bed and staring at where he had been—staring at her hand and what she’d done.



She summoned him the next day.

Immediately after her lessons, Vi feigned a stomach ache and had a simple dinner sent to her room. On hearing she was supposedly ill, Ginger tittered about, but Vi finally sent her away too. She waited for a good hour before holding out her hand and uttering the words.

The light appeared before her, flickering at first and becoming stable. Vi remained focused on every line, ensuring that the slowly swirling circles around her fingers stayed in place—close to her skin, just as he’d instructed. Only when she felt the magic stabilize did she look to her visitor.

“You seem more confident with that.”

“Me? Confident with magic? You have the wrong girl.”

“I’m just as surprised as you, to see one of the Dark Isle using Lightspinning. Though I must remind myself you have your contraband book that should’ve never made it across the Shattered Isles.”

“If my book upsets you so much, why don’t you come and get it back?” Vi retorted. The jab hit harder than she’d intended.

“If only I could.”

Taavin looked away and Vi studied his profile. Other than the scar that ran from his left eye, down his cheek, his face was as polished as a

sculpture. Though she was certain the light that constantly outlined him contributed to the ethereal illusion.

“Why can’t you?” she dared to ask. He’d said he’d never left his city the last time they spoke and Vi had heard volumes lingering under the statement. Until now, however, they’d only ever spoken of practical things—magic and visions. This was the first time she was making an intentional effort to venture beyond the basic framework that had brought them together.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.” Her lips curled up into a smile, hopefully encouraging and not mocking.

“My position, as the Voice of Yargen, means I am to remain by the flame at all times. I couldn’t leave if I wanted.” *And he did want to.* Of that Vi was certain.

“Trapped by your position...” Vi looked at the swirling magic around her fingertips. “That’s one thing I think I understand better than most.”

For the first time in her life, Vi shared the sentiment with someone and did not have them immediately disagree. He didn’t try to point out all she had in the power of her station. Nor did he chastise her for the feeling of entrapment. He merely stood in quiet camaraderie.

“What does the Voice of Yargen do?” Vi asked. “Keep this flame burning?”

Taavin took a small step back, as if surprised by the question. She watched as his guards slid back into place—mentally battening the hatches against her once more.

“No... the flame of Yargen has been burning since the goddess last left this world. It is a remnant of the goddess herself—and her power. Through it, her chosen voice hears the words of power Lightspinners use, as well as her guidance for the mortal realm she created.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “At least, that is what I am supposed to do.”

“I see...” Vi murmured. He couldn’t hear the goddess through this flame. Vi knew it by his expression and reaction alone. But something prevented her from saying so outright. Perhaps what stopped her was the keen knowledge that pointing it out would only bring him extra pain. She didn’t want to be torture to him, intentionally or otherwise. So Vi shifted the topic slightly. “What about the champion? You always bring up the voice and the champion together.”

“Because the champion is Yargen’s other chosen mortal. Though... there has not been one since the last time Raspian walked this earth.”

Vi suppressed a shudder at what she knew now was the name of the dark god she'd seen the zealots worshiping in her last vision. "Why do you think I am the champion?"

"Because a traveler told me of our meeting."

*Traveler.* Vi stilled at the word. It couldn't possibly be... "This traveler, was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman."

There was no way it was the same traveler who had spoken to Sehra. No possible way. That meeting had to have been more than twenty years ago. Yet was it truly just chance she'd heard of two different mysterious travelers with knowledge of Yargen so close together?

"What did she tell you?" Vi dared to ask.

"That my visions would reveal the locations of the apexes of fate—landmarks on the path of a dying world where my destiny overlaps with the champion's. That the champion holds the key to fueling the flame once more, and making sense of Yargen's will." Vi snorted, then laughter exploded from her mouth. Taavin blinked out of sight for a second and she quickly re-drew the glyphs for *narro* and *hath* in her mind, securing them back around her hand. A frown crossed his mouth. "Just what is so amusing?"

"I can see why you hate me so much. I haunt your dreams and then, when you finally meet me, I'm absolutely useless." Vi gave another self-deprecating laugh. When it came to magic, it seemed nothing she did would ever be enough, in any direction. There would always be someone she was letting down.

Her laughter subsided as she became keenly aware of Taavin's stare. Vi turned up her face to look at him, waiting for his retort. The silence stretched on, and his eyes traced her features what must have been a thousand times.

Vi forced a smile and ignored the tension. She didn't want it to be there. There wasn't time for it. But before she could think of another substitution for discussion, he spoke.

"I never said you were useless."

Vi swallowed. His words tightened her chest and stomach. Some kind of relief punched her in the gut, leaving her breathless and stinging in a way that was foreign to her. Was she really so desperate for affirmation that she was doing all right?

"Well, perhaps I can continue to prove I'm not by helping you find the next apex? Do you have any ideas from your visions?" She resisted asking if she was present in these visions.

“I’m still working to discern their meaning.”

“What do you have so far?”

“It makes little sense...” he murmured, pacing back and forth twice.

“You have someone to be a sounding board off of,” Vi reminded him. Given how he acted, and all he’d said, Vi suspected it was a relatively new development for Taavin.

“I doubt it’ll be much clearer for you.”

“Will you just let me help?” She threw her hands up in the air and the magic disappeared. “Oh, by the Mother,” Vi muttered, holding out her hand again. She took a breath, finishing a string of curses, and then uttered, “*Narro hath.*” Taavin reappeared. “Sorry about that.”

“You’re persistent, aren’t you?” He tilted his head slightly. When he did so, the bottom of his hair nearly touched his shoulder.

“I’ve been told I can be when something piques my interest.”

“I’m glad the end of the world has inspired your curiosity.” Vi opened her mouth to say that *he* was the one who had, but before she could, Taavin saved her from herself.

“I have seen a room, dark, two women standing before a single flame. Roses and wheat...”

“Not enough to go off of,” Vi reluctantly agreed with his earlier sentiment. “At least for that one. Any others?”

“In my dreams I have also witnessed a throne room—covered in the crystallized fragments of Yargen’s magic. A dying man who was tainted by touching godly power with mortal hands.”

Vi sighed softly, wishing it were a clearer lead. “That sounds like something more on the Crescent Continent than here.”

“It is unlike any throne room I’ve ever seen on Meru.”

“Is that all?”

“Do you know anywhere called Eye-owe?”

“Eye-owe,” Vi repeated, then shook her head. “It doesn’t ring a bell. What’s it like?”

“Something about a temple, perhaps?”

Vi thought back to all her maps. She certainly didn’t recall any temples named Eye-owe. But, given the North’s opinions toward marking their ruins, she couldn’t exactly rule it out.

“One more has been clear and reoccurring,” he continued when it was clear she had nothing more to add. “Though I doubt it’ll be any clearer for you. I see two women by a statue. I see a tall tree, towering above them.”

“That statue...” Vi shifted to the edge of her bed, an idea dawning on her. “What does it look like?” She knew what he was about to say before he said it. Vi could already see it with perfect clarity.

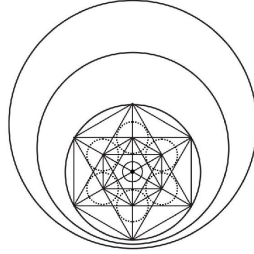
“One woman standing, the other kneeling, holding—”

“An axe,” Vi finished for him.

“What?”

She pushed off the bed, starting for the door. “See? It was a good thing you told me. Because I know exactly where that last apex is.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



THE MOTHER TREE, oldest of all the trees in the North, was at the center of the fortress. It was into this tree that Dia—a star from the gods—had fallen. On her descent, she had become mortal. Under its leafy boughs was where the Mother was said to have gifted her the axe.

This had to be the location of the next apex.

It was easy to identify it by its height and overall grandeur. But it was harder than one would think to get to. She had to spiral around smaller—but by no means small—trees, go up to go down, and spend nearly a half hour getting to the end of what should’ve been a five-minute walk, had she been able to go straight to the center. It was made worse by sneaking around in the dead of night, constantly looking over her shoulder to ensure she was alone.

But she saw no one and now the final barrier to her goal was before her. Vi was almost breathless from her haste. She stood on the other side of a living wall. Groundbreakers had woven saplings together to make a beautiful fence. Beautiful... and without any sort of clear entrance unless one had the magic to manipulate the trees to unweave themselves.

Vi looked up and around cautiously. The sensation of someone watching her was back. But Vi was certain it was nothing more than paranoia. She’d heard no footsteps and had seen no eyes peering at her through the darkness.

She stared through the woven barrier to the base of the Mother Tree. Shaded in an alcove was a ceremonial room that Vi had only been in a handful of times. Once for the blessings of Yargen to be placed on Ellene shortly after her birth, then twice every year since, for solstice rituals. The Mother Tree was a highly sacred place; Vi didn’t blame them for keeping people, or wandering princesses, out most other days of the year.



The bark of the natural barrier bit into her palms as she gripped it tighter. The room would be opened soon for the upcoming solstice; she could wait and not risk discovery now. But Vi doubted she could find a time to confidently come alone during the handful of days it was open to all in the fortress. Now she was certain to have time alone to see her vision, and speak with the man who came after.

Furthermore, Vi continued to try to rationalize her decision, she was a Child of Yargen too, wasn't she? That meant it would be acceptable for her to trespass on the most sacred space in the North. *Not trespass*, she couldn't trespass as a child of Yargen, right? Vi quickly tried to tally up the pros and cons in her head, before pushing the thoughts away. Rationalized or not, her path ahead was clear. She wasn't going to back away now, not when she was this close.

"You understand, right?" Vi whispered to the Mother above, looking up toward the heavens. Nothing changed and Vi took that as tacit permission to begin climbing the woven barrier.

Luckily, its lace-like weave made plenty of gaps and spaces for hand- and footholds as she climbed. From the ground, it looked much shorter than at its top, and Vi employed great care in swinging her legs over and starting down the other side. Thankfully, she'd spent a lifetime trying to keep up with Groundbreakers in the jungles. Tree climbing was easily a strong-suit of hers, and Vi moved with swift confidence.

Feet back on the ground, Vi raced underneath the arch that led to the hallowed room that very much mirrored Sehra's throne room. Except in place of a throne at the center, a barely-visible sculpture of two women stood. One was kneeling, her long braids nearly touching the ground—Dia, the forest star—and the other was said to be the Mother, imparting an axe upon her to carve out a new civilization from the raw earth she'd created for all mankind.

"A giant tree, a statue of a woman holding an axe." This had to be the apex Taavin had seen.

Vi held out her hand and readied herself. Whatever the vision showed her this time, she would be ready. She could handle it. At the very least, she wouldn't shout in horror and alert everyone to her presence. Good or bad, she was trained to be an Empress, and should not startle so easily.

Her eyes were wide. She could not look away if she tried. Yet the vision that possessed her was different from all the others. It was clearer, sharper. Now it was as if time itself flowed through her, posing her at its edge to peer through its secrets.

The world around her shifted. Days turned to nights. Stars spun across the sky. Flowers blossomed, saplings grew into trees, and vines knotted further over the remains of a civilization progressing quickly toward decay.

The fortress around her took shape and quickly changed, time and again. The city of Soricism grew and retreated with the seasons becoming more and more scarce—fading into a grayish stasis—as the trees withered, decayed, and exposed a sky larger than any Vi had ever seen, unbroken by treetops, to Shaldan's barren earth.

Finally, the spinning top of the progression of time stopped on a desolate landscape.

Vi looked out over a barren field. Rubble lay like tombstones around the rough stumps of trees that looked as though they had been shredded to toothpicks. The great giants of Shaldan—trees that had stood from the dawn of time—lay on the ground in charred husks.

The Mother Tree was little more than sawdust.

She could almost taste the ash in her mouth, bitter and still smoldering from what looked like the aftermath of a battle that far exceeded even the horrific stories of the siege on Soricism during the War for the North. The smell of rot somehow reached her and brought Vi to gagging, as the remnants of what could be called men and women had been left as carrion for the birds.

Each corpse was contorted into angles of agony. They twisted with open mouths, locked in an eternal scream. Their eyes were wide and absent of all color—gone completely white and glossy. Deep trenches cut into their skin from where they had clawed at the white and rocky parts that coated their bodies between veins of still-glowing red.

Without having ever seen it, Vi knew that this was the ultimate end of the White Death: a stony, cold agony that kept one trapped for eternity in its suffering.

Vi half-wheezed, half-retched, gasping desperately for a breath of fresh air—for sound, liberating sound from the deadly silence that surrounded her. There was nothing but silence and death. It was then that her eyes turned skyward.

The heavens had been broken.

An all-black sky, void of stars, was ripped apart by a bloody slash trimmed at the edges with white. Drifting through the bleeding fragments of a broken cosmos was the form of a serpentine, winged monster, wide talons dipping to tear off pieces of the world below. Red lightning cracked around its body, as if charged by the ripping of reality itself.

Vaguely, the terrifying imagery registered to her through the words of crones and soothsayers. They had spoken of an apocalypse, of a reckoning where all souls would be summoned to the Father's realms—a day where the sky itself would shatter and the world as they all knew it would come to an end. But Vi had never heard the tales spoken in this much horrifying detail.

The dragon roared and the world shuddered, vibrating with a sound that she couldn't hear. Vi may have screamed, but there was still no sound in her ears. The monster turned its gaze toward her and she was filled with the same sensation she'd felt the moment the diseased noru and the lightning man in her vision had looked to her.

*It saw her and it wanted her.*

She raised her hands on instinct to shield herself, to make herself small. She wanted it to end, to be free of the horrific images she was being inundated with. No vision until now had been this horribly vivid and she would not be able to endure should it continue.

"Make it stop!" The sound of her own voice broke the trance.

Darkness, the blissful darkness of the backs of her eyelids, filled her sight, and when Vi opened her eyes again, the world was as she knew it. She staggered and sank, her trembling knees no longer able to bear her weight. Gasping through fingers holding in silent screams at the horror she'd witnessed, Vi continued to stare wide-eyed at where her fire had been. Surely, surely, there was some mistake.

That wasn't their future. It couldn't be.

Gasping, Vi relished in the sound of her voice and the familiar cool darkness of the North in winter. A pair of boots, illuminated by hazy glyphs, appeared in her field of vision. Vi followed them up to the intricately embroidered coat Taavin always wore, along the scar on his cheek, and to his eyes.

"What did you see?" he asked grimly.

"The end of the world." The words didn't sound like her own. They were detached, removed, split from her body. What she now could never unsee would forever change her.

"Tell me everything."

Vi recounted the vision in as much detail as she could bear. For as difficult as it was, doing so gave her some clarity. It removed the initial shock and horror and turned the sights into something to be analyzed.

When Vi had finished, she asked, "This dark god you speak of—Raspian—and his followers... the White Death... they're all linked, aren't they?"

She didn't want him to nod. This was the one time in her life where Vi desperately wanted to be wrong.

"They are."

Vi let out a string of curses that would make her tutors blush. Taavin stayed silent, allowing her to reach the end of her list before speaking again. Curses were cathartic, but they weren't going to help them get anywhere. Vi tried to remember everything he had told her following her last vision.

"The elfin'ra, you said they were sealed away on Salvidia?"

"They were."

*Past tense.* "What changed? Why is all this happening now?"

"Raspian and his followers were sealed away by the goddess in their last, ancient struggle for power over this realm... but nineteen years ago, that seal was broken. Since then, his evil, his pure chaotic energy, has been seeping into the world—twisting it. And his followers, who were also set free with it, now seek a way to bring his full return."

If everything he said was true, it meant there was no cure for the White Death. Her father had left for nothing. Her people sought a cure that could never be found.

No one on Solaris knew how desperate their situation was, but her.

"Taavin, these visions I see at the apexes... are they what *will* be, or what *may* be?"

"What will be, should the world progress without any changes in course."

"So, then, the course can be changed?"

"Perhaps."

Vi breathed a sigh of relief, even though a corner of her mind still refused to believe it. Normal future sight—by a Firebearer—was generally regarded as absolute truth. But Vi wasn't exactly a Firebearer. So she'd have to take Taavin's word for it.

"How do we make sure?"

"Just as there have been apexes of fate in the past, there will be apexes in the future. Places where—"

"—the world changed or places where it could still be changed," she finished for him, remembering what he had said when she first asked. Vi finally pulled herself off the ground, feeling stronger. "So we need to find future apexes, and make sure we shift fate there." Simple logic, but Vi expected it to be much more difficult in practice. "How do we find them?"

“I will need to study... and record your vision to compare against my notes on my own dreams as I look for the next apex for you.”

She wanted to go now. She wanted him to have the answers immediately, and Vi shifted from foot to foot in an effort to let out some of the restless energy. Vi let out a deep sigh, trying to let go of the strange tremors rippling through her.

“Are you afraid?” Taavin cut through her racing thoughts.

“What? No.” Vi folded her hands before her to keep them still.

“You should be. Only a fool wouldn’t be.”

“I—”

“Go and rest now, Vi. I have work to do.” He vanished.

Vi stared at where Taavin had just stood. “Are you happy to have the last word?” Vi mumbled at the thin air, before turning and leaving.

Dark gods, plagues, fate... Vi was wrapped up in her thoughts as she slowly made her way back through the fortress. For the first time in her life, Vi felt small.

There was a red flash in the darkness, nearly identical to what she had seen the night she’d snuck out. Vi looked up, pulled back to reality, and squinted into the dark. Her exhaustion had vanished entirely, heart racing.

Her feet stopped halfway across the walkway she’d been traversing. She was frozen still by the silhouette of a figure blocking the path forward.

Vi narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out if the person was male or female. Male... probably, she decided, based on the broadness in his shoulders. The wind rustled the trees above her, the light catching on his eyes again, and Vi’s breath caught in her throat with a strangled choke.

Distinctly red eyes set on ghostly pale skin were narrowed directly at her.

He had a similar jaw line to Taavin’s, a narrow bridge to his nose, and Vi knew if she peeled back the man’s hood she’d see pointed ears. She’d seen creatures of this type before, recently, even. But never standing in the present.

Her whole body went icy.

“Wh—who are you?” Vi whispered, struggling to keep her voice level. She hated the weak quiver that caught the beginning of the first word.

The man unsheathed a narrow dagger. It had the same markings on the side as the one the leader of the acolytes had held in her vision—the elfin’ra. It further contributed to the surreal nature of everything

happening around her. Those creatures were on another land, far away. They weren't *here*.

Vi took a step back, glancing over her shoulder. Her room was still three stories up. This was the most direct route... but there was an alternate if she took a shortcut through a storage hall.

"What do you want with me?" Vi whispered, debating when she needed to make her break for it.

"The champion's blood for Lord Raspian." The words slithered from his mouth, curling through the air with pure malice, curdling in her ears.

The man lunged for her. Vi had barely a second to react. Her hand lifted, palm outstretched between them.

"*Juth!*" she cried. The symbol exploded from her palm, imperfect and half-formed in her haste. It shattered under the weight of its own power mid-air, casting sparks down on either side of the walkway like the embers of a firework. But Vi didn't have time to appreciate them.

She was already running.

Vi dashed back into the tree behind her. The elfin'ra's footsteps were close behind. Vi made a hard left, turning for a cramped passage that led to a narrow stair. At least here there was no way he could flank her.

There was a grunt behind her right as she jumped for the stairs. Vi turned just in time to see the flash of the dagger in the dim moonlight. It narrowly missed the back of her heel. If he'd sliced the tendon, it would've been the end of her.

"*Juth!*" Vi attempted a second time.

But as she raised her hand, the elfin'ra was already speaking, preempting her motions. "*Juth mariy,*" he snarled.

Vi's magic fizzled beneath her palm. In her shock, she stumbled at the top of the stair, half rolling down the narrow hall. The horrifying creature stalked closer, his red eyes piercing the darkness as easily as it pierced her soul.

"*You are the champion?*" The question was a cross between shock and condescending amusement. "I am to believe you are Yargen's chosen?"

Vi glanced to her right, where a towering shelf stood freely alongside where the man was approaching, dagger still in hand. At least, she hoped it stood freely.

"*Juth.*" Vi tried again. This time, she did not telegraph her attempt with a movement of her hand, nor did she direct it at the man. Instead, the front legs of the shelf burned away in a white-hot burst of fire.

Off-balance, it was sent toppling over, and Vi scrambled to her feet, running again.

One more flight of stairs; she didn't look back. Across one more rope bridge and she'd be at her room and there... there she would... *what?*

Her room had always been her haven. Her safe place. But now it would be a secluded area for her to die. There was nothing there that could protect her any more than where she now stood.

Vi looked around frantically, her head spinning with every sway of the rope bridge beneath her feet. There had to be a warrior patrolling somewhere who could help her. Her eyes scanned every passage and walkway, seeing no one. It was as if she were the only one left alive in the whole fortress.

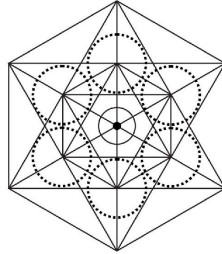
A cry for help rose in her throat, stopping as she turned toward the sudden creaking on the bridge behind her. The man was mid-lunge. His ominously glowing dagger was tracked over her chest.

*He was going to kill her.*

Vi looked down at her feet. If she was going to die, she'd take him with her.

"*Juth,*" she said, one last time, watching as his eyes went wide and the bridge exploded into flames beneath their feet.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



THE NIGHT RUSHED AROUND HER.

She'd known the sky trees were tall, but Vi had never really heeded Jax's warnings when it came to *how* tall. It seemed she would fall forever. Every second seemed longer than a hundred years and yet she knew it would be over all too soon.

Vi reached upward on instinct, flailing through the air, looking for a branch or walkway. But she couldn't find a hold. Surely, there was a window she could grab onto? Somewhere? Her nails ripped back, the pads of her fingers scraped off against rough bark.

There was a flash of red light—the elfin'ra was performing some kind of magic. Vi braced herself. She could almost feel the magic spinning at the man's whim—a twisted distortion of the power she knew, yet so similar it was painful.

All she could do was wait for it to strike her and then she'd be—

Two hands closed around her sides. She slipped through their grasp. They dug into her shoulders, friction ripping through her clothes. The fingertips pressed further into the meat of her arms. They gripped and didn't let go.

Vi heard a shout, but it was cut off abruptly as she swung face first into the tree she'd been trying to catch herself on.

Everything went dark.



*She was falling.*

Above her were the trees of Shaldan, shadowed and faded like ghosted sentries peering down at her through a hole that became smaller



and smaller the longer she fell. The ruins she'd explored in the jungle passed her. Countless eyes, peering through the darkness, stared only at her, waiting.

What were they waiting for?

Why did they look at her as if they knew her?

Her questions went unanswered. She didn't scream. The wind whizzed around her; she must be falling fast, but her stomach was settled. Vi felt calm. She was sinking into something familiar, warm. She accepted the waiting darkness beyond the reality she knew and the worlds she'd only begun to explore.

Perhaps this was how Dia felt when she fell from the sky. Fearless. Not knowing what awaited her at the bottom but knowing it wouldn't harm her. Knowing that wherever she landed, was where she was meant to be.

*Taavin was there.*

That was the first cohesive thought that registered on the edge of Vi's mind. There was his familiar shape, pressed against her, clutching her, supporting her. He was warm like sunlight, as though all the brightness in the world was contained within him.

*Familiar shape?*

Her mind was at war with itself. She didn't know him, not really. They were unlikely allies and she'd certainly never made physical contact with him in any of their meetings. Yet there was a distinct sense of rightness about him. Merely knowing of his existence put a label to something that Vi had never quite paid attention to or understood, something that inexplicably filled her with joy and excitement.

"What happened to you?" His words were muffled and distant, even here when he felt so close. Would he forever be just out of her reach? When had that even become a concern for her? "Is this the real you? Or just another night?"

She wasn't quite sure what happened to her, so she didn't answer. Everything was murky. All she knew for certain was relief that he was here now. That with him by her side she could endure the long night ahead.

"You're too far from me." That, they could agree on. "I can't help you."

*Just having you here helps,* Vi thought, and the words sounded as though they had passed through her lips. His ethereal presence shifted, slightly, as though his chest rose and fell with a sigh.

“Will you ever free me from this torture?” he lamented softly. Vi felt it as though he’d whispered it right into her ear.

The words rumbled through her. They were deep, contemplative. Full of a profound emotion Vi wasn’t even sure she could name. She wanted to twist, to see him, to hold him, to touch him. She would burn away his sorrows and reveal the brightness that only he contained.

But he wasn’t truly there. There was only darkness surrounding her; every passing moment had him drifting further away from her. He was always fading in and out of her life, like a weak pulse that vanished the moment she put her finger on it.

He may have never been there to begin with. Yet she could still feel his skin on hers. She could still feel the rough embroidery of his coat under her hands. There was a phantom memory of feeling things she’d never touched, so perfect she wasn’t even sure what was real anymore.



Vi opened her eyes slowly, blinking into the light.

It was dawn. When had night become day? She turned her head, feeling soft hands pressing into something uncomfortably squishy.

The someone pressing was Ginger, and the uncomfortably squishy was a section of her body that was where her ribs *should* be.

“Oh, Mother, princess, that’s the second time you’ve scared me half to death!” Ginger nearly jumped out of her skin the second she saw Vi’s open eyes.

Vi continued to look around. Her hands rested on her quilt; the feather mattress she’d always laid in was soft underneath her. The portraits of her family stood on the dresser, and her box of letters was on her bedside table... This was undeniably her room.

“Do you feel pain?” Ginger asked again. At least, Vi thought it was again. Her mind was still sluggish.

“No, I don’t,” she wheezed. “Discomfort, but no pain.” Why did her voice sound that way? Vi pressed her eyes shut and in the darkness behind them saw the glowing eyes of the man at the other end of the bridge. “We’re not safe.”

“Princess, *no*, I must insist, you cannot sit right now.” Ginger pushed her back toward the bed. “You’re young, and you received treatment promptly... You’ll be back up and about in no time flat. Even your face

will get back to normal. But, Mother, child, give it at least a day. I'm a cleric, not a goddess."

Vi allowed herself to sink back into her pillows. The haze was beginning to lift. A dullness still lingered on the edge of her mind, but Vi blamed it on whatever potion Ginger had forced down her throat when she was out.

If she was lying in bed, it meant she hadn't died—simple deductions first. That meant, somehow, she was saved... The arms. Her face meeting the tree. Vi winced, raising a hand to her bandaged head, the echo of a terrible crunch in her ears.

She was alive. That also meant the red-eyed man hadn't come back to finish the job. Like the saddle, he'd done his work in the shroud of night when he thought himself most likely to elude capture, vanishing in time to fade into suspicious coincidence by morning.

"How bad is it?" Vi asked, watching Ginger rub salve over her abdomen.

"As bad as you'd expect. But a whole lot better than dead. Which, were it not for Andru, you would've been."

"Andru?" Vi wheezed, barely moving her lips.

"He was out, he saw you fall. The man nearly fell out of the window himself catching you. Popped both his shoulders pretty badly, too," Ginger said, as though she could read her mind. "Promise me the rest of the day in bed, no unnecessary ventures, bathroom only. You can take dinner here. I'll check you in the morning and hopefully give you the all-clear to begin moving, at least around your quarters. In the meantime, don't hesitate to summon me should you ever need, princess."

"I will, Ginger, thank you."

Her cleric hovered, clearly debating something. Then a small, almost conspiratorial smile crossed her lips. "Princess, if I may, who is Taavin?"

"How do you know that name?" Vi tried to ask calmly, so as not to give away the instant feeling of protectiveness. She didn't even want to share the mere thought of Taavin with anyone.

*Taavin.* Just the thought of his name, the way it settled with her, told her she'd dreamed about him. But the details of that dream had vanished on waking. Vi couldn't recall anything.

"You were murmuring it in your sleep over and over."

Vi felt a heat rise to her cheeks that had nothing to do with her spark.

"It's normal for girls your age to begin feeling things," Ginger started. Vi could tell from her tone that she *really* didn't want to have this conversation. First Sehra, now Ginger. "Even your tutors have noticed

that perhaps someone may have caught your eye, given your distractions lately. You've been taking more lunches and dinners in your room and, well... They'd suggested that I perhaps speak with you on the—" she cleared her throat "*—logistics*, of men and women."

Vi went from merely "not wanting to have this conversation" to being willing to do just about anything but. "I appreciate all you do for me, but I don't think this is the time."

"Of course, princess. I understand. Merely consider me a resource for whenever you're ready to discuss such things. For a lady of your status it is imperative to be careful, and your parents have entrusted me to cover such matters with you as is needed." Ginger tucked one foot behind the other, dipping into a curtsy. She started for the door, but never got the chance to turn the lever.

The door opened from the other side, revealing Jax—Vi thanked every scrap of luck he had not entered moments earlier and been privy to the mention of Taavin. The moment he laid eyes on her, his whole expression crumpled into relief. She'd never seen such tenderness line his brow before.

"Thank the Mother," he whispered. He turned to Ginger. "How is she?"

"The bones and organs are on the mend. We're lucky it's not more serious. Her face should mend up just fine, the nose should set right if she keeps still. And I've told her to stay in bed," Ginger said pointedly, looking back to her.

"I'm not fighting you this time."

"Good." She turned back to Jax. "I'll take care of the rest of the bruising in the morning."

"Thank you for everything." Jax clasped Ginger's hand, sending her out the door in the same motion. He quickly closed it behind her, giving them privacy.

They had a small staring contest, but Vi was the first to avert her eyes. She didn't know why she felt guilty for making him worry. What had happened certainly wasn't her fault. Perhaps it was her regal training—that all fault ended with her. "I'm sorry, uncle."

"Sorry?" He crossed quickly to the chair at her bedside that Ginger had just vacated. "Vi, I'm uttering prayers of thanks with my every breath that you're alive."

"Someone attacked me." Vi reached for him and her uncle's hand was there to grasp hers right when she needed him. "There was a man and—"

“I know.” He squeezed her hand tightly. “There were remnants of the struggle in the halls. After the cut girth... I should’ve expanded my investigation further, faster. The leather-smith claimed that, perhaps, when he was making some last-minute trimmings to account for some weight loss in Gormon, he dug too deeply on the tail of the straps. When I could find no other leads, the trail went cold and I stalled. Forgive me, Vi.”

Vi shook her head, the horrifying ordeal playing out in her mind. The elfin’ra had powers like her—like Sehra—but twisted by that same red lightning she’d seen in her visions. This was unlike anything Jax could fathom going against.

“Whoever this person is,” Vi began slowly. “I think they’re well trained in the art of stealth and subterfuge.”

“Clearly.”

“Did you find their body below where the bridge collapsed?” Vi thought back to the bridge. There was no way the elfin’ra could’ve avoided plummeting to his death.

“Body, no...” Horror crept across Jax’s face. No body meant no confirmed kill—the elfin’ra was still alive. “Tell me of your attacker,” he demanded. “I’ll oversee the warriors personally and we shall hunt them down.”

Vi searched his determined expression. How could she hope to explain what her attacker looked like? What he was?

The memories of the visions returned to her—men and women decaying alongside the world at its end. Her uncle was in knots over the mere idea of something happening to her. How could she explain they were all sprinting head-first toward the end of days and red-eyed elfin’ra were seeking her blood as Yargen’s champion to expedite the process?

She couldn’t explain it all. So she didn’t even try. She couldn’t subject him to that.

“It was dark... I couldn’t make out much.”

“Tell me what you can.”

“Skin as white as a ghost and red, glowing eyes.”

“Red eyes? Like a Firebearer who has freshly seen the future?” Jax asked.

“I suppose...” Vi murmured, now wondering if her eyes glowed red after her visions. She’d never been around a mirror for one.

“Can you tell me anything else?”

“He was hooded.” Vi shook her head. “I’m sorry. I know saying a pale skinned and red-eyed man attacked me seems difficult to believe.”

Jax leaned forward, tugging on her hand gently. He tilted his head up, staring in her eyes. Vi searched her uncle's weathered face. Lines were drawn across his brow and hung in arcs underneath his eyes. He was only slightly older than her father but worry made him look nearly ancient.

"I will always believe you," he vowed softly. She nearly told him in that second of her visions. But the moment passed as quickly as it came. "I'll speak with Andru, see if he has any other details to contribute."

Vi nodded. Ache seeped into her bones and Vi gently pulled his hand toward her. She brought it to her cheek, holding it there gently. It was the closest thing to a hug she could manage in her present condition.

"Thank you, uncle," she whispered.

He said nothing more, shifting his palm to her forehead. Vi's eyes fluttered closed for several moments as he gently stroked her hair. In a different world, the touch would be her father's. But in this world, Jax was the closest thing she had.

"You should rest," he said, soft enough that he clearly thought she was halfway to sleep. "I will position extra security at your room at all times."

Vi appreciated the sentiment, even if she didn't think the elfin'ra would be caught or stopped by any normal means. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Can you please send Andru to me?"

"He's recovering as well, like you should be."

"It won't be long. I'd like to thank him," she said trying to prop herself up a little more on the pillows so she didn't actually fall asleep. "He saved my life. I promise I'll be a good patient the rest of the day. Just ten minutes?"

"Very well." Jax gave her a tender smile. She should have near-death experiences more often. It clearly softened him. "Never claim I don't spoil you."

"Thank you," Vi called after him.

In a few minutes, Andru arrived. Vi watched as he slipped through the door, moving stiffly.

"Close it behind you," Vi requested softly.

He did as instructed but continued to hover. His icy blue eyes stared down at her and Vi looked back at him. Neither of them said anything for several long moments.

"I thought you were trying to kill me," Vi blurted.

“What?” He blinked, startled. “Is that really what you summoned me here to say?”

“No. Well, it was one of the things I wanted to say...” Vi admitted.

“Why did you think I was trying to kill you?” he asked skeptically.

“Because you showed up and suddenly strange things started happening.” A lot of strange things, but none of them could be blamed on Andru, it seemed. “You said you followed me into the city—”

“Because I wanted to protect you.” His eyes darted around the room, shifty. *No, they weren't shifty.* She'd only thought they were. He was simply... awkward. “I can see the door to your room from my bedroom. I had been having trouble sleeping with all the forest noises and was up.” It was then that Vi realized she didn't even know where they had put him up in the fortress. “I saw you going out, alone, looking very much like you were sneaking about. There was someone else following behind you, too, but they were gone when I went to approach them.”

“What did they look like?” Vi asked eagerly.

“I did not get a good look.” He walked slowly over to the chair Ginger had been using. “May I sit?” Andru rubbed his midsection and Vi remembered what Ginger had said. She gave a small nod. “What else did I do that made you think I wanted to kill you?”

“You wanted me to ride the noru with the broken saddle—”

“I thought you were going out because you *wanted* to ride the noru.”

Vi stared at him, dissecting the words. They sounded truthful to her ears, which meant... “You really are dense.”

“What?”

Vi laughed at his expression, her whole body aching as a result. “That was all a ploy for Ellene and Darrus.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” She watched as comprehension lit up his face.

“And then everything about my being fit to rule, and maybe my brother should... you haven't exactly been friendly with me.”

“What? I tried to be.” Andru leaned back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. He looked at them, speaking more to his fingers than her. “I am not the best at making friends. I think.” His head slowly rose and he stared at her for a long moment. Then said, simply, “I am sorry, your highness.”

“May I speak plainly?” Vi asked thoughtfully.

“I should be asking that of you.”

She took his statement as a yes and let out a small sigh as the last of the tension that had wound between her shoulders was unleashed. When

she spoke again, it was no longer in the drawn out way of nobility, but the simple phrasing she'd use for Jax, Ellene, or Jayme.

"I think I have as much to apologize for as you do. I could've—should've—been nicer to you from the start." Vi gave a small huff of laughter, mostly at herself. "You know my brother even told me you were important, and I think that, with all I've had going on, I botched it."

"I wouldn't say that..." Andru said slowly. His eyes drifted to her letter box. "Romulin said I was important?"

"More important than I could imagine'," Vi answered delicately. She studied his face, trying to read the expression that lingered there.

"Did he ever write anything else about me?" Andru asked in a small voice. He'd never spoken so plainly around her. Perhaps having a shared near-death experience was what they both needed.

"No..." He hadn't. Vi blinked slowly, realization dawning on her. "He never really wrote about any of his friends."

Andru seemed just as shocked as she was. "What did he write about then?"

"Books he was reading, mother and father, the court, news of the South, advice for how to manage things..."

"All very useful nuggets of information. Romulin's terribly savvy." Andru smiled.

Vi tried to smile back, but her mind was preoccupied for the moment by musings of a similar vein to what she'd thought around Andru before. How much did she really know about her brother? Vi had always imagined they were close... but what sort of music did her brother enjoy? What hobbies filled his days when he wasn't in his lessons? She was certain she'd written about those things.

"Your brother was actually the one who encouraged me to take this post," Andru continued, oblivious to her moment of turmoil.

"He was?" Vi tried to shake her discomfort. She was merely overreacting due to exhaustion, seeing things that weren't there.

"Romulin wanted me to help prepare you, and I don't think I've done that at all."

"You saved my life, surely that counts for something?" She gave him a small smile and his eyes darted away.

"At least I did that... Otherwise I might be in trouble."

"Why?"

"I don't know if I'm doing my job well." He folded and unfolded his fingers, eyes darting back and forth, not quite making eye contact with her. "I *need* to do my job well."



“Isn’t your father head of Senate? Aren’t you basically set for life?”

He laughed bitterly, a sound Vi recognized because she’d made it herself.

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Andru shook his head slowly. “My father is more of an ass than a donkey, and far more stubborn. You’re not the only one he has high expectations for.”

“At least you’re not an ass, then.” Vi sunk farther back into her pillows, ignoring the ache in her jaw from speaking so much.

“You don’t think so?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” He let out an audible sigh, bringing his gaze back to her. Perhaps it was all in her mind, but Vi would swear he was beginning to look her in the eye more.

“There’s something else I wanted to ask you...” Vi hadn’t been planning on the conversation taking this tone when she first summoned him, and though she was glad it did, she needed to find out the truth.

“Which is?”

“On the bridge... did you see him?”

Andru went very still. He said nothing, hardly breathing.

“You did.” Vi let out a sigh of relief. She didn’t expect having someone who knew even part of her secrets to be so relieving. Nor did she expect that someone, out of everyone, to be Andru.

“I don’t know what I saw.” He shook his head. “It was... It was like —”

“A monster?” An apt description, all things considered. “A man with glowing red eyes, not quite human?”

“And a magic to match,” he affirmed. “I thought... when I woke up, I thought I’d dreamed it but...”

“It was real,” Vi assured him. “What, exactly, did you see?”

“The sounds of your struggle woke me... But I only saw you on the bridge. I saw you both fall and as I reached out to catch you, a cage of lightning surrounded the man. By the time I had you in my arms, pulled in from the window, he had disappeared with nothing more than a flash.”

“I see...” Vi murmured. At least that explained, somewhat, why there was no body. She’d have to ask Taavin about the magic of the elfin’ra—learn what she was up against.

“What was that thing?” he whispered.

“A creature from very far away.” She didn’t bother launching into a description of a dark god and his acolytes. That was far more than would be useful for Andru in this moment. “Uncle says he’s going to

investigate, but I doubt he'll find anything... What I want to know is how he got here."

"When you say very far away..."

"Farther than the Crescent Continent."

"But there is nothing beyond the Crescent." How wrong he was. But Vi didn't see the point in correcting him. She never expected to pass up the opportunity to educate someone on geography, but today was turning into a banner one for firsts.

"You say there is nothing. But there are monsters. Trust me on this," Vi half begged, half commanded. "As your sovereign and your new friend."

"I do... I have no other choice after what I saw." He shook his head. "Had I not, I would've had a much harder time believing it."

"I'm glad you can affirm I'm not crazy, then." On the list of possibly insane things to have happened to her, this wasn't even at the top.

"It's just that no one should be coming from the Crescent Continent. Trade was shut down due to the White Death."

"Which is why I want to know who is getting in and out." She would be certain to ask Taavin too, at the next possible opportunity. But first, exhaustion was beginning to catch up with her.

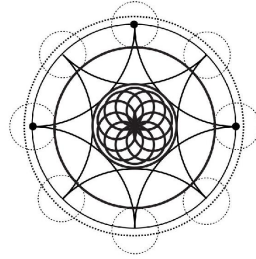
"I'll see what I can find."

"That's all I ask." Vi shifted slowly. Her whole body ached, and her torso felt more jelly-like than she remembered. Every shift and smile hurt her face. But she grabbed his hands with hers. Andru jumped, startled at the touch. His eyes drifted up to hers and they stared questioningly. "Thank you, truly."

"For Romulin's sister, I'd do anything."

Vi hoped it was true. Because she had the distinct feeling that she would be asking more of him in the coming days.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



THE HOURS and her consciousness slipped between her fingers like unformed strands of magic for the rest of the day.

Jayme and Ellene stopped in at some point—either the first or second day, Vi couldn't quite remember. The conversation was kept light, mostly her friends expressing relief that she was all right. Vi could sense some tension from Jayme, mostly stemming from guilt over not being the one to protect her. But, to her credit, the woman knew it wasn't the time to dig into Vi about it. After spending so long speaking with Andru, Vi didn't want to rehash everything. She needed a day to think and the quiet space to do it in.

On the morning of the third day, Vi created that space thanks to Ginger. She told the cleric that she wanted a day to rest and the woman became her sworn guard. Since breakfast, not even one servant had come in. Vi waited until Ginger returned to deliver lunch, knowing she should have a few more hours of uninterrupted time afterward.

Vi sat upright in her bed, as tall as she could manage. The room was cool; winter had finally taken hold in the North. A light breeze tickled between her fingers before the heat of her magic flowing freely replaced the sensation.

*"Narro hath,"* she whispered.

The light was thinner than normal, faint and flickering like a candle burning the bottom of the wick. But it was enough to carve a hazy outline. Her glyphs hadn't been this weak since she first began.

Taavin stared at her for a long moment, hovering at the foot of her bed. His emerald eyes looked her up and down. Concern darkened his features.

"I'm fine," Vi said before he could speak.

“You don’t look fine.” He crossed to her bedside, shifting strands of magic unraveling and then re-condensing until he solidified at her left elbow. It was as if he was sitting on the mattress, half leaning over her. Vi stared up at him; pressed back against her pillows, there was nowhere she could go. She was pinned beneath his gaze. Instead of focusing on his eyes darting all over her, she focused on keeping her magic wrapped tightly around her fingers. *Should she have dressed in more than a simple sleeping gown before summoning him?* When had summoning him in her bedroom, rather than her study, become more natural? “What happened to your face?”

“Is it that bad?” She smiled tiredly. Ginger had removed the majority of the bandages that morning. “I haven’t had the strength to look in a mirror yet.”

“You’re still beautiful, if that’s what you’re asking,” he whispered.

A spark crackled in her chest and her magic seemed to feed on it. He grew brighter, more solid. For a brief moment, Vi could almost ignore the glyph swirling around her hand and focus solely on him.

“I bet you say that to all the princesses you have clandestine meetings with.” She should’ve just said thank you. But Vi had to reach for the joke. If she didn’t, that meant acknowledging the feeling that had flooded her whole body at his flattery.

“I’m afraid you’re the only princess I meet with...” Taavin looked out the window. “The only person, really.”

“Where are you, Taavin?” Vi looked at his hand on the bed, light dancing where there should be contact. If she tried to touch him, what would it feel like? Would he be warm like sunlight? Or icy, like the misty illusions Waterrunners made? Would he feel like anything at all? Fear of the last answer being no was what kept her from reaching out.

“I told you, I am in Risen.”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Vi slowly shook her head. “Where are you? Where do you live? Is it hot or cold there? What do you see out your window?”

“Ah.” He made the sound of understanding, but said nothing for a long minute. Taavin stood, strolling over to the window—though Vi still wasn’t sure if he could see through it. When he spoke, he didn’t look at her. “I live at the top of the Archives of Yargen.”

“Is that a place where they keep the history of the goddess?”

“All the history of this mortal realm.” Taavin looked back to her. “Every record of the world’s knowledge is kept here... Well, what can be found, at least.”

“That sounds...” Her heart raced with excitement at the mere thought of it. “Beautiful.”

“I’ve only seen it from the outside twice.”

“Why?” Vi asked delicately.

“Why do you care?”

“I want to know you,” she said simply, honestly. Since when had baring herself become natural around him? Perhaps it was her wounds making her too tired to care about pretense. “I want to know what your days are like. What you eat. What you see when you look out your window.”

“I see... I see a view not unlike yours, actually,” he said softly. “A city sprawling beneath me. Far enough away that it looks more like a painting than an actual home for living, breathing elfin. I see the terracotta spires of the gilded palace adjacent to the archives. I can see the harbor where Risen nearly runs into the sea... I can see the worn whitewashing of buildings hiding behind slatted wooden shutters that hang on rusty, weeping hinges.”

“The way you describe it makes me feel like I can see it too,” Vi whispered. She could envision those narrow cobblestone streets. The buildings packed too tightly together, like crooked teeth. But in her vision, her breath fogged the air, and snow lined the edges of walkways.

In her visions, it was Solarin she saw.

“I’ve spent a lifetime looking out that large window.”

“So have I.” Vi wished she could leave her bed and stand with him. She wished she’d summoned him not in her room, just once, so he could see the world beyond through her eyes... what little she had to show of it.

“You don’t seem quite so trapped.” He crossed back over, perching himself on the edge of her bed again.

“Then appearances are deceiving. I spend most of my days in these quarters... maybe out in the fortress to join Ellene for dinner. If I am on top of my studies and in everyone’s general good graces, I may walk the city below. But never freely, never without an escort. That’s the extent of my leash.”

His gaze was hard, closed off. For the first time, she wished desperately to know what he was thinking—but lacked the bravery to ask.

“If you are so sequestered... how did you obtain such injuries?”

Vi swallowed. This was the real reason she’d summoned him. It wasn’t to talk about windows or the worlds beyond. It wasn’t to lay eyes

on his tanned skin and emerald eyes.

“Someone tried to kill me. An *elfin’ra* tried to kill me,” Vi hastily clarified before he could get a word in.

Taavin went very still. When he spoke, a protective edge limned his voice that Vi hadn’t heard before. “Tell me.” Vi obliged him—what little information there was. “They’re moving quickly...” he murmured when she finished.

“He used *juth...*” Vi started and then abandoned the question. Luckily, Taavin picked up her meaning.

“As I said before, the *elfin’ra* are splintered from the *elfin*. They know Yargen’s words, but twist them with Raspian’s power—as well as use words of Raspian’s own making.”

“Lovely,” Vi muttered. That explained the lightning Andru spoke of seeing before the man vanished. “There’s something else.”

“What?”

“He said he wanted ‘the champion’s blood for Lord Raspian.’ What does that mean?”

Taavin stood and began to pace. The magic trailed through the air behind him, as though his very essence was unraveling. Vi’s technique had improved with his tutelage, but she was struggling to catch up.

“Can you hold more still, please?” she asked. He stopped abruptly but did not face her. “Taavin, I need to know what I’m up against.”

“The ritual you saw, with the man of red lightning, do you remember?”

*How could she forget?* “Yes.”

“To perform that ritual, to bring back Lord Raspian to walk along this mortal plane, they need a sacrifice of Yargen.”

“How do they get the sacrifice of a goddess?” Vi asked slowly. Suspicions were dawning on her even as she asked, but she wanted to leave no room for error.

“Ashes, from the flame if it is snuffed. The blood of the voice... or the champion.” His eyes fell heavily on her. Vi swallowed hard. It was as if his words alone reignited pain in her ailing body.

“That’s why, in my vision... the body on the altar in the bag...”

*It was one of them.* One of them had been gutted, bagged, and laid across an altar to resurrect an ancient evil.

“You must be careful, more than ever, Vi. Yes, in the vision there was a whole body and that would be the most... effective way.” He grimaced at the word *effective*. “But given the strength they’re already displaying,

I have no doubt that all they need is blood from one of us to pull off the ritual.”

“Should I start telling Ginger to burn my clerical rags?” Vi didn’t want to begin keeping track of everywhere she spilled a drop of blood.

“No... It needs to be fresh blood spilled at the sacred site. Or blood captured by one of their ritual daggers so that it is kept in a specific stasis to be brought back for their ritual.”

“That explains the dagger he was holding,” Vi murmured, remembering the strange-looking weapon the man kept slashing at her with.

“They shouldn’t even be able to create those weapons. It takes great power to craft them, ready them for collection of blood, and then keep the blood viable for ritual.” Taavin shook his head grimly. “Yet another sign of how Raspian’s power is growing while Yargen’s dims.”

“Dimming... The traveler said the flame will be fueled again, didn’t she? That the champion holds the key.” Taavin gave a small nod. “Taavin... I don’t know anything about your flame. Even if I wanted to rekindle it... I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“And that is what I hope the apexes of fate will show us.”

“Do you have any new leads?”

“None that I haven’t already told you.” He sighed.

“The throne room... the dark room... and a temple with eye-owe?” Vi recalled.

“Just so. Do you have any new leads on them?” he asked hopefully.

“Unfortunately not...” Vi admitted. “Eye-owe keeps sticking with me, but I haven’t been able to place it. I’m sorry. I’ll do my best to find it, though.”

Vi looked down at her hands: one rested in her lap, supporting the glyph, and the other rested at her side. A shimmering hand interrupted her thoughts. Delicate fingers rested on hers. Vi couldn’t tell if her mind filled in the sensation she expected, or if he truly felt warm.

“You must be careful in your search, Vi. More than ever. The elfin’ra and their dark arts were locked away, but the barrier keeping them in exile vanished when the seal on Raspian’s tomb was broken.” Her eyes drifted up the embroidered sleeve of his coat to his face. “I am protected in Risen. I am the most guarded man on Meru in a city surrounded by a barrier of its own that’s directly connected to the flame itself.” Taavin leaned forward slightly, and Vi wondered if she just imagined it. His voice was deep, pained. “But you are an easy target—and they will continue to come for you.”

Vi felt fear rising within her but forced herself to swallow it down. Jax had always told her she would be a target for enemies of Solaris. This was no different. She had been raised for this.

“Teach me how to protect myself,” Vi demanded. “Teach me beyond anchoring the glyphs and basic principles. I want to use Lightspinning to fight.” For a brief second, she was afraid he would reject her.

“I shall do my best to make myself available at every moment to be your tutor.”

Vi let out a small sigh of relief, leaning back into her pillows but making no motion to pull her hands from under his silhouette of light. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He glanced sideways. Then, speaking mostly to himself, said, “Here I am, willingly seeking you out after you’ve haunted me my whole life... I feel I should hate you for entrapping me once more.”

“Do you?”

“No... The only scrap of hatred I can find in me now is for the elfin’ra who harmed you.”

“Then what *do* you feel about me?” The question brought his eyes back to her. Taavin stared for a long moment and Vi held his gaze. Whatever he said would be fine. Her chest tightened. Whatever he said next wouldn’t change anything for her—not their pursuit of the apexes, not his tutelage, not her heart.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

“Good.” Vi’s voice had gone equally soft. “That makes two of us then.”

He finally pulled his gaze from hers and Vi felt like a trance had been broken. Taavin looked down at the magic spinning around her fingers. She’d all but forgotten she was maintaining *narro hath* still. Now she stared into it, watching it curve and double-back on itself before spinning outward again.

“You should let the magic go, so you can recover.”

“Or you can keep me company until I fall asleep.” Vi shifted farther back into her pillows. The magic had been thin to begin with. Now it was nearly exhausted. It wouldn’t be long until he was pulled from her again.

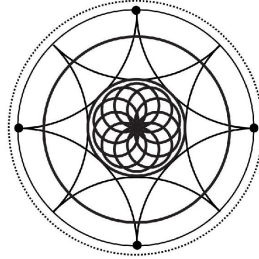
“That, I suppose I can do. I’m beginning to enjoy having some company in my solitary life. Even if it comes from the woman I can’t escape.”

“Maybe...” Vi whispered, “I’m glad you can’t escape me.”



Taavin gave her a small smile, one Vi returned. They stayed just as they were, his ghostly hand on hers. Looking at nothing, looking at everything, until Vi could no longer sustain the magic and she drifted quietly off into sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



EVEN THOUGH VI was only in bed on cleric's orders for three days, her tutors decided they did not want to "push her" right away.

A part of her was offended at the notion, but a larger part was relieved.

There was work to do.

"The more words you add, the more detailed the spell and its outcome," Taavin explained, perched on what had become his spot at the edge of her bed.

"The book outlines two words—the main and subordinate." Vi had one of the drawers of her dresser opened. Sehra's book was perched inside, the inner lip of the drawer holding open the page so her hands were free. "That's how it breaks up the chapters at least... So there's *narro*, and then *hath* is a sub-word underneath it."

"Yes, that's correct. There's a structure to the chants... The first word of every chant is the high-level discipline you're invoking." Taavin held up a finger.

"Such as healing, or deception, or destruction..." Vi said, to make sure she was following along.

"Just so. The second word is the classification within that discipline." He held up two fingers now. "Most chants will have at least two words. But sometimes there's a third—the clarification."

Vi lifted the book, flipping through the pages. She was becoming more familiar with the glyphs, her mind more accustomed to reading them. "I don't see—"

"They're there, likely not marked. Let me see." Taavin stood and looked down over her shoulder. "Go to *narro*... flip the page, again, again—no wait, you've gone too far, back one." Sometimes, it was a pain to be his hands in the physical world. "There—*loreth*."

“*Loreth*,” Vi repeated, allowing the new word to settle on her. “To imprint a communication mark.”

“Like this.” Taavin pointed to the watch around her neck. Vi looked down. She was so familiar now with the hazy mark that hovered above it whenever she spoke to him that it barely registered any longer. “That was created with *loreth*; it is my unique communication mark.”

“So that’s why I can summon you, but you can’t summon me.”

“Unless you’re at an apex.” He took a step away and Vi fought a chill. She was growing familiar with how his magic registered as warmth. Especially when he was near.

“Right...” Their means of communication remained a *noru* in the room. Neither of them could offer an acceptable explanation for how she came to be in possession of his token. To some extent, Vi didn’t want to try to figure it out. As curious as she was, doing so would remove the mystery—the magic—of it all.

“So you have your first high-level discipline word, then the secondary, then the clarification,” Taavin continued.

“Would you ever have two clarifications?”

He shook his head. “At that point, the magic is shaped by intent. Take *halleth*, for example.” *Halleth, to heal*, Vi filled in mentally. “*Ruta* is the sub-discipline of *halleth* for mending the flesh. But then there are clarifications beyond that—*sot* for inner wounds, and *toff* for outer. Let’s say I were to heal that crooked bit in your nose that hasn’t quite set right.”

“There is no crooked bit in my nose.” Vi’s hand flew up to her face, gently feeling the bridge of her nose.

“Don’t be self-conscious, I think it suits you.” She narrowed her eyes at him, and Taavin had the audacity to have a laugh at her expense before continuing. “So if I wanted to heal that, I would use *halleth ruta sot*—” Taavin’s voice had a soothing quality to it, his accent running words together in a way that was smoother than silk. “—and make sure my glyphs were crafted with the intent of repairing the tissue in that location.”

“Understood—three words, and then intent beyond that.” Just as she’d originally suspected. Lightspinning was not so different from the principles of elemental magic she’d been taught her whole life.

“Sometimes there’s a fourth word.”

“You’re just making this difficult now.” His mouth quirked up just slightly, as though he was not only amused by, but satisfied with, her accusation.

“It’s the last word, I promise—even more rare than the clarification.”

“Which is?”

“If you are particularly blessed, you’ll be told a word from the Goddess—a word only for you that will give you the opportunity to enhance your spells, somehow. Again, it’s different for every person, but individuals with a goddess-word know how to wield it.”

“Have you received a word?” Vi asked delicately, hoping he’d answer.

“I’ve received multiple.”

“Then you can hear the goddess through the flame?” Taavin’s gaze went hard. Vi’s heart raced. Perhaps she’d been wrong and even though the flame was weak, he could hear *something*?

“I am the voice. It is my duty to hear her and guide the people with her words.”

“Yes, but—”

A knock interrupted them.

“Your highness?” Andru asked through the door.

*Was it dinnertime already?* She could hardly believe they’d been working that long.

Vi’s eyes darted to Taavin and he gave a small nod. Vi stretched out her fingers and felt the tethers she’d summoned Taavin with unwind. Once she closed Sehra’s book and slipped her dresser drawer closed, it was like he hadn’t been there at all.

“Yes, Andru—” Vi opened the door and was assaulted with the aroma of steaming food “—thank you for joining me for dinner.”

“Thank you for having me.”

The servants were finishing setting the table in her main room. When she was no longer on bed rest, it became inappropriate for him to sit alone with her in her bedroom, so they had to find other means of communicating privately. Dinner seemed to be the easiest excuse. Jax had even praised her for making an effort to “win Andru over” while warning her to be careful in the same breath.

Vi had to fight back laughter the whole time during that conversation.

Navigating merely meeting with Andru made Vi appreciate her easy relationship with Taavin all the more... and underscore how necessary it was for her to keep him a secret. She couldn’t imagine the look on her tutors’ faces if they discovered she could summon a man to her room on a whim. Though thinking about it had her fighting a grin.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as the servants left.

“Better. I ache all over still.” Vi rolled her shoulders as she crossed to the table. She couldn’t help but notice a little bit of oil staining the wood where Jayme usually tended to her blade.

“Likewise.” Andru hurried over despite the ache, to pull out her chair for her. Vi eased herself down, feeling the seat hit the back of her knees and assure her she wasn’t going to land on the floor.

“Are your shoulders still giving you trouble?” Vi asked as he took up the seat to her right.

“They’re much better. Ginger does good work.”

“Doesn’t she?” Vi helped herself to one of the large leaf pouches on a platter in the center of the table. When she opened it to reveal the rice and poultry mixture inside, a billow of steam hit her face and went right to her stomach, reminding her that she was actually quite hungry. “Speaking of work...”

“Yes, I’ve been doing my best to secure and review trade notices and communications.” Andru followed Vi’s lead, though he struggled more unwrapping the leaf pouch. “Which hasn’t been entirely easy given my position here. But emissaries are arriving from the West for the solstice and I have found some information.”

Vi ate quietly, listening intently as he continued.

“It seems there are rumors that goods are still being bought and traded from the Crescent Continent.”

“Despite the trade ban?” Vi asked after washing down a particularly hasty bite with a gulp of water.

“Likely because of the trade ban. Nothing drives prices like scarcity and perceived rarity. It’s making tokens from the Crescent Continent even more valuable in the West, according to one trader I spoke to.” He paused, taking a sip from his own goblet. “Poor man, thought I was going to arrest him for selling illegal goods.”

“Did you?”

“What? No.” Andru looked at her, looked away, then looked back. “Even if I had the authority, do I strike you as someone who could apprehend anyone?”

Vi laughed at his apt self-assessment. “No, you don’t...” And she liked him more for the fact. “So how are these goods getting here?”

“That’s the question I had the hardest time answering. What we know is that it must be a network—people meeting on both sides, likely in neutral territories in the barrier islands. Nimble, well-guarded ships. Ever since official trade stopped, the barrier islands have become rife with pirate activity.”

“Do we know who might be leading these networks?” She could already speculate that the elfin’ra may have smuggled himself on one of these illegal trading vessels. Perhaps he had allies Vi could uncover. Or, at the very least, she’d know how the red-eyed monsters were moving to report to Taavin.

“Forgive me, all I know is hearsay, suspicions, and rumors.” He sighed, looking at his lap.

“Tell me,” Vi commanded gently.

“Perhaps... the Le’Dans.” Andru looked back up to her, gauging her reaction.

If he had been expecting her to be upset or offended by the notion, he was wrong. “It’d hardly surprise me.”

The Le’Dans were one of the oldest families of the West, only rivaled by Vi’s own lineage through her grandmother—the Ci’Dan family. They had warred across the ages in feuds that read as everything from thrilling adventures to tragic romances. But in modern times, the Le’Dans had become essential to the crown, holding the purse strings of the West through their jewelry empire and being an essential voice of confidence in the remnants of the Western Court.

Despite all that—no, *because* of it—Vi knew exactly what the Le’Dan family was: shrewd business people who never found themselves on the wrong end of a deal.

“There are rumors they’re still getting fresh stock. They claim any Crescent jewels entering the market are from their vaults, but in reality... well...”

“People aren’t convinced,” Vi finished for him. He seemed uncomfortable at the notion of accusing one of the most powerful families in the Solaris Empire of illicit deeds. Vi couldn’t exactly blame him.

“My father included.”

“Oh?”

“He had me look into some things while I was in the Crossroads on the way here. Jayme and I stopped there as a halfway resting point.” The Crossroads was at the center of the Solaris Empire—a large city housing the intersection of the two major roads that connected the major capitals of each of the Empire’s four regions. “It was Romulin’s idea that I should start with the Le’Dans, given their clout. So I went to investigate one of the Le’Dan stores for myself.”

Andru had stopped looking at her as he spoke. The casual, calm nature he’d had when he’d first arrived vanished completely. This was

the shifty-eyed man she'd met at the stables weeks ago. What she'd taken then as suspicious behavior, she now recognized as extreme discomfort.

"What is it?"

"I found nothing there." But he radiated too much anxiety for that to be true.

"There's more..." Vi pressed as gently as possible.

Andru looked at her through his upper lashes. She leveled her gaze at him. For as friendly as they were becoming, he was not exempt from her command, and she wasn't afraid to pull rank if necessary. She just hoped he'd tell her of his own volition instead.

"Your highness—"

"Let's not go back to formalities, Andru. At least not in private."

"Vi..." He was practically squirming with discomfort. She would have spared pity for him if she didn't so desperately want to know what he was hiding. "Does Jayme know the Le'Dan family?"

Vi sat a little straighter in her chair. "Why?"

"Well, when I went to investigate... I found her already there. I... I'm sorry. But I followed her."

"Go on." Her food was entirely forgotten.

"She went around back. There was someone from the store there, unloading boxes off a cart—a Southern woman, by the looks of her long blonde hair. They exchanged some words. Jayme handed something to her. The woman handed her a small satchel in return. And then they parted."

"Did you hear what they said?"

"No... I didn't want to get that close."

"Understandable. Thank you for telling me. I'm sure it was just a friend of hers." Vi smiled, hoping to put the matter, and Andru's clear worry, to rest.

Jayme had never spoken of the Le'Dan family. But Vi had never asked, either. In fact, she'd never inquired much about Jayme's journeys from south to north and back. It wasn't unreasonable to suspect she'd made some friends along the way—companions to share a table with in the Crossroads to make her travels less lonely.

"Well, I think that—"

The door burst open, interrupting her thought.

"Vi Solaris!" Ellene exclaimed, barging in without so much as a knock. "We have not seen you in—"

When Ellene and Jayme actually saw her, they froze mid-step. Both women looked from Vi to Andru, to the meal laid between them. Jayme, to her usual credit, kept her composure. Ellene, however, looked utterly shocked.

“We’re not interrupting something, are we?” Jayme asked slowly.

Vi could practically see the incorrect assumptions tallying up in their minds and she burst out laughing. “No, no you’re not.”

Andru sat rigidly in his seat, looking between Vi and her friends, and then focusing on anything else in the room.

“Are you sure? Because we could come back.” A fox-like grin was creeping across Ellene’s lips.

“Andru and I are not having some sort of clandestine affair under your noses.” Vi snorted again with laughter at the notion. “Not in the slightest.”

“Wait... *What?*” It seemed to have dawned on him all at once what the two were hinting at. “No. No we are not. Her highness is right. This was just dinner to... to go over things.”

“And what were you ‘going over’?” Ellene waggled her eyebrows as she sauntered over to the table and helped herself to one of the leaf-wrapped pouches.

Jayme continued to hover, looking between Vi and Andru. For one brief second, Vi was worried she’d somehow heard them discussing her. But she followed shortly behind Ellene, sitting at Vi’s left and picking at some of the skewers from a nearby platter.

“Something I need to go over with both of you, so I’m glad you’re here.” Vi leaned back in her chair, food forgotten for now. “Someone is trying to kill me.”

“More than the saddle?” Ellene asked through her food.

“Yes.” Jayme was the one to answer.

“How do *you* know?” Ellene asked with a mix of shock and hurt.

“Jax told me, as part of the investigation, since I’m Vi’s guard. He swore me and the other warriors to secrecy over it... He doesn’t want word spreading that the Crown Princess could be in danger.”

“You could’ve told me at least.” Ellene huffed and pressed her back into her chair. “You know I wouldn’t have told.”

“She was just trying to do her job,” Vi spoke for Jayme, hoping Ellene would listen. “It’s a recent posting and all.”

“Yes, yes, I get it.” Despite what she said, Ellene still folded her arms over her chest, clearly frustrated. “Though, that explains why there were so many warriors around the bridge and halls leading to it... To think, I



believed them that they were merely looking for any other structural weaknesses!" Ellene turned to Vi, the full depth of the situation dawning on her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm still here," Vi said gratefully.

"Speaking of being here..." Jayme turned to Andru. "You know something. That's what this dinner is about, isn't it?"

He gave a small nod, looking anywhere but the guard staring him down. "Yes... I saw him. The attacker."

"Tell me what happened," Jayme demanded. "I'm clearly missing something that wasn't imparted to Jax."

"I told Jax the truth," Vi insisted.

"Just not the whole truth." Her friend knew her too well.

"The man we're fighting isn't entirely... human."

"What is he then?" Ellene was a mix of horrified and excited. The latter worried Vi slightly.

"He's a monster, from far away—across the sea."

"Like the Crescent Continent?" Ellene asked.

"Like that... Yes." It was a miracle Andru had believed her. Vi didn't want to push her luck with her friends by going too far into the details. *How could she tell them the world was ending?* "Andru is helping me investigate how such a creature may have arrived."

"I'll ask my mother, see if she knows anything," Ellene offered. Vi was certain Sehra had already been consulted. But she knew her friend merely wanted to be of help. "And Darrus, he may have heard something in the city."

"Don't spread word of our investigation too far," Vi cautioned, thrumming her fingers on the table. "We don't want to alert my attacker to our movements... or Jax or my tutors—they'll tell us not to worry over such things and put me under even tighter scrutiny for fear I'll be reckless."

"But you *are* reckless," Jayme muttered.

Andru gave a snort of amusement at her final sentiment. Jayme and Ellene both turned their heads in shock at the noise. He coughed, looking away.

"That sounded like something Romulin would say, is all..." he mumbled.

"So we're all in on this, then," Jayme said finally, slowly, her eyes on Andru.

"Yes. All of us," Vi affirmed. They would see Andru was a friend soon enough. She had to have faith in that. "Thank you all for it."

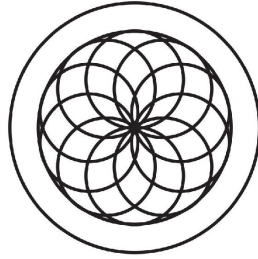
“It’s what we’re here for.” Ellene squeezed her hand. “And in the meantime, when we need a break, we can focus on winter solstice activities!”

Vi gave a small nod and smile. She felt marginally better getting everyone on the same page. Even if they might not be able to do much, having some path forward was enough, for now.

Tomorrow, and every day between now and the solstice, she would be working with Taavin.

If she was truly going to survive the threat of an elfin’ra, he would be the one to equip her with the knowledge on how to do it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



VI WAS with Taavin whenever she could find a moment alone, which was more often than she would have expected.

They spent time working on her technique. He guided her through finger placement, and how he formed the glyphs in his mind. Vi watched his hands, skilled and effortless, as they moved through the air. She listened to his words so carefully that they resonated in her sleep.

For the first time, it was as if she had a real magic tutor who knew what to do with her.

When Vi wasn't with Taavin, she spent the hours scouring her maps and notes for the location of "Eye-owe." And when that ultimately yielded no results, she sought out Andru, Ellene, Jayme, or all three. The ladies still expressed skepticism about Andru in private, but they made a good-faith effort to give him a decent chance. Vi took it as a good sign when Ellene felt comfortable enough to open up about the fact that she had *finally* agreed to dance with Darrus.

On the morning of the winter solstice, Vi woke early.

It was still dark when she got out of bed. The world had become chilly in the mornings and the floor was icy on her feet. But she knew it would warm significantly as soon as the sun crested the horizon.

Vi dressed in the clothes the tailors had made special for the occasion. Her Southern tailors had insisted that she should be in a dress befitting the Crown Princess on a ceremonial occasion. Vi knew she had to look the part, but she also enjoyed the winter solstice and wanted to be able to participate in the festivities. She'd won everyone over by pointing out that while it was important to pay homage to her Southern roots, she should also show respect to her Northern hosts.

What was crafted was a compromise of the two fashion sensibilities.

On top, she wore a golden shirt fitted to her torso with a tall, wide neck. The shirt split at her hips into a front and back piece that draped down to below her knees, reminiscent of the tabbards the Northern warriors wore. A tightly fitted white undershirt had long sleeves that reached a point over her hands, hooked to her middle fingers with small rings. Her legs were covered with a patchwork of lynx leather, tucked into knee-high boots.

Underneath it all, the watch was warm against her skin. She'd grown so accustomed to its weight that the idea of removing it now seemed virtually impossible. In her mind, it had become synonymous with the newfound confidence she was still working on building in her magic.

Around her wrist was a glowing glyph. Vi had learned how to make and sustain *narro hath* so well that she could now slide it from her fingers to her wrist like a bracelet, that way she could move her hand with it staying in place. Which was good for a morning like this, when she couldn't lose time.

"*Juth*," Taavin said from over her shoulder.

Vi paused, closing her eyes. She summoned the symbol in her mind, drawing every line with precision. When she opened them again, her hands continued to move through her hair, carefully weaving braids.

"*Calt*."

She repeated the process, summoning a new symbol to her mind. Taavin had stressed how summoning the glyphs needed to be second nature. Not only did she need to know them as they appeared in her book. But she needed to know how they changed, slightly, to adapt to her own internal voice—that was where mastery came from. Or so he claimed.

"*Mysst*," Taavin said from over her shoulder.

Vi paused, watching as circles formed and lines intersected them behind her eyelids. *Mysst, to craft*.

"That one you'll find useful..." Her eyes flicked up, looking at him in the mirror. He hovered in his otherworldly way, not quite solid, not quite ghostly, right at the edge of her closet. "We should focus there more. You can use it to make shields and weapons of light. Now that you have a better handle on *juth*, it's a logical progression."

"In theory," she corrected for him. Taavin arched his eyebrows. "I have a better handle on *juth in theory*. We haven't been able to do much practice..."

"Yes, well, you said you'd find a training ground for that soon."

"I'm trying," Vi mumbled, tying off a braid. Luckily he didn't press. Vi had a suspicion that Taavin didn't doubt how hard it was for her to concoct reasons to do anything in her structured life.

"What is it you're getting ready for?" Taavin's voice audibly shifted when he was no longer asking as her tutor but her friend.

"Today is the winter solstice. It's a big holiday here in Shaldan."

"What do you do?" He walked over to her side.

"It starts with a ritual to Yargen at dawn... then merriment—singing, dancing, performances, shopping—until the final ritual of the day at dusk."

"That sounds like heaven." Taavin's eyes fluttered closed as he spoke.

Vi's hands stilled, falling from her hair. She turned to look at him. The room was dim, a few candles her only light to see by. He radiated light that couldn't seem to touch her world. It didn't reflect off her mirror or the shine of her wooden walls.

It was as though he only existed in her mind.

"Do you like to dance?" he asked, opening his eyes again.

Vi looked quickly back to her mirror, pretending she hadn't been inspecting him in his moment of thoughtful longing. "I like it well enough, I suppose."

"Is it difficult?"

"You don't know how?" She turned back to him, surprised.

"I've never had a partner."

"You don't need a partner to dance." Vi laughed softly. "You can do it alone."

"No one has ever taught me." He shrugged.

"You've never felt so merry at the sound of music that your feet just moved on their own?" She was hardly one to talk. Vi was not one to be swept away by a beat. But it had happened once or twice.

"I have not had many reasons—until lately—to feel merry, Vi."

*Until lately.* The words stuck with her, shining like the light that surrounded him. Vi swallowed, facing him. They talked so much now, but it felt like even more was going unsaid. There was no logical explanation for the feeling, but it put a lump in her throat.

"Perhaps I can teach you some time?"

The tiniest of smiles crossed his mouth. His eyes were soft, tender almost. A welcome change from the hard-as-gemstones man she'd first met.

“I’d like that.” There was a soft knock on her bedroom door. Vi looked between Taavin and the source of the noise. “You should go.”

She should. But all she wanted to do was stay and teach a man made of light how to dance.

“I’ll summon you tonight. It’s quiet after the festivities. We can go over *mysst*,” she whispered hastily.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Vi kept her eyes on his face as it disappeared. She felt the strands of light release from her fingers, knots of tension in her magic relaxing. He was gone, as though he’d never been there at all. And it was that impermanence that put an ache in her chest.

“Come in,” Vi called, finishing up her braids as she emerged back into her bedroom. She was finding it easier and easier to switch back and forth from talking with Taavin to engaging with the rest of the world. It was a necessary skill to ensure he remained her secret.

“You look beautiful,” Jax said from the doorway.

“Good thing my face healed, right?” Vi remarked, pausing to rub the bridge of her nose lightly. She wondered if it had set correctly.

Jax laughed, then had the decency to look guilty for it. “I meant your clothing, not your face.”

“I told you I wasn’t insane for wanting to go a little untraditional.”

“By all standards... it’s certainly something no one would dare call traditional,” he appraised. “But it’s a very nice merger of North and South.” The statement was punctuated with a yawn.

“Too early for you?” Vi grinned. “It’s not much earlier than we used to get up for our magic lessons.”

“Yes, well, we haven’t had those in some time thanks to Sehra stealing you from me for lessons.” Jax glanced at the window. “Speaking of Sehra, I believe I saw her headed down.”

“Is it that late already?” Vi jumped from her seat.

“Not late, perfectly on time.”

They walked down together through the tree fortress, across the same pathways and passages Vi had traversed more than a week ago to get to the Mother Tree. The barrier she had to scale was completely gone. In its place were pathways of fresh grass lined by woven roots, and patches of flowers nursed to bloom by the tender hands of a Groundbreaker. As far as Vi could tell, there was no sign or suspicion of her earlier trespass.

Jayne was waiting for them on the outer edge.

“Good morning, princess.” She gave a small bow of her head. Even in her nicest dress clothes, attending a sacred event, her sword was still

strapped to her hip.

“Good morning.” Vi ignored decorum and pulled her in for a close hug. “And happy solstice.” She felt the woman relax in her arms.

“Happy solstice to you as well.” Jayme gave her a pat on the back.

“This is your first time, right?” Vi linked arms with her friend, walking toward the tree.

“Yes, I usually stay in the capital or go home over winters.”

“How is your father doing?” Vi asked delicately. The opportunity to broach the topic of Jayme’s family wasn’t frequently afforded; speaking about them upset Jayme terribly, and while Vi had no desire to trouble her, she wanted to make plain that she cared. “Have you heard word since arriving?”

“Mother says he’s well.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Over the years, it had come out that Jayme’s father was ailing... some constant, chronic problem. But Vi didn’t know any further details. The only solace Vi took was that he had grown sick long before the White Death made landfall. So there was no suspicion of the deadly plague being the cause of his illness.

Her father’s sickness... Friends made on the road... Her ambition to become a guard... It suddenly struck Vi just how little she actually knew about her friend. There was the same sickening feeling that accompanied the realization about Andru’s knowledge of Romulin.

“Happy solstice!” Ellene ran over from her mother’s side, throwing her arms around them both and interrupting Vi’s thoughts before they could run away from her. They echoed the sentiment back. “I thought you were going to be so late you’d miss it.”

“The sky is barely turning colors.”

“Yes well, we need to—”

“Ellene, your place,” Sehra called over to her daughter.

With that, the rest of the room fell into their places as well.

Sehra and her wife, Za, stood before the statue of Dia and the Mother, Ellene sandwiched between them. There was a ring of men and women around them, and Vi stood with them. She recognized some of the others in her circle like dignitaries, nobles, and even a Crone of the Sun. Vi tried to peer under the woman’s over-sized cowl, but could only see the lower half of her face, as was customary. It was rare to see crones in the North... perhaps she’d come with the same caravan as the old woman in the market.

Behind them, around the edge of the room, was everyone else. Still a small group, so mostly important people in Northern society and to

Sehra. Of them, Vi only recognized three—Jax, Jayme, and Andru. Quite a few leaders from the outer townships of Shaldan had come to Soricium this year, it seemed, so the usual attendees from the fortress had been edged out.

Clearing her throat, Ellene stepped forward.

“The world was young,” she began, her voice wavering initially before she caught her stride. “Young enough that only the Mother Tree which stands here now, oldest in the land, is the only one who can recall the hours. This land was dark, absent of the sun’s light.

“Then, a star fell.

“The star was caught in the boughs of the Mother Tree. As the branches swayed and shook, the star was jostled, collecting the tree’s life energy on the way down to earth. This energy—part godly, part mortal—became the young Dia when it reached the earth. Her skin was made of the bark of the tree and her hair shone with the stardust she brought with her from the heavens.

“The Mother saw this falling star, and the holy light that radiated in her, and said, ‘Take this axe, my child, and by its blade, carve a new society in my name. Teach its people the ways long forgotten in this land of night. Use the magic within it to guard and guide them.’”

Ellene stepped back, and Sehra stepped forward.

“Dia did as the mother asked,” the Chieftain continued. “She guarded and guided the people to prosperity. And when the end of her life drew near, she returned to the Tree and asked the Mother for one more gift—an heir.

“Yargen told Dia that the power lived in her. So Dia cleaved a seed from the Mother Tree and consumed it. In nine months’ time, she gave birth to an heir that carried on a part of her light.”

Vi’s eyes drifted to Ellene as Sehra spoke. She’d heard the story many times before. But every time, at this part, Vi couldn’t help but wonder as to the exact logistics—a mystery she’d likely never have the answer to.

But she believed it. Because she also had powers supposedly from the Mother, was visited by a man made of light, and was hunted by a red-eyed assassin who worshiped the godly incarnation of evil itself. Was it really so hard to believe that a woman could get pregnant by a magic tree?

“We, descendants of Dia, remain steadfast in our mission to protect our people.

“We honor the old ways.



“And we still have not lost the command of her light to guide us through dark times.”

Sehra raised her hand and Vi watched closely. Every time she'd seen this ritual before, she'd missed it. A small sigh escaped Sehra's lips, one Vi knew to be the sound “*durroe*.”

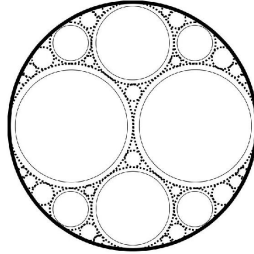
It was true what Sehra had said, that in time she had learned the words to the point of hardly needing to speak them. It was an illusion, nothing more, but the usual *oohs* and *ahhs* from those gathered showed that they saw it as the Mother's pure blessings.

The ball of light Vi had stared at for hours on end filled Sehra's palm. Sehra turned to the statue, and placed it in the Mother's outstretched hand. It stayed there after she took her hand away, and Vi knew it would remain for the better part of the day before fading with sunset.

When she was younger, she too thought it was the Mother's blessings fueling the orb. Now, she knew it was nothing more than a spell and the Chieftain's own power. Vi honestly couldn't decide which was more impressive.

“On this day, as we prepare to endure the longest night of the year, and go the longest stretch without seeing the Mother sun, Yargen's visible force on our world, we pray she will watch over us from her heavenly throne.” Vi could've sworn she saw Sehra's eyes flick in her direction. “We are those who keep Dia's light alive.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



VI HAD a mug of steaming cider and couldn't feel more content. She'd needed a day of merriment and relaxation, and that's precisely what the solstice provided.

Music lofted through the air near midday. The bands had been playing non-stop after the noru races had concluded in the morning, immediately following the rituals. The solstice festivities were so large this year that the dancing alone had sprawled across three separate clearings in the city—one Vi suspected was made by some determined Groundbreakers to have their own dance floor when everything else was full.

Everything muddled together like the spices in her drink. It was impossible to focus on any one singular thing—but she didn't want to anyway. The sum of all the parts was too wonderful to try to separate them. Vi wanted to take in everything, as much as she could. This would be her last solstice to enjoy in the North and she was awash with nostalgia, and regret over the worry that she had never really spent long enough enjoying it before.

"How long does this go on?" Jayme asked from her side. They sat on a raised platform of stairs with Andru, others escaping the dancing, and those merely enjoying the merriment. Though none sat too closely. It was the invisible force field of nobility keeping others at bay. With an elfin'ra on the loose, for once Vi wasn't irritated by the imposed isolation.

"They celebrate as long as the sun is in the sky, so the Mother can see joyous appreciation for her goodness before she settles in for her long sleep. When the sun is gone, there will be one more ritual and then everyone braces for the long night."

“Braces? Braces for what? Is there some kind of ritual combat in honor of the Father?”

“No. Braces as in goes to sleep.” Vi laughed.

“You could’ve just said that, you know.” Jayme shook her head, exasperated, but a smile spread across her cheeks. “The drama of the ritual from earlier has you swept up.”

“Perhaps.” Vi took another sip of her drink, savoring the way the flavors drifted over her tongue before burning down her throat due to heat in both temperature and spice. There was a lot of drama Vi was wrapped up in, way more than Jayme would likely ever understand. “Isn’t that part of the enjoyment, though? Getting lost in something that seems as if it should be impossible?”

*Impossible... like a man made of light.* A smile fought its way onto Vi’s face at the thought.

“Well, if that isn’t a *romantic* notion.” Jayme gave her a sidelong look, one Vi ignored. The last thing she wanted to do was give Jayme any suspicions about Taavin.

“She certainly seems lost in romance,” Andru said from their side, nodding at Ellene and Darrus as he sipped from his mug.

“That’s the truth. This whole place could burn down and I don’t think she’d see anyone but him.”

Jayme snorted in amusement. “Us, maybe? She might try to save us from the fire.”

“*Maybe.*” Vi stressed the word to the point they broke into laughter. She turned to Andru. Something about the time that had passed bringing them closer, the cool day clearing her head, or the warm cider sitting in her belly, had made her comfortable enough to dare asking a personal question. “Has a lady caught your eye back home, Andru?”

He sputtered and coughed, cider going everywhere at the question. Vi and Jayme fought laughter at his expense as he set his mug aside, trying to wipe it off the front of his shirt.

“Me? A lady? No...” he mumbled, glancing at them, then back to his shirt. Vi tilted her head slightly, trying to see his face. There was something there... something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“But—”

“My father is adamant that I make a good match.” He grew still, maybe preternaturally so. Vi had lost count of the times Andru’s demeanor brought to mind helpless prey caught in the crosshairs of a predator. She couldn’t hear the words that echoed in his mind, but she

could see his eyes were no longer fixated on the present. He'd said his father was an ass, so Vi could only imagine how *that* conversation went.

She reached out a hand, resting it lightly on his. Andru stiffened at the touch, and they made eye contact. She held it for a long moment.

"I'm sure I'll be the same," Vi whispered softly. "I'll have a good match made for me, too." A match she'd have little say in.

"Your parents certainly defied those expectations," Jayme mumbled. Vi opened her mouth to reply, but it was Andru who beat her to the words.

"Prince Romulin has said that's precisely why they—Vi especially—are expected to make smart matches. A commoner rising to marry the Crown Prince as Empress Vhalla did is not something we can come to expect often."

"And here I thought they'd set a precedent." Jayme took a sip of her cider.

"They had unusual circumstances leading to their being crowned." Vi sighed softly. There had been the assassination of her grandfather, the uprising of the Mad King, the final war of the Crystal Caverns before the caverns went dormant—.

*The Crystal Caverns going dormant.* Vi sat straighter. Taavin had said the barriers on Raspian and his followers had been broken about eighteen years ago, which corresponded with the end of the Mad King's rule and his use of the power from the caverns. Could that have been the barrier?

Vi fought the urge to race back to her room and summon him, instead taking another lingering sip of her drink.

"Romulin says much the same," Andru said, ignorant to Vi's thoughts. "He thinks Vi will be married to a prince of the East and he a princess of the West."

"Don't you mean, *Prince* Romulin?" Jayme leaned forward slightly. "You're always going on about what the prince does and doesn't say. Are you sure you report to the Senate and not to him?"

Andru turned scarlet. "I-I am merely fortunate enough to know his highness and think he is very wise."

"I agree with you, Andru," Vi said over the top of her mug. Jayme had connected something she'd overlooked. Something Vi was now incredibly curious about. But much like her other revelation about the caverns, this was neither the time nor place. "He gives me excellent counsel, and I am looking forward to getting such wisdom in person when I go home." Along with knowing him better in every other way.

“Home...” Jayme repeated thoughtfully. “Vi, may I ask you something?”

“You know you can ask me anything.”

“Do you really want to go south?” Vi frowned, turning to face her friend. Jayme took a sip, clearly mulling over her words with the cider. “You did say I could ask anything.”

“It’s fine you asked.” Vi didn’t want Jayme to feel like she couldn’t be honest. “I’m merely wondering where that question comes from... Have I done something to make it seem like I don’t appreciate the South?”

She glanced over at Andru. Even if he’d become her ally... did she have to worry about matters like this being repeated to his father? Jayme clearly didn’t think so, as she continued the line of questioning.

“Nothing of the sort. But if I’m honest, you haven’t done anything to make me think you have a deep love for it, either. You’ve lived here your whole life, you know this as home... do you really want to leave it?”

“I expected this sort of questioning from Southerners, but not from you.” Vi had been bracing herself for it, preparing herself, but she hadn’t thought it’d come so soon.

“A good thing to expect,” Andru murmured.

“I’m just curious, princess,” Jayme insisted. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry if I sounded curt.” Vi sighed.

“Answer honestly now, princess,” Andru advised. “You may not have a chance when we return home.” He *was* on her side—she was sure of it.

Vi searched for an answer to the question—an *honest* answer. Everything she could think of to say sounded as though she was channeling her best public princess face. But they were right. This might be the only opportunity she had to answer as just Vi—not the princess, not the heir, but Vi Solaris.

“Home is a funny thing...” she said, finally. “I don’t really know where home is or what it will look like. I have dreams, ideas, but nothing concrete.”

“But it’s not here?”

“Sehra has been... kind, most of the other Northerners as well... All right, hit or miss sometimes with them—not that I blame them, given how recently the war was, all things considered... But overall, yes, they’ve been kind. And Ellene is like the sister I never had.” Vi’s eyes landed on the girl in question. She was laughing, full-bellied and head tilted back, as Darrus spun her in time to the music. “But Ellene is the

only one who could make this feel like home. Everyone else has always maintained a level of distance; they see me as Southern. I don't look like them, or talk like them, and trying to would be nothing short of offensive. I know that without my tutors telling me as much.

"But I know the South won't feel like home either, if I'm honest. I think it'll be the closest thing—because my real family is there. I'll finally live with them, come to truly know them, for better or worse. And if family isn't home, then what is?"

"You're right, family is important," Jayme said. There was something almost wistful in her tone. "Perhaps the *only* thing that's important."

"Agreed." Vi stood, ending the conversation. She didn't want to talk about their families, or philosophical homes, or worry about what it would be like when she returned south. She wanted to try to enjoy what little time she had left. Her life was already changing faster than she could fully comprehend. There was work to be done tomorrow, but today she could just enjoy herself. "Want to dance, or mill about the market stalls? Or are you still too sensitive after your last cheese failure?"

Jayme chuckled and took a long drink of her cider, downing what remained in one gulp. "I think my constitution has improved enough. Walking a bit sounds lovely."

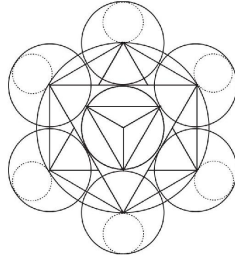
"Are you coming, Andru?" Vi asked.

"I think I'll stay here, just watch. I like being out of the crowds."

"Sure thing. We'll get you another cider before we come back." Vi gave him a smile, one that was returned, before walking away.

Just as they started down the wide steps toward the ground together, a scream shattered the festivities.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



A MAN RAN into the square, crazed and wailing. Behind him raced three others in the same terrifying, long-beaked masks Vi had seen Darrus wearing the night she'd escaped to the ruins.

The diseased man's head drifted back and forth, mouth slightly parted. It had that same sickening sway that the sick noru had possessed, as though the tendons in his neck had gone slack and the pain of the awkward movement wasn't even registering to him. His eyes were glossed over, completely white, shining red lines pulsing outward from their centers. His skin around the angry veins of magic had turned hard and glossy, almost like a pale stone was protruding from his dark flesh. The outline of the diseased tissue was straining against the healthy skin, cracking and opening into sores that oozed globs of white.

"No one touch him!" one of the men wearing the plague masks commanded.

The oozing man looked around, ready to dart again. Sehra stepped forward from the crowd. With a raise of her hand, four walls of stone bars imprisoned him. He immediately darted against them, straining madly against his prison.

Vi swallowed hard, trying to push back the first vision of her father and the man in the cage. For all she wanted to look away, this was not another vision. This was not her father in a distant land before a foreign queen. This was not an end of days, dangerously removed from her here and now.

These were the people she was responsible for and the disease that was killing them slowly.

"There's another round of outbreaks flaring up!" one of the women lifted her plague mask to shout. "Should anyone feel ill or notice any strange sores, please immediately report to the clerics at the infirmary."

“I would like to recommend everyone return home and regroup with their families,” Sehra announced. “In the interest of public health, we will end the festivities early. Please listen to all instructions from the clerics and thoroughly check yourselves for any signs of the disease.”

There was murmuring and for a brief moment it sounded as if there was going to be dissent at the idea. Then, a scream. All eyes jerked in the direction of a woman.

She held out her arm, scratching at something. Scratching to the point of drawing blood. From where Vi stood, she could only see healthy skin. But perhaps there was something there. Or perhaps panic made people mad.

“I think I have it. I think I have it!” she wailed.

Then, someone else. “Wait, is this one? My skin feels tough here... I think I have it too!”

The man in the stone cage gave a guttural growl, gripping the bars and snarling like an animal. Vi knew what he was going to do next, but that didn’t stop the horror at seeing him pull his head back and smash it into the stone. It was the same as the noru, the same as the sick man the queen of the Crescent Continent had shown her father.

“We should go back to the fortress.” Jayme was close now, a hand on the hilt of her sword. Vi realized that chaos was beginning to break out.

“You’re right, let’s get Ellene.” They began trying to weave through the crowd as quickly as possible.

“Please stay calm and return to your homes,” Sehra was shouting. “The clerics can see you all individually there.”

“You!” A man Vi had never seen before darted in front of her. His face was twisted in rage, spittle flying from his lips. “Crown Princess Solaris,” he sneered.

“I would advise you to step back, sir,” Jayme cautioned, taking a small step forward. She didn’t have her sword drawn, but her grip had certainly tightened on its hilt.

“What are *you* doing?” The man ignored Jayme and kept his eyes on Vi. His shouting was starting to gain attention.

“I—”

He wasn’t interested in whatever answer she could come up with. “You came, destroyed our home, dragged us through the mud, then told us our lives would be better. But all the Empire has brought Shaldan is disease and heartbreak.”

Vi opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. What should she say? What *could* she say? She certainly hadn’t done anything to try



to stop the White Death or its spread. Even if she had wanted to, she wasn't Darrus. She couldn't go and work in the infirmary... she had a role to fill as the heir.

And for the very first time, Vi wondered if that was the role she *should* fill. If her mission was to do what was best for her Empire, then she should let nothing, not even her throne, get in the way of that... right? It was an answer she didn't have time to come up with as the brief moment of introspection was quickly interrupted.

"What will Solaris do?" he demanded again. "All I see are *our* clerics, *our* blood on the ground, *our* people in danger. Is Solaris just leaving us to die?"

"Is help coming from the Empire? Or are we alone?" Another woman stepped forward, emboldened by the man's tirade.

"The White Death is affecting everyone—the South, East, West, and North. It is a plague on us all. My father has already left for the Crescent Continent," Vi said quickly. She cleared her throat, trying to dictate her words as her tutors had instructed, putting on her best Empress voice. "He has gone in search of a cure that—"

"They say the disease itself comes from the Crescent Continent," another woman spoke. Vi turned, surprised to see the old Western woman she had purchased spices from. Her beady black eyes bored into Vi's soul. "He will meet his demise on that foreign land. If he has gone into those pirate-infested waters, into the territory of Adela, she will kill him as she killed his grandfather before him. The Emperor Solaris is already dead."

"Hold your tongue," Vi whispered. There was a dangerous note to her voice, one she had never heard herself make before. "Careful, lest someone hear your words for the treason they are."

"We ask questions and it's treason?" The first man balked, talking even louder. "This is how Solaris treats us!"

"No, that's not what I—" Vi tried to say quickly but was interrupted.

"That's enough," Sehra said quietly. She didn't shout, didn't need to. "Focus on the wounds yet bleeding before you go looking for old scars to tear open." She narrowed her eyes at the man. Vi watched how, with a look, Sehra suddenly made herself seem twice her size and the man half of his.

"Chieftain, I meant no disrespect." He lowered his eyes, shoulders curling forward slightly.

"Is that so? Certainly an odd way of showing it. You disrespect me, as I told everyone to leave, and you disrespect my honored guest, the

Crown Princess.” Sehra’s eyes swung to them as the others scattered. Vi looked for the Western woman, but she was already gone. All of the transgressions against her family tonight would have to be forgiven, it seemed. Forgiven, maybe, but not forgotten. “I told everyone to leave, and that includes you three.”

Vi was suddenly aware Andru had materialized at her left. For all his awkwardness, he was proving himself a true friend time and again.

“We’re gathering Ellene and then going back to the fortress,” Jayme reported stiffly.

Sehra gave a small nod of approval. “No more distractions.”

This time, no one stopped them getting to Ellene. She was engaged in a heated conversation with Darrus, arms flailing, voice strained to a barely audible pitch.

“Ellene, we need go back.” Vi grabbed the girl’s elbow.

Ellene jerked away without even looking at them, focusing on the man she’d been dancing with all night. “Not without Darrus, he’s not talking sense.”

“I have to go to the infirmary, Elle,” he said gently.

“This is getting serious!” Ellene grabbed his hands, tears welling in her eyes. Vi resisted the urge to correct her that it had been serious for some time. Darrus was the only one among them who had really done something. “Come, stay in the fortress—it’s safer there, with us. Let other clerics do the work, they don’t need you. You’re not even fully trained yet.”

“Ellene, I can’t.” Darrus pulled her in tightly. “I have to help our people. New clerics just arrived with medicine from the West today. They have more insights. We’re going to beat this.”

Vi found herself admiring Darrus once more. He was composed and certain of himself when she could barely fend off the panicked ravings of one of her subjects. He continued to fearlessly step up, putting his life in danger, for the sake of his people—her people, her Empire.

What kind of a leader did that make her if she needed others to stand in for her at every turn? What could she be doing for her people?

Finding the apexes of fate was a way to stop this. If they held the knowledge of how to stop Raspian, it would stop the White Death, too.

“Don’t... Please, don’t...” Ellene gripped at him so tightly that Vi was certain she left bruises. He lightly kissed the top of her head through the young woman’s spiral curls, then looked to Jayme and Vi.

“Take her and keep her safe. Do *not* let her come after me.”

Vi gave a short nod, overlooked the fact that a commoner had technically just issued an order to her—sometimes etiquette was best ignored, particularly in the face of what was very obviously young love—and pulled Ellene into her arms. “We have to go now.”

“No, don’t take me!” Ellene twisted. “I’m going with him.”

“Your mother asked us to take you.” Jayme got a grip on Ellene’s other arm.

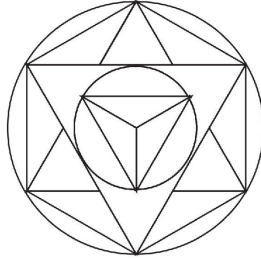
“*Ellene.*” Za’s voice was a sharp and searing blade to the heart of her daughter’s contention. “Back to the fortress. Now.”

Ellene slumped against Vi and let herself be shepherded away.

More and more people were beginning to panic. There was wailing, crying, shouting, and accusations thrown their way whenever someone bold enough got a good look at Vi walking in their midst.

The four of them navigated through it, hastening back to the fortress to wait out what already truly felt like the longest night of the year.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



THEY SAT around a small table in the back corner of one of the kitchens. Between each of their hands was a mug of warm tea; a plate of food steamed in front of them, but none of them could muster the will to eat.

After the events of the day, Vi certainly wasn't hungry.

"He's going to die," Ellene mumbled grimly.

"You don't know that."

"He's going to get sick with the White Death, and die."

"No one knows how it's transferred," Jayme started.

"Part of what makes it so terrifying," Andru interjected under his breath.

Vi was silent. The old Western woman was still in her mind. She'd said the White Death came from the Crescent Continent. If Vi's theories on the crystal caverns were true, then the plague's origins were far more homegrown.

But the solution might lie across the sea, nonetheless... with a man she knew through strands of light. What would she ask Taavin first? She worked to sift through the chaos of the day to find an answer.

"I saw houses in the capital, families who lived together in one room—five people—poor folk who couldn't afford any clerical help." Jayme continued to try to cheer up Ellene. "Mostly left to fend for themselves... One fell ill, but the other four survived. I'm no cleric myself, but I don't think it's transferred by mere proximity, like autumn fever."

"He'll catch it. If anyone will catch it from proximity, it'll be him." Ellene wasn't hearing them. She wasn't seeing them either. She stared off at nothing, wallowing in her own doubt.

Vi wrested herself from her thoughts and rested a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Listen to Jayme."

“He’s going to be taken by the illness just like my grandmother!” Ellene pushed her hand aside and crumpled into tears. Jayme and Vi shared a look.

The death of the last chieftain had been particularly hard for the North. A people who were still relatively new to the Empire, still stinging from the loss of their sovereignty, had their leader called to a foreign land to see if her rare magic could assist in finding a cure for the White Death. Sehra’s mother, Ellene’s grandmother, had never returned from that journey. She’d succumbed to the disease and her body was burned in Norin, her last rites given by foreign people in a foreign land.

“Darrus is strong,” Vi attempted. “He’s much younger than—”

“My grandmother was not that old.” Ellene’s head jerked up, tears streaming down her cheeks. “And she was one of the strongest chieftains to ever live.”

“You poor lot, stuck in here on the night of solstice.” Renna made a clicking noise with her tongue as she shook her head in disapproval. “You should’ve been dancing the dusk away, filling your stomachs with good food, filling your souls with the final rites of the evening, and then drifting to sleep as the wonders of the day filled your mind.”

“Unfortunately a plague doesn’t wait for festivities to be over.” Vi sighed, still rubbing Ellene’s back with an open palm as the girl sniffed softly.

“It does not. But at the very least, would you three like a story? Seems a shame to head to bed without even hearing one of the old tales around a fire. What good is the solstice if you don’t?”

“I wouldn’t mind.” Jayme was the first to seize the opportunity.

Vi recognized as well what Renna was trying to do for Ellene. The kitchens were large, but Renna had been in ear-shot since the moment they’d sat down. Moreover, there wasn’t much activity at this time of night, so there hadn’t been much noise to drown out their words.

“I’d like that as well. I don’t think you’ve told us stories since we were kids, sneaking in for whatever cookies or cakes you had baked for the day.”

“Well, speaking of...” Renna glanced over her shoulder. “We made a whole batch of candied nut rolls for the festival that no one has touched thanks to all this madness. If you finish your dinners, I could cut you each a hefty slice and I’ll tell you one story before bed.” She looked right to Ellene. “Would you like that?”

Ellene gave a small sniff and, for a brief second, Vi was afraid she would protest that she was far too old for sweets and fireside stories

before bed. They all were. But for one night, retreating into the comforting ignorance of childhood wouldn't harm any of them.

"I think I would," Ellene said finally.

"Then finish your meals and I'll have warm sticky sweets ready when you're done."

"Sticky sweets for finishing a meal; I feel like a child again," Andru murmured.

"There are worse feelings," Vi said quickly, with a small nod toward Ellene. Understanding dawned on Andru's face, and something like gratitude. Vi was starting to understand how this shy, awkward man's mind worked—and how often it missed what seemed like obvious social cues. Renna was just trying to help, and one slice of nut roll would not turn any of them into a toddler again. And, if Vi was honest with herself, her mouth was already watering at the thought.

Renna was good to her word. The wiry woman had a plate waiting for each of them when they arranged themselves around the giant stone hearth of the kitchen. In proper fashion, they each sat on the floor, the woman easing herself into a stool she'd pulled over.

"When was the last time we did this?" Vi asked with a small laugh and nudge to Ellene's shoulder. "Seven? Ten?"

"It's been so long I can't remember." She stared at her nut roll and inhaled through her nose. "It smells just like I remember, though."

"Sounds like you had a nice childhood," Jayme said softly.

Vi resisted the debate that would follow any kind of correction. Her childhood hadn't been bad... but nice? Nice was living with your family, knowing your sibling, and not growing up as the Empire's trading chip.

But there were layers to Jayme's statement, ones Vi may not have considered before Andru revealed her clandestine meeting in the Crossroads. What had her childhood been like? She knew Jayme had become the official courier almost immediately after enlisting. How did a fourteen-year-old manage that? It was something Vi hadn't really considered, but the older she got, the more she wondered at the logistics that had lined up to make such a prestigious honor of delivering Imperial letters fall on a young girl's shoulders.

*Just how well did she really know her friend?*

"What story would you like to hear?" Renna asked.

"I have no preference," Jayme said, louder, as if to speak over the echo of the words she'd uttered under her breath. "They'll all be new to me."

“Something romantic,” Ellene eagerly chirped. Vi didn’t know if returning her mind to romance was the best course.

“Something happy,” Vi suggested hastily.

“Something romantic and happy...” Renna leaned back in her chair. “How about the creation of the reservoir?”

The reservoir was a large freshwater lake to the south east of Soricism. It was said that its underground tunnels fed most of the springs throughout the jungles. And, if that were true, it made it not only the largest source of freshwater on the continent, but also the primary water source for the people of Shaldan.

“The one with Dia and Holin?” Ellene asked eagerly. “Yes, that one, tell that one!”

Renna chuckled. “Very well, if my little chieftain-to-be commands it...

“Long ago, as Shaldan and its people grew under the care of Dia, so too did their needs. No longer could they collect water from when the skies opened, or rely on small trickles through the jungles. Something far more substantial was needed.

“‘Cut a layer beneath the earth,’ a young man suggest—”

“Holin!” Ellene said through a particularly large bite of her sweet roll.

“Yes, Holin.” Renna smiled brightly at Ellene’s ever improving mood. “He suggested such to Dia—that if she could use her axe to cut not just the earth above the ground as trees, and plants, but the earth below, that water would gather there in a mighty basin for all to utilize...”

Vi hadn’t heard the tale in some time, and she found herself as entranced as her friends by Renna’s storytelling. Andru seemed to be getting particularly into the way the weathered woman spun the tale as he inched forward, hanging on every word, not roll forgotten.

It was a story of love being enough of a reason to master a power none had seen before, a story of triumph, full of such fantastical embellishments that even though Renna presented it all as fact, Vi was certain very little was actually true.

“... and while it was aptly called the reservoir, even then, a new name was eventually given—Lake Io, named after Dia and Holin’s first daughter. Some even still call it that name, in honor of our first chieftain.”

“What?” Vi sat straighter. “What did you just say it was called?”

“You’ve heard it before.” Ellene tilted her head, clearly not understanding what had Vi so worked up.

“I know, I must’ve... But on all my maps... It’s just ‘the reservoir’...”

“Perhaps because your maps have been made by the South.” There was a cool edge to Renna’s tone. One Vi chose to ignore. “Lake Io is how most of the old folk will refer to it.”

“How is it spelled?”

“I-O.”

Vi had seen it before on her maps.

But she had always thought it was intended to be some kind of acronym, one she’d never understood—one she’d always assumed meant *reservoir* in the old language of the North. If she had tried to pronounce it as a word, it was always I-oooh in her mind, nothing like how Renna or Ellene said it.

Io.

Pronounced eye-owe.

Just as Taavin had said—Lake Io was an apex of fate.

Vi shot upright. She had to tell him she’d pieced together his clues. “I have to go.”

“What’s wrong?” Jayme asked.

“Have I done something to offend?” Renna was visibly nervous as Vi passed.

“No, no,” Vi said hastily. She gave the woman a small nod—a huge sign of Imperial deference, as far as etiquette was concerned. “You’ve done me a great service. I need to consult my maps. They’re not marked properly and I must go fix that.”

“Don’t try to think through it,” Ellene said through a mouth of food to Renna. She’d cleaned her plate, so Vi could only assume she was starting in on her half-finished roll. At least someone would eat it. “She gets like this about her maps sometimes. I’m sure she needs to correctly label every one.”

Vi let them think what they wanted; all she needed was to get back to her room.

Her uncle appeared in the doorway, stopping her in her tracks. He had a serious look about him, the look that usually heralded a scolding. But he said nothing, simply stared.

“Excuse me, uncle, I need to go do something.” Vi stepped around him, and he just watched her go, shoulders sagging. There was a glint to his eyes, a shining wetness that was strange to see. He wasn’t one for



emotion, but after helping Sehra with the outbreak, Vi couldn't blame him for reaching a deeper-than-usual level of physical and mental exhaustion. Her heart had contorted as well for those suffering.

"I need to speak with you, Vi." He cleared his throat, forcing out the words.

"Not now, uncle." Vi was starting up the stairs, taking them with her long legs two at a time.

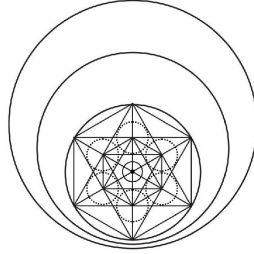
"Vi..."

"This is important," she called over her shoulder. He still hadn't moved from that partly hunched, limp-armed position. "Tell me tomorrow morning!"

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, and Vi rushed off. She wondered briefly just what he needed to say, and what had him in such a state. But whatever it was could keep.

Right now, she had to get back to her room, chart the best course to get to Lake Io, and tell Taavin of her discovery.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



VI WAS breathless by the time she ran into her chambers.

“Okay, Lake Io...” Vi mumbled as her fingers traced her shelves. She knew she had an atlas exclusively for maps of the North. One book that would be perfect for... “There you are.”

Lifting it from the shelf, Vi placed the over-sized tome on her drafting table and began flipping through it. She looked over to one of the unlit candles on the wall and lit it with a thought.

By candlelight, Vi selected a map detailing Soricium and the surrounding area. The edge of the map bled over onto the next page, where the topmost corner of Lake Io could be seen at the edge of the vast and mostly uninhabited jungle. Reaching into her drawer, Vi resisted the urge to grab for her pen and add “Lake Io” under “Reservoir.” Instead, she grabbed her trusty caliper—a metal tool composed of two straight edges screwed together at the top to precisely tune the width between their points.

She rested the tool on the page over the scale marker, reducing the width to match. She began to chart out her course. No map was perfect... but Vi needed to know about how long this trip might take, so she could formulate an appropriate story to secure permission to go on it. That particular logistical nightmare was one she’d reckon with in short order.

Pulling out a spare sheet of paper and a pen, Vi began to jot down notes on distance, time, and terrain. She couldn’t have been working too long, because there wasn’t that much to do, but a knock on her door frame jostled her from her thoughts.

“Ellene, hello, what...” Vi tried to shuffle the paper without looking suspicious, which was utterly futile and only succeeded in smearing ink across her hand. “What’re you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you, Vi,” she said gently. Tears were still streaming down her cheeks.

Vi looked down at her maps, then back to her friend. She’d promised Ellene she’d try to be present in their final weeks together. But this was an apex of fate! Their world depended on Vi’s “distraction” more than Ellene understood.

“Give me ten—twenty more minutes and then you’ll have my undivided attention.”

“Vi... you, you really should talk to me now. I want to... I’m trying to help, as your friend.”

“I’ll be done in just a moment, I promise.” Vi forced a smile. “If you tell me now, I’m just going to be distracted with my maps anyway. Wait a just a minute or two and—”

“This is more important,” Ellene insisted.

Vi bit back a sigh and looked to the girl again, ready with a retort. She hadn’t known what she was going to say next, but whatever dismissal she’d have attempted died on her lips. Ellene stood with her hands knotted in her shirt, balled so tightly they were trembling. Her eyes continued to overflow with tears, spilling onto an expression of absolute torture.

“Is it Darrus?” she asked softly. There was no way he’d contracted the disease that fast. Even knowing nothing about the White Death, Vi knew that was impossible.

Ellene shook her head. “I—I wanted to tell you, but I...” Ellene sniffled loudly. She looked off to the right, just beyond the door frame. “I can’t,” she whispered weakly. “I’m sorry, I tried. I thought I could.”

In stepped Jax.

“What’s going on?” The weight of the situation was finally beginning to catch up with her. The whole atmosphere had gone heavy. Ellene continued to hang in limbo and her uncle’s expression had darkened further from the last time she’d seen it. “What is this?”

Vi closed her maps, slowly sliding the paper she was working on into one of her drawers. They were acting like she was about to bolt, or do something uncharacteristic, like attack them.

“I—” Jax’s words choked in his throat, escaping as a croak. He swallowed hard and Vi watched the knot in his neck bob once, twice, three times. “There were messengers from the West. They arrived this morning, right as the festivities were beginning. That’s why it took so long for their missive to get here. We weren’t in the fortress, so it took time, then with another outbreak, things were chaotic...”

“Is everything all right with Aunt Elecia?” Vi asked hastily. Messengers from the West, her uncle’s state—that was the only thing Vi could think of that would have him so distraught. Elecia and Jax had never been anything official, yet everyone with eyes knew there was more than a little bit of something there. Since Norin, the city Elecia ruled, was the first city outside the South with the White Death... “Is she sick?”

“No.”

“Oh, thank the Mother.” Vi gave a huge sigh of relief. “Then what is it?”

The relief she felt quickly abandoned her. Her uncle’s face twisted further. She could almost feel the tension in his muscles, as though he was forcibly trying to hold himself together.

“Uncle... if it’s a message... I can read it myself,” Vi offered in the hopes that would alleviate some of his struggle. Still, Jax persisted with another shake of his head. “Then I could—”

“Your father is dead.”

*What?*

She hadn’t heard him right.

Vi’s ears rang. There was a buzzing, like bees had begun to occupy them. She couldn’t hear anything correctly anymore. She certainly didn’t hear those four words said so plainly... so heartlessly... that her own heart fractured instantly, trying to break apart, to fill the void between each word with emotion.

“What?” It was barely a word. More of a blurt of sound that was half a laugh of disbelief and half the start of tears.

“We received word with the messengers.” He sniffled loudly. “Emperor Aldrik Solaris has perished at sea.”

“W-what?” Vi stuttered. That was the only word that would make sense, because nothing else did. The words her ears were telling her she heard, and the truth Vi felt within herself, were diametrically opposed.

Her father couldn’t be dead. He was coming with her family to finally, *finally* retrieve her. He had promised he would be back from the Crescent Continent in time. *He had promised.*

“The Imperial Vessel, the *Dawn Strider*, was to send back word when she docked at the Crescent Continent. Nothing was heard for some time... longer than it should have taken them to reach their destination.”

How long ago had her father left? Vi tried to run the math in her head. She’d received his letter when Jayme arrived months ago—two months? It was the end of fall. It must’ve been two, almost three months.

It was already almost the new year. It was impossible for Vi to add anything up—nothing was adding up.

He'd said he was leaving then. He must've left around the same time as Jayme, or just before, to escape the passages freezing over.

That meant he had to go north to the Crossroads, then west out to Norin. From Norin he would've boarded the ship... how long did it take to prepare a ship? Vi's head was swimming in questions that came so fast she would drown in them.

Nothing made sense.

This wasn't real.

Her toes had gone numb.

"They sent out search parties throughout the barrier islands," Jax continued, as if trying to preempt her likely questions. "There has been talk of increased pirate activity lately—stories of ghost ships and mysteriously vanishing vessels." Jax stopped again, swallowing, collecting his thoughts. The seconds he took to do it were both too long and too short. Long enough that Vi's mind ran wild with possibilities of what he'd say next. But short enough that by the time he continued, she wasn't ready for it. "Those search parties found debris, along with the bodies of the crew of the *Dawn Strider* in the waters, washed ashore on the beaches of Diamond Sand Island."

"My father?" Vi whispered in a voice so tiny she couldn't believe it came from her.

"They have yet to recover his body... The search efforts will continue, however. At least for a time."

"If they didn't find his body, then—"

"Aldrik was not a Waterrunner." Jax hung his head. "He was strong and powerful. But against whatever storm or pirates befell the *Dawn Strider*, his magic wouldn't have been enough. There have been no survivors."

"You don't know that."

"Vi—"

"He could be out there, still! If we haven't found his body, then, then..."

"Then it could be at the bottom of the ocean or torn apart or turned to dust!" Jax snapped. Hurt raised the volume of his voice, making his words sting her ears. They stung worse than the tears prickling her eyes. "You don't think I thought of all that? Elecia thought?"

"I... But..." Her chest heaved with soundless sobs. A pain so agonizing ripped through her that all she could do was breathe.

*He couldn't be dead.* Her father couldn't be dead. Everything she'd done had been for her family—a complete family—for her father. Vi's mind was beginning to fracture, her thoughts not quite adding up.

“Elecia has been scouring the seas for weeks now. She, nor the Senate, no one, wanted to declare your father dead, especially prematurely. She's seen vessels going as far as they are allowed in the waters beyond the Main Continent before the armadas of the Crescent Continent strike them down as part of their mad travel and trade restrictions... the bunch of brutes.”

“One of them could've found him,” Vi thought aloud, hopefully. She moved for her uncle, grabbing his hands. She didn't know if she was trying to support him, or seek support for herself. Either way, it felt right. “He's the Emperor Solaris, you said it yourself, and my father was powerful. He could be on one of the Crescent Continent ships and they took him back and—”

“Do you think if your father was alive he would not return home? He would not even write?”

“Perhaps they're holding him hostage?” Vi countered frantically. She felt like she was the *Dawn Strider*, holes being punched through the hull of her arguments. She was sinking further into that rising tide that had been taking the air from her lungs and reducing her to frantic whispers and thin words since the start.

“They invited him to begin with. And if their plan from the start was to take an Imperial hostage, why would they be silent about it now?”

“I...” She didn't know, and was running out of counter-arguments. Her arms went slack, falling limply at her sides. Her eyes were burning now, and not from her spark but from the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I know he's alive. I just know it. He—he *promised me!* He would be home. He would come with Romulin and Mother. He would be here and we would be a family—together—once and for all. He promised me and this is the one thing I have ever wanted. He won't deny me it!”

She'd hunched in on herself as she spoke, holding her chest, trying to breathe. When had breathing become so difficult?

“I'm so sorry, Vi...” Her uncle shook his head, pulling her to him. Vi's eyes pressed closed and the tears spilled over uncontrollably. She didn't want to give into them, or the tremors in her shoulders. But the grief was too much. The world she'd always been promised was no more, before she could even step foot in it. Everything she had lived for and waited for was suddenly pulled out from under her feet.

“He—He’s not dead,” she insisted again through tears. Jax held her tighter. Vi shook her head, her nose grinding lines of snot across his shirt. “He can’t be dead.”

“He’s—”

“Don’t say it again.” She tried to pull herself away enough to look the man in his eyes. The moment there was a gap, Vi instantly missed their embrace. She wasn’t even sure if she could stand on her own right now without him. Yet she also didn’t want him to touch her. Everything had been disconnected all at once in her now fragile form. “Don’t say he’s dead. He’s not dead! He can’t be dead!”

“Vi—” Ellene started weakly. Vi had forgotten entirely she’d been standing in the doorway. The girl ran over in a sprint the moment Vi’s eyes landed on her. She wrapped her arms awkwardly around Vi’s waist, so she was now held in two places by two people. “I’m so sorry. I’ll be here. And you still have us, you still have your mother and—”

“Stop, stop!” Vi practically screamed, forcing them both away. She bumped against her desk, nearly falling on top of it. She’d jump on top of the thing to get away from them and the horrible words they were trying to pass off as truth. “He’s *not* dead. My father is alive.”

“I know this is hard for you... Take your time.”

“Don’t speak to me like a child!” Vi shouted at her uncle. “I know he’s alive.”

“How?” His voice had hardened once more. She knew he was bracing himself for the tough love he thought she needed. Good, he should brace himself; Vi wasn’t going to give up this fight easily. The spark lived in her and she’d unleash it on them all if she had to, if that’s what it took to get them to stop saying her father was dead. “How do you know, sitting here in the North, far from everything, what has happened in the barrier islands? How do you know more than Elecia and her search parties?”

Her uncle had intended the questions to be rhetorical. Of that, Vi was certain. But he’d asked the right thing to give her an answer.

*She knew how her father was alive.*

“You said he died on the barrier islands?” Vi whispered. This time, it was not grief, but a delicate, quivering hope silencing her words.

“Yes.”

“On the way to the Crescent Continent, *not* back from? He never made it there?” she emphasized.

“Yes. He was to make it to the Crescent Continent and send back word. There has been no word, and the *Dawn Strider* was sunk on the

way.”

Her whole body was trembling now. She knew her father was alive. For she had seen a vision of him on the Crescent Continent, kneeling before a queen in clothes similar to Taavin’s, in a city that mirrored what he’d described.

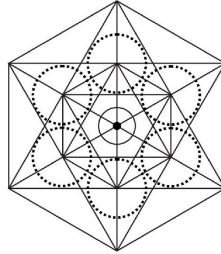
If she’d seen the future with her sight, and saw her father there, that meant her father had somehow made it. Vi remembered her conversation with Taavin. Her visions were of things that would happen if the world remained unchanged. Had the world changed already? Changed enough, and in the specific ways that would have altered that scene?

There was only way to be even remotely certain—she had to somehow trigger another vision of her father. If she could see him again, she could squelch the doubt that even now threatened to smother her. But the only places Vi had ever received her visions were the apexes of fate.

In one frantic motion, Vi snatched up the sheet she’d been working on, turned, and ran.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



“VI, WAIT!” Ellene called after her.

Her father wasn’t dead.

“What the—” Jayme and Andru were standing right outside of her main door, though Vi blew right past them.

Her father wasn’t dead.

“Jayme, Ellene, keep an eye on her,” her uncle called after sadly. Three sets of footsteps took up chase behind her.

He couldn’t be. There was no way he was. *Her father wasn’t dead!*

The words resounded in her, bouncing back and forth around her ribcage, puncturing her heart and healing it in the same action. The world could think he was dead. But she knew better. She’d seen it. She would be the one flame of belief protesting against their bleak darkness that could be a lighthouse to guide him home.

All she needed now was proof.

“Vi, wait!” Ellene tried again.

Vi didn’t even slow down to respond. She sprinted down the curving passageways and bridges of the fortress. Her feet knew the way in and around the trees, down a pathway she’d run countless times in her life to greet Jayme, her mother, and her father at the stables.

Rubbing her eyes with her palms, Vi forced her lungs to burn only from the exertion and not from sobs. She wouldn’t mourn her father until she knew he was dead. She would mourn when she had proof of that. Not before. Never before.

At the hard-packed earth of the stables, Vi made a hard right toward the noru pen. Her hand met the top of the fence and Vi hoisted herself over, landed hard, and was off again. She brought her hands to her mouth and let out a shrill whistle.

Gormon's ears perked up and his head turned. On her command, he came plodding over.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jayme shouted between labored breaths.

"Let us help you, Vi!"

"I have to go." Vi hoisted herself up onto Gormon with giant fistfuls of fur. There wasn't time for him to be saddled. If she asked for a saddle it would delay things, and someone would stop her.

"Leave? And go where?" Andru asked.

"There's someone out there trying to kill you!" Jayme motioned to the road that led from the fortress. "Now isn't the best time."

Vi looked down at them from Gormon's back. Every moment she wasted was another moment she could be making headway to Lake Io. Another precious second that she could turn into finding information about her father before anyone else could reach her.

"You guys can come with me, or stay here. Andru can ride with me, Jayme behind Ellene on her noru. But I have to go *now*." She gripped Gormon's sleek fur tighter, trying to make sure she wasn't hurting the beast. They all stood, staring at her in shock. Vi let out a curse under her breath and jumped the fence.

"Wait!" Andru, of all of them, was the one to speak up. Vi didn't know who looked more surprised by the fact—her or him. "I'm coming."

"Well if he's going, I am," Ellene declared, quickly summoning her own noru.

"Jax told me to keep an eye on you, so it's not like I have a choice!" Jayme mounted, somewhat awkwardly, behind Ellene. Though Vi only saw it for a moment. She was already turning forward, looking at the long road out of Soricum.

Down the road, past the burnt outer ring, turn hard south, and ride into the dawn. The map spun in her head, confirming the path forward as Vi sprung Gormon into motion.



"Can you hold me less tightly?" Vi finally asked, slowing Gormon from an all-out run. She would continue bounding through the jungle if his sides weren't heaving. They'd made enough headway... she hoped.

"Is it over?" Andru slowly released his arms. Vi glanced over her shoulders to see his eyes slowly opening. "I feel sick."

“Mother, of course you do. Don’t ride with your eyes closed on a noru.” She shook her head and looked forward again, setting Gormon into a good trot.

“I’ve never ridden one of these before,” Andru muttered as Ellene and Jayme came alongside them. Vi glanced over long enough to see Jayme’s face set in a scowl.

“Just what is going on?” she half-seethed, half demanded.

Vi took a deep breath, enjoying feeling her lungs fully expand without Andru’s death grip. She looked forward as she spoke, making sure they kept their headway. Not once had she checked the paper in her pocket.

“My father isn’t dead.” They may never believe her. But she needed their help now, more than ever, regardless of what they believed. They’d elected to come this far with her and she couldn’t let them turn back now and give away her plan.

“What?” Andru asked from behind her.

“Denial won’t help. I learned that with my own father,” Jayme lamented bitterly. “Denying the truth is only going to lead you down the path toward even more hardship later... Especially after this stunt.”

“It’s not denial.”

“Vi... Jayme’s right,” Ellene said softly. “Take your time processing, but pretending it isn’t real isn’t going to help.”

Where did Vi begin when it came to telling them the truth? How much truth could she tell them? After keeping her magic secret for so long, Vi wasn’t even sure if she knew the way to honesty.

“I have future sight, and have had a vision of my father on the Crescent Continent,” she said succinctly. Ripping off the bandage seemed like the most efficient approach.

“What?” Ellene gasped. Jayme was silent.

“There’s no record of you having future sight,” Andru said cautiously.

“Are you shocked that it would be kept off the record, given how the South feels about sorcerers?” Vi looked over her shoulder at him. He shook his head and glanced away. “More than that... it only just happened, the morning you arrived, actually.”

“Of your father?” Jayme asked slowly, no doubt piecing it all together.

“Not... that time.” Vi hadn’t given the vision with Taavin much thought since it first happened. There had been so much since to focus on. But now, knowing who he was, that he was on the Crescent

Continent... She would find a way there. Her father *must* be there. Unless Taavin would come to her... All the possibilities of future sight made her head hurt. "But I did see my father in a later vision."

"What did you see?" Ellene whispered in awe.

"I saw my father, before the Queen of Mer—the Crescent Continent," Vi corrected quickly. "Which means he *must* make it to the Crescent Continent. If I saw him there, he's alive, he didn't go down with his ship. He survived, somehow."

Jayme and Ellene shared a long look with each other. It was as if they were having a silent conversation that ended in a debate of who would speak first.

"Are you sure these are visions of the future?" Jayme challenged. "Not just dreams or wishes?"

"I know what I saw," Vi insisted.

"But what if you were wrong?" her friend persisted.

*What if she was...* That was the solitary wound that had been struck deep within her, a gaping hole she refused to acknowledge. What if her father was actually dead and this was all false hope? What if the events that needed to come to pass to see him on the Crescent Continent hadn't happened or wouldn't happen?

There was still only one way to find out. Vi kept her eyes forward. The trees blurred around them and Vi cast her doubts aside, letting them fall under Gormon's large paws and be left behind.

"I'm not," Vi lied to them and herself. "I know it."

"How?"

"I don't know!" Vi shook her head. Tears stung her eyes again and she swallowed them down, setting her mouth into a hard line. She struggled to keep her composure. "You're right, I don't know. But I can find out. The answer is at Lake Io."

"Lake Io?" Ellene repeated with surprise.

"I can only have my visions at certain places... and the next one is at Lake Io."

"Is this why you're so obsessed with maps?" Andru asked. It wasn't. But by the Mother was that a convenient excuse. So Vi ran with it and gave him a small nod over her shoulder. "Why not just ask Jax for permission if he knows all this?"

*Because he doesn't know all this.* "With the assassin still out there, and the outbreak, there's no way he'd let me go. All my life, I have played by their rules. I've done what they wanted of me. I've sat and prepared and repeated and studied unquestioningly. I did it because that

was the deal—if I played my part, I would someday be reunited with my family.

“Now, fate is trying to take that from me, and I’m not going to let it.” Vi stared ahead, waiting for the break in the trees that would show the water she’d hung her hopes on. “I’m not going to sit quietly by. I’m not going to be the perfect princess if breaking the rules will help me save my father. My family is the one thing I’ve wanted, the one thing I’ve been working toward. I can’t give up on it now.”

The conversation died with that.

Vi didn’t know if they believed her or not, but they’d stopped objecting, and that was the best she could hope for. At the end of it all, they didn’t need to believe her. She merely had to save her father.

“I think it’s admirable,” Andru whispered softly from behind her. Vi could barely hear him over the rustle of trees and snapping of foliage underneath Gormon’s paws. She glanced over her shoulder, hoping Ellene and Jayme hadn’t noticed. “Looking out for your family with such fervor when you don’t even know them.”

Vi swallowed. “My parents have come and visited me, when they were able. I exchanged letters.”

There was a long pause.

“I’m in love with your brother... and he’s in love with me.”

Vi’s hands tightened around Gormon’s fur. She didn’t look at the man behind her—the man who had been sent to assess her. She thought of his nerves around her, nerves she’d misread. She thought about how he mentioned her brother with such reverence at every possible turn. Andru’s slip-ups in saying Romulin’s name without “prince” before it. The letter about Andru’s importance written in Romulin’s own hand.

“I know,” Vi whispered. And her brother—her twin!—hadn’t trusted her with the fact.

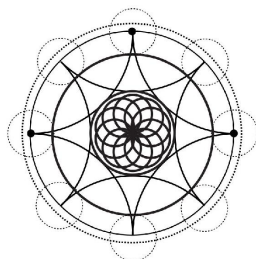
“Don’t be upset with—”

“I’m not,” Vi interrupted sharply. Then, much more softly. “I’m not upset with him... Or you. I’m sure you both had your reasons to keep it from me—from everyone. But I don’t want to discuss this now. If I’m going to know, I want him to tell me on his own. He deserves that... I love Romulin, too. He’s my twin. Of my essence. The one I’ve known longer than any other. And I want him to tell me. It’s his truth to say.”

Andru was silent for a long moment and for once Vi felt as awkward as him. Vi released Gormon’s fur and patted the back of his hand lightly where it rested around her waist. She hoped he understood.

“Please don’t misunderstand me. Romulin can love who he loves,” she whispered. “I couldn’t be happier for both of you... But I want him to tell me all his secrets, in person, when we’re together for the first time—with *both* our parents— come spring.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



THEY'D MADE GOOD TIME.

The sun was setting over Lake Io when they first laid eyes on it.

Out of nowhere, a lake larger than any Vi had ever seen—so large she couldn't even see the other side—appeared like magic in the center of the jungle. Trees ran right up to the water's edge, their gnarled roots draped lazily over giant rocks to lap up the deep blue waters. Even in the fading light, the foliage was bright and verdant. The greens were more vivid—almost neon—the flowers boasted full rainbows of color in nearly iridescent petals. Vines created extensive spider-like webs, folding over each other, curled anchors holding them together.

"It's beautiful," Jayme whispered softly.

"Isn't it?" Ellene said proudly. "I don't come here enough..."

"Why don't others?" Jayme asked, dismounting. "Surely, there would be more buildings, towns, along the water?"

"Sometimes there are... some of the traveling clans will set up camps here. But this is a sacred place. It was made by Dia herself and said to give us all life-sustaining, fresh water. It's more of a place of pilgrimage than of residence or industry."

"Is it all right that we're here?" Andru asked, dismounting stiffly.

"If anyone is permitted, I would think it's the future Chieftain, future Empress Solaris, and their sworn guard," Ellene said with a note of pride. Then, hastily added, "And a future Senator, son of a Senator, Southern Court... man."

"I think my title was somewhere in there." Andru gave her a sly grin.

"Even still... we don't exactly have time to linger." Jayme reminded them. "I'm surprised they didn't send a search party immediately after us."

“For all we know, they did, and we’re just ahead of them,” Vi admitted. “I was hoping I’d get enough of a head start to throw them off our trail...”

“But mother has trackers too good for that,” Ellene finished Vi’s thought. She gave her friend a nod.

“Which is why we need to get you your vision and return.” Jayme folded her arms over her chest.

“Do you need something special?” Ellene asked, turning to Vi. “Is here good enough?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “One way to find out.”

Vi took a few steps back from the water. They’d been surveying the lake on one of the large boulders protruding from the earth. It was a good vantage to see from. But not the best place for a vision—just in case she collapsed in shock, or fear, or exhaustion after. The last thing Vi wanted was to go into the water head first and unconscious.

Holding out her hand, Vi summoned her flame, stared at it, waited... And waited.

“What do you see?” Ellene asked with a whisper. Her face was alight with awe, as though she was witnessing something mysterious and sacred. Vi hated to be the one to burst her bubble.

“Nothing.” She closed her fist, looking across the lake.

“Could we be in the wrong place?” Ellene looked back the way they’d came.

“Perhaps it wasn’t Lake Io?” Jayme mused.

Vi shook her head. “No, it’s here... But Ellene may be right. This spot, right here, may not be the right place.”

“How so?” Andru asked.

“All the other places I’ve received my visions were remnants from the start of Shaldan. There were the underground ruins, the ruins at the edge of the city...” *Ruins*. That’s what it was, Vi realized. Taavin had said something about a temple of the sacred family.

“So you’re saying we need to find ruins?” Jayme followed Vi’s logic. “Or some other remnant of old Shaldan?”

“There must be some near the lake, somewhere.” Vi looked to Ellene. “Do you know of any? Specifically related to Dia and her family?”

Ellene shook her head.

“That’s a lot of ground to cover.” Jayme looked out over the water.

“Perhaps there’s a faster way,” Ellene mused, wiggling her toes.

“What’re you thinking?” Andru glanced between Ellene and her feet.



“I could feel out the earth. If there are ruins underground, or an odd shape of stone, it should feel different to me than normal earth.”

“If this is really supplying the water for all of Shaldan, there must be countless passages underground...” Vi murmured, trying not to dash their hopes.

“I can try,” Ellene insisted. “I’ll try to feel for smooth rock, something finished.”

“It can’t hurt if you can do it while we walk.” Jayme was already moving around the lake’s outer edge, starting off in a somewhat arbitrary direction.

“I should be able to.”

“If it goes too slowly, we can always jump back on the noru,” Andru suggested.

Vi gave him a nod and they started along the water.

She felt small pulses emitting from underneath Ellene’s feet with every step. The girl’s eyes closed from time to time, but she never ran into a single tree or bush. Even with her eyes closed, her magic mapped the forest for her into a sight beyond sight. Once in a while, she’d touch a tree, and Vi felt the same pulses vanish into the bark, down into the roots, and then fade past the realm of her perception.

“Wait, stop.” Ellene turned, looking to their right. She lifted a hand, pointing. “There’s something over there.”

“You’re sure?” Yet even as Jayme was asking, Vi could make out the outline of a shadow in-between the trees that she would’ve missed if not for Ellene.

“One way to find out.” Vi led the charge, away from the lake itself and back into the jungle.

Sure enough, not far from the water, stood a ruin. It was completely unmarked on any of her maps—like most were, but Vi couldn’t believe no one knew of its existence. It seemed too magnificent to leave lost to time.

“It looks almost like another fortress,” Ellene whispered.

“It does,” Vi agreed, her voice falling to a hush as well.

Large archways supported crumbling stone pathways between trees, draped with vines and moss. The skeletons of long-dead trees rotted in the shadow of the ruins, feeding newer life that would someday grow tall enough that their mighty roots would crack even more of the crumbling foundation.

It wasn’t as pristine as the first ruins Vi had discovered. But it was far more intact than those around Soricium. Perhaps this site was more

removed, protected from anyone bothering it throughout the ages. Or perhaps it had once been so large, that even what was left after time had taken its toll still maintained breathtaking grandeur.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Vi asked Ellene.

She shook her head. “Not outside of Soricism. It... I can’t describe it. It doesn’t look like the other cities in Shaldan.” She must’ve been truly confused, because she returned to her earlier sentiment. “It looks like the fortress—or an early version of it.”

“It’s incredible, whatever it is,” Andru whispered in awe. “This must be the place, right?”

“I think so.” Perhaps there were hundreds of ruins dotting the shore of the massive lake. But Vi didn’t think there were any that would look so grand. If any place was going to be an apex of fate, this would be it. “Let’s go in.”

“In?” Jayme caught her hand. “That’s a crumbling death trap.”

“Everywhere else, I’ve had to go in. I’ve had to stand right at the heart of it. There’s no time to waste debating this. You can wait out here if you’d like.”

“If you’re going in, then so are we,” Ellene declared. “We’ve come this far together. Besides, you have a Groundbreaker on your side. I’ll fix any cracking bits and keep us safe.”

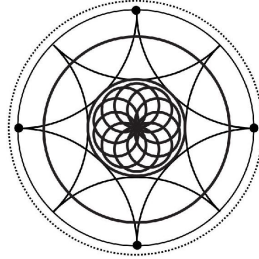
“We won’t abandon you now,” Andru agreed.

“Fine. Even if I’m not completely thrilled by the idea...” Jayme looked uneasily up at the ruins.

Vi stared at her friends in wonder. Standing in front of ancient ruins that could well lead to their deaths, she felt the first cornerstone of something she could call “home” fall into place.

“Let’s go, then. Fate is waiting.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



THEY SCRAMBLED over large stones and other rubble as they neared the heart of the ruins.

Half perched in a tree, half supported by the stone that extended unnaturally from the earth, was a structure that looked more like the cathedrals to the Mother Vi had seen in her architecture books than anything Northern. It had pointed spires and more soaring archways to support its large columns.

“Where to from here?” Jayme asked as they climbed up a broken stairway to a wide platform.

“In there, I think.” Vi pointed across a crumbling bridge. “That looks like the center of it all.”

“Leave it to me.” Ellene stepped forward ahead of them. She swept her palm out and across her chest. Before their eyes, old cracks were smoothed, large chunks of stone settled back into place, and the vines tightened, lending further natural supports.

Yet, despite all this, Jayme and Andru seemed skeptical.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Jayme asked.

“We’re pretty high up...” Andru glanced over his shoulder, panting softly at the exertion of their climb.

“I may not be a builder, but I know how to use my magic to manipulate the earth enough to make a secure path,” Ellene insisted.

“I have faith in Ellene.” Vi started forward.

“As if I don’t.” Jayme rolled her eyes, taking a wide step, determined to be the second on the bridge.

Once across, the four stepped into the smothering darkness of the heart of the ruins. The shifting moonlight of the jungle already hadn’t been enough to see by. The small flame that magically hovered over Vi’s shoulder, guiding them, had provided just barely enough light.

Here, however, the darkness seemed to have that same impenetrable quality as the first set of ruins Vi had stumbled on. It clung to every corner of the cavernous inner space, darkening relief sculptures and collapsed columns alike. Her friends huddled closer, staying in the halo of light from her flame.

"This feels like the right place," Vi whispered.

"How so?" Jayme's voice had dropped to a whisper as well. Something about the atmosphere was making them all tense. Perhaps it was they couldn't see the far walls or ceiling. The only source of pale moonlight was the archway they'd entered from.

"I can't describe it..." Vi shook her head. "A place with purpose? Something important happened here." Vi wondered if she truly felt that way, or if Taavin's words were merely inspiring the feeling.

"I can only imagine." Ellene's voice echoed off the high ceiling. Whatever the girl could imagine, it wasn't the need that Vi felt to remain as quiet as possible. "What's over there?"

With a flick of her fingers, Vi sent the small flame ahead of them. They hustled to keep up, none seeming to want to linger in the darkness for too long. The pale outline of two figures were highlighted in orange, slick with damp that dripped softly from the tall ceiling. One figure held an axe and knelt before the other. It was almost an exact replica of the statue in the Mother Tree... save for a few key differences.

"Is that... a man?" Jayme squinted. Time and age had taken its toll on the statue and it was impossible to tell. "Wearing a crown?"

"I think so?" Vi tilted her head, trying to imagine what the statue might have looked like when it was first made. There was something masculine about the figure... yet it also had a litness that read as feminine. Androgynous, would be a better term. "Wearing a crown? I didn't think chieftains wore crowns?"

"We don't." Ellene frowned slightly. She seemed disturbed by the sculpture. "And what's he holding in his other hand?"

"Some kind of blade?" Vi wondered aloud. It was curved but half-broken. She couldn't tell from the blunted end alone what it may have been originally.

"He has a sword on his hip, though," Jayme pointed out.

"Maybe he was some kind of warrior?"

"Dia would kneel to no warrior," Ellene insisted. "She would only kneel to the Mother."

"Perhaps it's not Dia," Vi suggested, more out of kindness. The woman was holding an axe, and nearly in the same pose as the sculpture

of Dia in Soricism. It seemed too similar to be mere chance.

"Maybe not..." Ellene was seeing what she wanted to see. But there was no use in pointing that out.

"Perhaps he's a warrior for whoever this is..." Andru's focus had wandered to the wall behind the statue. Whatever he saw had him entranced enough that he'd wandered away from the halo of light.

Vi, Ellene, and Jayme joined him. With a mental command, Vi had the fire lift above her head, illuminating another relief on the wall.

It was massive in scale, the figures easily four times life-sized. A man and a woman were locked in combat. The woman had a blazing sun behind her and she pointed a staff at the man. The man was angular and sharp-looking, wings of lightning crackled behind him. Soundless cries of battle had been cast on their stone faces, resisting the wear of time in an impossible way.

"I would think it's the Mother and Father but..." Andru trailed off.

*But they're fighting,* Vi finished mentally. The Mother and Father were said to be in an eternal dance, hand in hand, forever with each other throughout the ages as one watched over day and the other night. The crones of the Empire said they were lovers, not enemies... And that's what Vi would've believed before Taavin had told her his truths. Now, she saw it and knew she was laying eyes on a great battle.

This was the truth of their world. An ancient good—Yargen—pitted against an ancient evil—Raspian. They were all mortal pawns laid between them, cast in stone at the gods' feet.

The Solaris Empire and its people had been so far removed from this great struggle that they didn't even see its impact on their lives.

"It's likely also something else." Vi shrugged. She might know better, but her friends didn't and there was no way she could explain otherwise. Just looking at the image was making her uncomfortable. It was as if she was looking at something she was never meant to see. "Who knows what this place really was, or who even built it."

"Maybe your vision will give us insight?" Ellene suggested.

"Right. I'll need to use my flame for it... if it goes out when I'm finished, it may be dark for a moment."

"I think we can survive the dark." Jayme readjusted her stance, stalwart as usual.

"All right, then." Vi closed her eyes and held out her hand. Like a bird, her flame perched in her palm. She felt as much as saw the orb of light moving on the other side of her eyelids. When Vi opened her eyes, she prepared herself to be thrown into the vision.

This time, she wasn't disappointed.

Once more, the world was over-saturated with white. Slowly, by the brush of an invisible artist, color returned, filling in shapes and lines that were as foreign as the last time. As she was coming to learn was normal, there was no sound filling the cavernous room she stood in.

Taavin knelt before her in stunning clarity.

For a brief moment, Vi merely studied his face: immobile, focused, sharp. Sharper than she'd ever seen it before. He looked real, almost like something she could reach out and touch...

Her hands were frozen in place, and Vi was forced to be nothing more than the observer she'd always been during her visions.

His expression was somber. He stared forward, seeing through her, but Vi felt as if he could actually see her. His shaggy hair had been pushed back from his face and set. It was the first time she'd seen it not spilling over his brow, curling around the pointed tips of elongated ears.

The light of a fire blazing behind her, glowing through her disembodied spirit, cast his cheeks in oranges and yellows. His mouth was moving quickly, though the words were lost on her deaf ears, and Vi got the distinct feeling that she was watching another ritual unfold. Light peeled off his skin, spinning around his form, condensing over his hands as he continued to chant.

Taavin's hands were folded together, holding something. A silver chain looped around them, dangling and catching the firelight. She could recognize those links anywhere. They were identical to the chain she wore around her neck.

A shadow moved in the background.

Inexplicable dread filled her and Vi fought the urge to shut her eyes. *She didn't want to see this.* Somehow, she knew what was coming with a sickening certainty.

*No, don't do this.*

The words drifted through her, soft as a whisper, heartbreaking as a scream.

The man continued to chant, continued to stare at the flame at her back that Vi couldn't see. All she wanted to focus on was him and the steadily intensifying light peeling off his flesh. The world was reduced to his magic as it mingled with the bright white power that always hovered at the edges of her visions.

In the background, there was more movement. Vi squinted. She could see a figure nearing, but the darkness of the room had become so intense that it was impossible for her to make out who the person was.

A pair of feminine hands rested themselves on his shoulders. Light wrapping around them as well. The glyphs of the two sorcerers bounced and sparked off each other in the air before they merged. One spell, two casters; without even seeing the person's face, Vi knew the stranger was reciting the chant in unison with Taavin. Just as she knew that soon, it would all be over.

The glyphs brightened and spun to their breaking point, shattering in a blaze. She watched Taavin's head tilt back, mouth open in a soundless scream, as fire arced forward—through Vi herself—and onto him. He was immolated as the glyphs brightened to strands of pure light that wrapped tightly around him.

Vi bit back a cry of anguish as the world turned white. She kept her eyes on his face for as long as possible, watching as flames cracked through his skin, charring it instantly to ash. It was a horror she did not want to see, but she refused to turn away. She would see every detail up until the end.

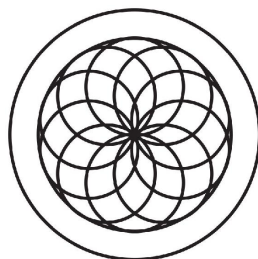
She hadn't made a sound this time when her vision ended, it seemed, nor had she fallen. Vi spun in place, looking for her mysterious ally. Panic set her heart to racing, as if somehow he could've already been lost to her.

What did she say to him? How could she tell him? Panic rose in her. *She had to protect him.*

"*Hoolo!*" Taavin's voice rang through the darkness, ceasing all thoughts with the single word. It curled between her ears, taking residence in her mind with all the rightness of the world. "Vi, Yargen has spoken! She's given you a word!"

Vi turned, looking for Taavin. But she did not find him. Instead, she saw a pair of glowing red eyes cutting through the darkness.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“YOU SEE HER VISIONS. One of the Dark Isle is truly Yargen’s champion,” the man with the red eyes spoke. “How the mighty fall...”

“Stay back,” Vi commanded, scrambling to her feet. She held out her hand, fire igniting across her fingers. “Or I’ll—”

She never had the chance to finish her threat.

The man moved so quickly that he became one with the shadows themselves. He was in one place, and then in a blink he was before her. Red magic sparked off his shoulders, casting the relief sculpture on the wall of the battle between the gods in a bloody glow. He held up a hand, a red circle forming around his palms, and brought it down to her.

“No!” Ellene cried.

Suddenly a column of stone emerged from the ground at Vi’s feet. The side of her foot caught its edge and was pushed upward. As she slid off, she lost her balance, staggering and hopping from foot to foot. Her fire was extinguished and the only light was from the man’s red irises.

“This doesn’t concern you, child,” he growled from the other side of the column. Vi was quickly scrambling to her feet, heading opposite of where Ellene stood; she had to draw his attention away from her friends. “But that won’t stop me from killing you.”

Vi held out her hand. Strands of magic were already collecting, illuminating the room.

“*Juth!*”

Vi felt her magic split and the glyph took shape. The swirling circles curled around him, a smaller replica before her palm. It happened in a single breath, but Vi felt every shift and change in her powers. She had never been so utterly confident wielding magic before. There was not an ounce of fear at losing control; every inch of her will was woven into the carefully crafted glyph.



The only person that should be afraid was the man she was levying it against.

The elfin'ra spun, raising his hands upward, as though her circle had become ropes around his arms that he was breaking with muscle alone. But this wasn't a physical resistance. His magic pushed against Vi's, and they shattered together in an explosion of flame and red lightning.

Fearlessly, Jayme dove in with a shout.

She leapt through the fire and sparking magic, sword in hand, elbows tight to her, point tracked over the man's chest. She lunged, and the sword point almost hit. But the man, or whatever he was, was too fast and well trained. He brought up a hand, as if batting the sword away with a shield. The magic that arced from his middle finger to twist around his pinkie to form the half-shield was hotter than any blacksmith's tool.

It seared off the edge of Jayme's blade and cast the woman off-balance. Vi could see her eyes, bulging in shock, outlined by the glowing red stump of her sword.

"You think that could harm me?" The man laughed. "You worthless girl, you do not even have magic, not even an element of Yargen's precious, splintered boon on this Dark Isle."

Luckily, Ellene was not so distracted. A box of stone rose up around the man. It stretched in a blink up to the ceiling, trapping him in a column of rock.

"Let's go, now!" Ellene shouted.

Jayme had recovered and was on her feet, sheathing her now useless sword. Vi started to move, but then looked around. *Where had Andru gone in all the chaos?*

Her eyes landed on him, huddled in the corner by the statue, looking between Vi and the stone box trapping the elfin'ra in. Vi sprinted over and linked her arms around him. "We have to go."

"What's going on?" He jerked away, eyes wide. They were fearful... of her. These were the eyes she'd expected from the Southerners. *So why did they hurt?*

"We have to go!" Vi ignored the sensation. "Get to the noru, get away." She ran around behind him, pushing the small of his back. Andru finally spurred into motion and Vi wasted no more time behind him.

A surge of magic had her skidding to a stop.

"Vi, come on!" Ellene shouted.

He was about to break free. She could feel it before she saw the red cracks in the stone or felt the rumbling. Even if they ran, they wouldn't get very far. The elfin'ra was faster than lightning and more powerful

than all three of them combined. They had to fight here, or they would die running.

Her mind cycled through all the words she knew. She repeated everything Taavin had ever told her on how to string them together. Every lesson they had stolen with each other would have to pay off now.

“You three go ahead.”

“I’m not leaving you. I am your guard and—” Jayme started an objection that Vi would have none of.

“That is an order from your Crown Princess!” Vi shouted. Jayme stared at her, shocked. “I know what I’m doing.” *She hoped.*

“Fine. Andru, Ellene—”

“No, we’re fighting with Vi,” Ellene insisted. Andru looked less than certain at the notion, but said nothing.

“You three need to go now!” Vi looked between them and the column of stone frantically.

“She seems to have a handle on this.” Jayme pushed on Andru and yanked on Ellene.

“I don’t—” Ellene never finished. Vi watched as Jayme hoisted the girl into her arms. Her powerful legs bulged against her trousers, arms shifting the bundle of weight. Ellene stared in anger, already beginning to thrash. “I’m not going!”

Vi was distracted with them; Jayme was distracted with Ellene and Ellene with her. Andru used his long legs to get several steps ahead. Her friends were almost out and that meant—

They’d all taken their eyes off the column for far too long.

It exploded outward with molten stone and interconnecting cracks of red lightning.

“*Mysst xieh!*” Vi screamed, raising her arms. A glyph appeared before her, hasty and half-formed. It withstood the brunt of the blast, but fractured with every bolder and stone that pelted against it. When the shield broke, Vi was cast backward, confetti of rubble pelting her body.

She groaned, rolling onto her stomach. She didn’t want to see the state of her friends... but she had to. Vi heard the scream before she lifted her eyes.

Ellene was on the ground, rolling several feet away from where Jayme lay. Stones scattered off of her shoulders, and small fires that ignited from the molten rock coming into contact with her clothes were snuffed. Vi’s mouth dropped open, trying to find a word. Not a word of power. Not a word to summon her magic.

A word to call out to her chillingly immobile friend.

Jayme was on her side. There was a giant, steaming gash in her back, where a stone had pummeled her spine. Blood poured out from her. Vi had seen hunters bleeding kills... but those were animals. She never thought a person would have so much blood in them.

"No," Vi whispered.

"Jayme!" Tears were already streaming down Ellene's cheeks as she half-crawled, half-ran toward their friend. "You idiot!"

"There is no escaping," the man with the red eyes spoke. "Champion of Yargen, this is your fate."

"What?" Andru groaned, sitting up as well.

"Return with me to Salvidia, a willing sacrifice, and I will allow your friends to live."

The body on the altar in her vision. Was this how she got there?

"If you were letting us live you wouldn't have... you... you wouldn't have!" Ellene sobbed over Jayme. Her magic was moving on instinct, vines and mosses curling around the prone woman. Vi made note of it. If there was one thing she could—and would need to—count on, it was Ellene's powers having a mind of their own in times of stress.

"Andru, get to Ellene and Jayme." Vi pushed herself to her feet, ignoring every fiery pain in her limbs. She didn't care if the man heard her plot to keep her friends safe. He'd made it clear she was his quarry. But she also didn't believe for a single moment that he'd let her friends go if she offered herself up as a sacrificial lamb.

"Last chance." The man unsheathed his dagger once more—no doubt a vessel of sorts to bring her blood back if he could not acquire her whole body.

"Ellene, protect yourself," Vi ordered simply.

Vi lifted her arm slowly as she heard the groans of stone lifting upward into what she hoped was a protective shell over Ellene and Jayme.

She dipped into the well of power that had always lived in her. It had been her enigma, her bane, as she'd struggled to control it and make sense of it. But now, however limited her knowledge still was, she had the circular pathways to channel it through. She had the words she'd read over and over in Sehra's book, locked in her mind.

She had the knowledge Taavin had imparted to her.

"Do you think you can burn me with your pathetic flames?" he sneered.

"I am Vi Solaris. Anything burns if I will it."

"You are—"

*“Juth starys hoolo.”* It was the perfect combination. The perfect pronunciation. The words resonated with her magic in a way Vi had never imagined possible and clicked together to form a glyph unlike any she had made before.

The circles spun wider, consuming the whole room. They ran over Ellene’s cocoon of stone and lapped against the walls, white hot, leaving singe marks in their wake. The second the final word finished echoing through the space, her power exploded.

*Destruction. Destroy it all. Burn everything and let nothing remain.*

Those were the singular thoughts in her mind as Vi watched the world erupt into white flames. Red lightning arced through it, pushing against her power. But unlike every other time she’d evoked *juth*, the circles did not disappear after the initial explosion. They sustained, burning brighter and hotter with each passing second.

Magic poured from her, filling every nook and cranny of the room with fire. From the outside, the ruins must have looked like a furnace, filled to the brim with coal and burning out of every orifice.

*Juth—destruction.*

*Starys—incinerate.*

*Hoolo... to hold.*

The word had not been in Sehra’s book. Taavin had not had a chance to explain it, yet she knew what it was down to her very core. He’d armed her with the ability to hold, to maintain, to keep her fire burning as long as she needed until everything finally went dark.

It didn’t feel as though the power was even coming from her. This unstoppable magic was pouring from a source Vi had never seen from her own eyes. These flames were not her own, but something far greater.

When the light and fire of *juth* dimmed, the elfin’ra was gone, and she was left to hope that it was because she had burned him alive.

*She’d burned a man alive.* Vi stared at her palm. Warriors had spoke of the disgust that flooded a person after such an act. Of the horror of committing such an atrocity. Of the ways in which you were fundamentally changed by such an act.

But Vi felt no different. If she was honest, she didn’t even feel guilty. Perhaps it was because the man was a monster... or, more likely, because she had other concerns.

“Ellene!” Vi called, staggering over to the cocoon of rock. Her fire had heated all the stone to the point of glowing. The soles of her shoes had burned off. But at least she’d mastered enough control of her magic

not to allow it to burn her clothes during the act. “Ellene! Jayme! Andru!”

The rocks half melted, half crumbled away, revealing her friends. Sweat ran down Ellene’s temples, whereas Vi’s brow was still dry. But she otherwise looked fine. Andru was in a similar state. Jayme was not so lucky.

“Is he...”

“I killed him,” Vi declared, still hoping it was true. She knelt down at Jayme’s side. “I can cauterize some of the bleeding.”

“Don’t.” Ellene stopped her. “The plants are medicinal for clotting, healing, sleep... I’m trying to keep her in stasis.”

“How long can you hold it?”

“I don’t know.” Ellene looked at her with fear in her eyes. “She’s bad, Vi. I don’t know...”

“Stay here. Keep her alive... I’ll go back and get help.”

“Vi, I—”

“She’s still breathing. The best thing to do is not move her.” Vi clamped a hand over Ellene’s shoulder. “You can do this.”

“Don’t leave,” Ellene whispered softly, grabbing Vi’s hand.

“Be brave.” None of them had any other choice. “We both have to be brave for Jayme, because she was brave for us. Andru will stay with you.”

Andru slid a little closer to Ellene, avoiding eye contact with Vi. He’d known she was a sorcerer... No, this was the trauma of the day, nothing more.

Ellene sniffled and then her face hardened. She gave a stiff nod. “Be hasty.”

“I will.”

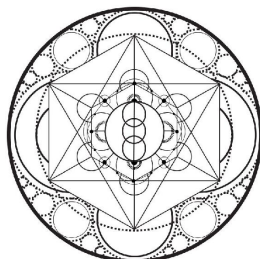
Even though she was still exhausted and every limb felt like lead, Vi left at a jog. The singe marks from her flame extended halfway across the bridge Ellene had made between the platform they’d ascended and the heart of the ruins. Vi didn’t even glance over her shoulder, immediately clamoring down the worn stairs and large boulders toward the ground far below.

She started into the woods, raising her fingers to her lips and letting out a shrill whistle. Jayme was dying. She had been wounded because of Vi, and if Vi couldn’t save her now, she would never forgive herself. That would be the death that would linger with her. Not the elfin’ra. But Jayme, her friend, her first sworn guard.

Gormon came bounding through the trees, skidding to a stop before her. Vi worked to mount him. Her muscles ached, spasming with every thrum of his large paws on the ground.

She would make it, she had to. There was no reality Vi would entertain where she didn't save Jayme. She gripped Gormon's fur tighter, spurring him onward.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



VI FELT every inch of her bruised, battered body. Every rock that had pelted her was making its ghostly presence known as she rode Gormon deeper into the jungle. The rush of the fight was fading and, in its wake, pain bloomed.

But Vi rode onward.

There would be time to rest soon enough. Jayme was hanging on by a thread—*her friend was counting on her*. Vi swallowed down panic and focused on moving with the animal beneath her so she wasn't unseated. She couldn't let her emotions get the better of her; there would be time for that later as well.

Dawn was breaking when Vi saw a rustling in the jungle in the distance. She sat straighter, a cry for help stuck in her throat. She didn't know if she had the strength to fight off another diseased noru.

The beast came into view—normal fur and eyes. On its back were two of Sehra's warriors. Vi didn't recognize their faces, but she recognized the special tabbards they wore. Then, another noru emerged... and a third behind it, bearing Jax.

"Here!" Vi shouted. Clearing the thickness of her throat and adjusting her grip on Gormon, she raised a hand and waved, shouting again. "Over here!"

The ears of the noru swiveled toward her and they were bounding over a second before even their riders had fully registered her presence. Vi slowed Gormon to a stop, allowing herself to be circled. Jax was the last to arrive, his face was a twisted mess of anger and unshed tears of relief.

"I—"

"What in the Mother's name were you thinking?"

"Uncle—"

“Running off like that. I thought you knew better than—”

“Jayme is dying!” Vi shouted, fearing he would go off on one of his usual tirades where she couldn’t get a word in. Jax was startled into silence. “Jayme is dying, please, help her.” Her hands were shaking, clutching Gormon’s fur for support. Had she ever been so tired?

“Where?” The anger melted to serious concern.

“I’ll show you the way. Is there a cleric among you?” Vi asked the warriors.

“I know some basic salves and procedures for the field.”

Vi gave a small nod to the man who spoke. “You, come ahead with me.” She turned to the other noru with two mounted warriors. “You two head back to the fortress and get Ginger. Tell her to bring her box. We’ll meet you here or closer to the fortress, if Jayme can be moved.” Vi finished giving her order, but then added at the end, hastily. “Also, Ellene is fine. She’s mostly unscathed and is keeping Jayme stable.”

“Yargen bless.” The warriors gave a small bow of their heads before turning the noru and bounding back into the jungle.

“This way.” Vi shifted in her seat, guiding Gormon with her knees and thighs. She spurred him into motion, leaving the rest to catch up with her.

“As soon as we arrive you should go back to the fortress as well!” Jax shouted, riding up next to her.

“No, I’m seeing this through, uncle. It’s my fault she got hurt.” Vi shot him a glare. “If not for me, she wouldn’t have come—she didn’t want to come.”

“She was always the one who had the most sense! You should try listening to her some time,” Jax grumbled.

“I know. I’m sorry. But don’t send me back, yet.” Vi knew the decision had been made, given that she was riding in the opposite direction of the fortress. “Let me see Jayme well. And then I’ll take responsibility for my actions and whatever punishment comes with it.”

The wind rushed in her ears, and Vi strained her tired eyes to make out the initial outlines of the ruins. She had thought the matter closed. But Jax was apparently not yet finished. When Vi saw him open his mouth again, she braced for whatever tirade he was about to unleash.

“There will be punishment.” It was a promise that prickled up Vi’s spine like a threat. “But seeing you take charge and responsibility just now... Perhaps it may not be as bad of a punishment as you think.”

“All I care about right now, uncle, is making sure my friend is all right.”





Vi could tell by the movements of Ginger's hands alone that the cleric was tired. Not that she could blame her. The woman had been woken up at an ungodly hour, dragged out across the jungle, saved a life, and then came back to attend Ellene, Andru, and now Vi.

"Sorry for the trouble," Vi murmured as she finished her tally of what she'd put Ginger through.

"Princess, you really are always trouble." Ginger sighed. Then paused, glancing up from her work on Vi's legs. "Sorry for my loose and tired tongue."

Vi gave a soft laugh. "I think I deserved that."

Her eyes drifted away from Ginger to the window of her room. The sun streamed though it as normal, as though it were any other day. It felt like anything but.

"I'm sorry for your father," Ginger said softly. "I don't think any of us really blames you for running off. Grief can take up residence where our better judgment resides."

*Father...* There was a dull ache in Vi's chest. She had gone out and risked her friend's lives to get a vision of him. While she'd failed in that, she had seen the end of another man's life.

"I realize you likely only think of me as a cleric who mends bones and cuts," Ginger continued. "But, princess, some of the most important—and difficult—healing work is done on the mind. Please reach out if you need. There are many around you who care."

"Thank you, Ginger," Vi said softly. "I'm very lucky to have your support."

"Any time, princess. I've looked after you your whole life and have no intention of stopping now." Ginger finished up her work and tiredly packed her box. "I'm going to tell Jax that you need some rest before he storms in here scolding. Try and close your eyes for a bit, princess. If you have trouble sleeping, let me know and I can give you a tippie for deep sleep."

"I'll be fine, thank you." Vi gave the woman a nod and watched her leave.

Letting out a sigh, Vi sank back into her pillows. Her whole body ached and felt exhausted. Could she even manage to spin the light right now?

She looked down at her hand. It wasn't as if she had a choice. She needed Taavin right now. She needed to tell him what she'd seen, and

about her father... More than anything, she needed Taavin's ear, his support.

"*Narro hath hoolo*," Vi uttered.

Light blossomed above her chest. A magic circle more complete than she'd ever seen before hovered at her watch, expanding outward. It floated before her, spinning parallel to the floor. Slowly, the magic lowered, unfurling like the spool on a spinner's wheel. The strands that hovered in the air took a new shape, a new outline.

Just like every time previously, Taavin came into sight. Color filled in and the light settled around him before disappearing entirely. There was no glyph swirling around his feet, no tendrils of light wafting off of him. It was just a man, standing at the side of her bed, looking around in wonder. He looked even sharper, more solid, almost like she could...

Vi's hand moved, drawn on instinct. It rose, reaching out to what had been thin air moments before. But her fingers landed on him, feather-light. She pressed further, her fingers stretching up his forearm. They spread across the fabric of his coat, feeling every bump and groove of the intricate embroidery.

He was there. It was not pulsing magic, or warmth, or light. It was a man she could see and touch.

Taavin said nothing. He looked down at her through half-lidded eyes with an inscrutable expression. His attention alternated between her face and her rogue hand, staring at the place where it rested on him.

In his expression was knowing. Sorrow. Determination. Everything she'd seen of him from the start and then some. Neither of them said anything, and she would've been content to let the peaceful silence of simply being in his presence for the first time drag on for eternity.

Were it anyone else and any other situation, Vi may have felt embarrassment at her actions. But all she could feel was him. All she knew was the outline of his form—knew she was even now committing it to memory.

"I can touch you," she whispered up at him.

"I can feel you," he said in reply. "It must be the word Yargen gave you. This was why she bestowed it on me." Taavin sat on her bedside. The feather mattress didn't sink or sigh. *So he was real to her, but to nothing else.* He wasn't actually with her, it only seemed to her he was. "You're all right?"

Vi gave a small nod. "Bruises and scrapes mostly... But Jayme, she—" Something caught in Vi's throat and the words stuck. She

swallowed, once, twice, but couldn't dislodge it. Her eyes burned, and Vi knew if she dared speak again, emotion would spill from them.

"Is she alive?"

"Yes." Vi forced out the word, closing her eyes. When she felt more stable, she said, "Thank the Mother, yes."

"Yargen's blessings." Even though he'd never met Jayme, Taavin breathed a sigh of relief. His other hand closed over hers. Vi hadn't even realized she'd still been clutching his sleeve. "I saw you and the elfin'ra. Did he..."

"I killed him. He didn't get my blood."

"You killed him?"

"Don't act so shocked," Vi gave a small laugh. "Isn't that what you were teaching me? To protect myself?"

"Yes but..." He squeezed her fingers. "It's a relief to know you can."

"The word you gave me helped, if I'm honest."

Taavin gave her a small smile, one that quickly vanished. "What were you out there for anyway? I thought I told you not to be so reckless."

"What are you, my keeper?" Vi gave a small grin.

"This is the second time you've scared me." Taavin leaned forward slightly. She wondered if he realized he'd tensed his grip on her hand. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

The world stilled. Everything hung on her shallow breaths. Vi searched his shimmering emerald eyes and the sentiment in them suddenly sparked fear.

"You're going to die," she blurted.

To his credit, he didn't even flinch.

"Death comes for us all," he said softly. "Your vision... Tell me what you saw."

"Taavin, you don't understand." Vi straightened away from the pillows. Her other hand reached over, sandwiching his. She clung to him, relishing in finally *feeling* him. "Someone is coming to kill you and I don't know why, and you're far, and I can't help you, and—"

"You can help me by telling me what you saw." Vi shook her head and he freed his arm. She looked away, realizing how forward she'd been, only to feel his hand land on her cheek, gently guiding her face back to his. "Take a breath and tell me, Vi." His voice was firm, stabilizing, as though cementing her mind back into place from whirling doubt.

Vi recounted the broad strokes of the vision for him. "... but what you were holding, it looked like this." Vi pointed to her watch.

"You said I was kneeling before a fire?" Taavin asked and Vi nodded. His eyes dropped to the watch around her neck. "It must be..."

"Didn't you hear me?" Vi shook his hand lightly. "Someone is out to kill you."

"Do not worry so much for me," Taavin mumbled, still clearly lost in thought.

Vi balled her hands into fists. The spark roared to a blaze in her. The marrow of her bones was replaced by molten rock. She rose from the bed and stomped over to him.

"Firstly, don't you presume to tell me what I can and cannot do." Vi held a finger in front of his handsome face. "Secondly... You are the only person who knows what in the Mother's name is going on with me. So you can bet that I worry 'so much' for you."

Her two fingers hovered in the air between them. He looked down past them, to her. A small smile snaked across his lips.

"Good to know your compassion is purely a result of pragmatism."

"You didn't let me finish." A third finger lifted. "And... third... I-I care about you, Taavin," she said softly. His eyes widened a fraction. "You are the only person I've ever spoken to that I feel both listens and somehow fully understands what I say. I don't want anything to happen to you." Vi hung her head. "I may have lost my father," she finally said aloud. "I don't want to lose you, too."

"Your father?"

"They've declared him dead. Killed by pirates between here and Meru." Vi shook her head. "I saw the vision of him with the queen, but what if the world has changed? What if *I* did something that led to my father's death?"

She looked up at him, searching, though she didn't know what for. Their hands shifted once more, curling around each other in a new way. It was as though, regardless of how they moved, neither wanted to relinquish their hold on the other. They had finally found this connection... what if they never had it again?

"I will look for information on your father. And we will seek out more apexes of fate—perhaps you will see him again. Do not despair yet."

She swallowed, giving a nod. As long as there was hope her father was alive, she would be strong. She would not believe he was dead until she laid eyes on his body, or the person who claimed to have killed him.

“I can find more apexes here. I’ll be headed south in a few months... Surely there will be some along the way. Maybe I can make sense of the two I don’t yet know.”

He paused, eyes darting over her face. Vi knew the look of a person who was hesitating. She leaned forward slightly, hanging on his next words.

“We need more than that. Your latest vision... I believe the key to saving this world lies in the watch around your neck.”

“What?” Vi freed a hand, grabbing it protectively. Taavin’s glyph shimmered over and through her fingers.

“I need you to bring it to me.”

“I can’t just leave... It doesn’t work that way,” Vi whispered, knowing he was all but trapped in the Archives of Yargen on Meru. “I have a duty to my people. And my family, they’re here, on this continent.”

“If Raspian goes unchecked, your people and your family are forfeit. If you remain there, the elfin’ra will hunt you until they have you. Vi, come to Meru.” Taavin stared down at her with his impossibly brilliant eyes. “We will find the truth of your father along the way. You will learn full mastery of your Lightspinning. And, together, we may find a way to seal away Raspian once more, and put an end to the plague that heralds the coming end of days.”

Vi swallowed, trying to clear her throat. She wanted to sound braver than she felt, ignore the odd nerves firing within her and setting her to quivering. Champion of Yargen, Lightspinner, heir to the Solaris Empire... Vi did not speak on behalf of any of her titles.

She spoke for herself and herself alone when she whispered a simple, “Yes.”



I hope you enjoyed Vortex Visions! Get ready for a whole lot more magic, romance, and adventure, as Vi’s story continues in book two:

[Chosen Champion](#).

*But...* before you continue onward to Meru, please consider leaving a review on this book. Even just one or two sentences helps authors greatly.

# CHOSEN CHAMPION

AIR AWAKENS: VORTEX CHRONICLES  
BOOK TWO

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<http://elisekova.com/chosenchampion/>

*A princess on the run...*

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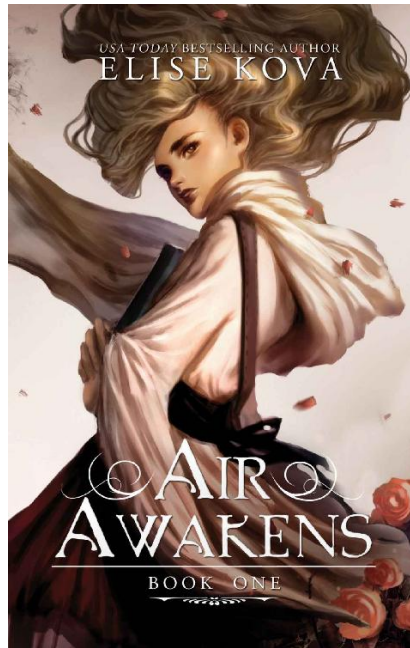
The Empire sees her as their Crown Princess, returning home at long last. But Vi only sees visions of fate guiding her to the world's gruesome end. Across the sea is a man who holds the keys to deciphering her premonitions and thwarting the ancient evil ravaging their world. But to get to him, Vi will have to contend with enemies of the crown, romance she never wanted, sorcerer pirates, and a betrayal she never saw coming.



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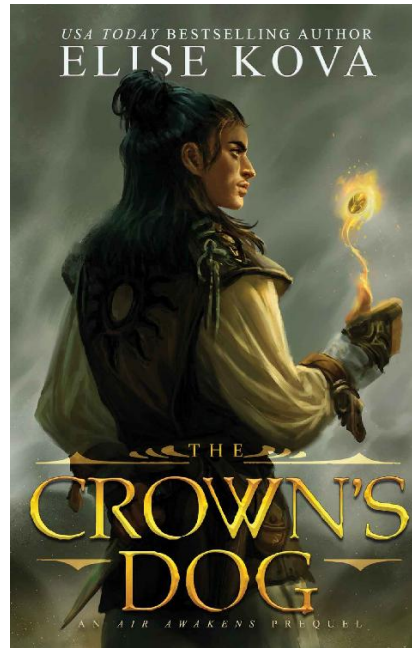
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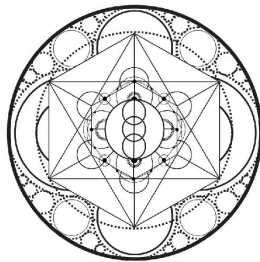


**Want to explore my other worlds?**

Keep reading or turn to “Also by Elise Kova” to learn more about my fantasy series that don’t take place in the Air Awakens universe.



# APPENDIX



Want even more about the world of Air Awakens than what's in this book?

*Visit Elise's website at:*

<http://elisekova.com/the-world-of-air-awakens/>

## PRONOUNCIATION

There is no “wrong way” to pronounce any words in this book. However, if you would like to know how Elise Kova pronounces some of the trickier words and names...

- Taavin: T-ah-v-in
- Vi: V-eye
- Jax: Jacks
- Ellene: Uh-lil-een
- Meru: Muh-rew
- Durroe: Duh-row
- Halleth: Hall-eh-th
- Ruta: Roota
- Toff: Tough

## COMMON TERMS

Definitions to common terms found in the Air Awakens world. Presented alphabetically.

- **Affinity** - term used to describe the type of magic a sorcerer has
- **Affinities of the Self** - secondary powers attuned with each elemental affinity
- **Aires** - term for the world, used outside of the Solaris Empire
- **Awoken** - when a sorcerer's magic is opened in full, giving them access to their channel
- **Broken Moon** - the symbol of the Tower of Sorcerers, stylized as a dragon curled in on itself and split in two, each side off-set
- **Channel** - the source of a sorcerer's magic that can be "opened" to give them better/easier access to their magic
- **Commons** - a person without magic
- **Firebearer** - a sorcerer with fire magic
- **Groundbreaker** - a sorcerer with earth magic
- **Manifest** - when a sorcerer's magic first shows itself, usually in a small way
- **Sorcerer** - a person with magic
- **Tower of Sorcerers, aka, "The Tower"** - a school of magic in Solarin, capital of the Solaris Empire, attached to the Imperial Castle
- **Waterrunner** - a sorcerer with water magic
- **White Death** - a plague that causes the diseased's skin to turn hard, pale, white eyes, madness, and ultimately death
- **Windwalker** - a sorcerer with wind magic

## ELEMENTAL AFFINITIES

In the Solaris Empire, there are four elemental affinities among sorcerers. Every sorcerer can only perform magic within their affinity.

While magic is not in the blood, many families share the same affinity and the magic between family members of the same affinity is usually similar. However, two sorcerers can give birth to a commons and the reverse is also true.

### **Affinity: Firebearer**

Element: Fire

Most Common Region: The West/Mhashan

Affinity of the Self: Future Sight

### **Affinity: Groundbreaker**

Element: Earth

Most Common Region: The North/Shaldan

Affinity of the Self: Healing

### **Affinity: Waterrunner**

Element: Water

Most Common Region: The South/Lyndum

Affinity of the Self: Listening to the Whispers of the Past

### **Affinity: Windwalker**

Element: Wind

Most Common Region: The East/Cyven

Affinity of the Self: Out of Body Projection

## LIGHTSPINNING

Lightspinning is a form of magic found beyond the Solaris Empire/Dark Isle. This magic can be utilized in any number of ways based on intent and the words its caster uses. The words are said to have been given from the Goddess Yargen.

The chants Lightspinners use have a structure of: [High level Discipline] [Secondary to the Discipline] [Clarification] [Any Personal Words of Power from the Goddess]

### *Words of power (mentioned in the story so far)*

#### **High Level Discipline: Halleth** (*Heal*)

Secondary Word(s): Ruta (*Mending of Flesh*)

Clarification Word(s): Sot (*Inner*), Toff (*Outer*)

#### **High Level Discipline: Juth** (*Destruction*)

Secondary Word(s): Calt (*Shatter*), Starys (*Incinerate*), Mariy (*Destroy Magic*)

Clarification Word(s): —

#### **High Level Discipline: Durroe** (*Deceive*)

Secondary Word(s): —

Clarification Word(s): —

#### **High Level Discipline: Mysst** (*Craft*)

Secondary Word(s): Xieh (*Shield*)

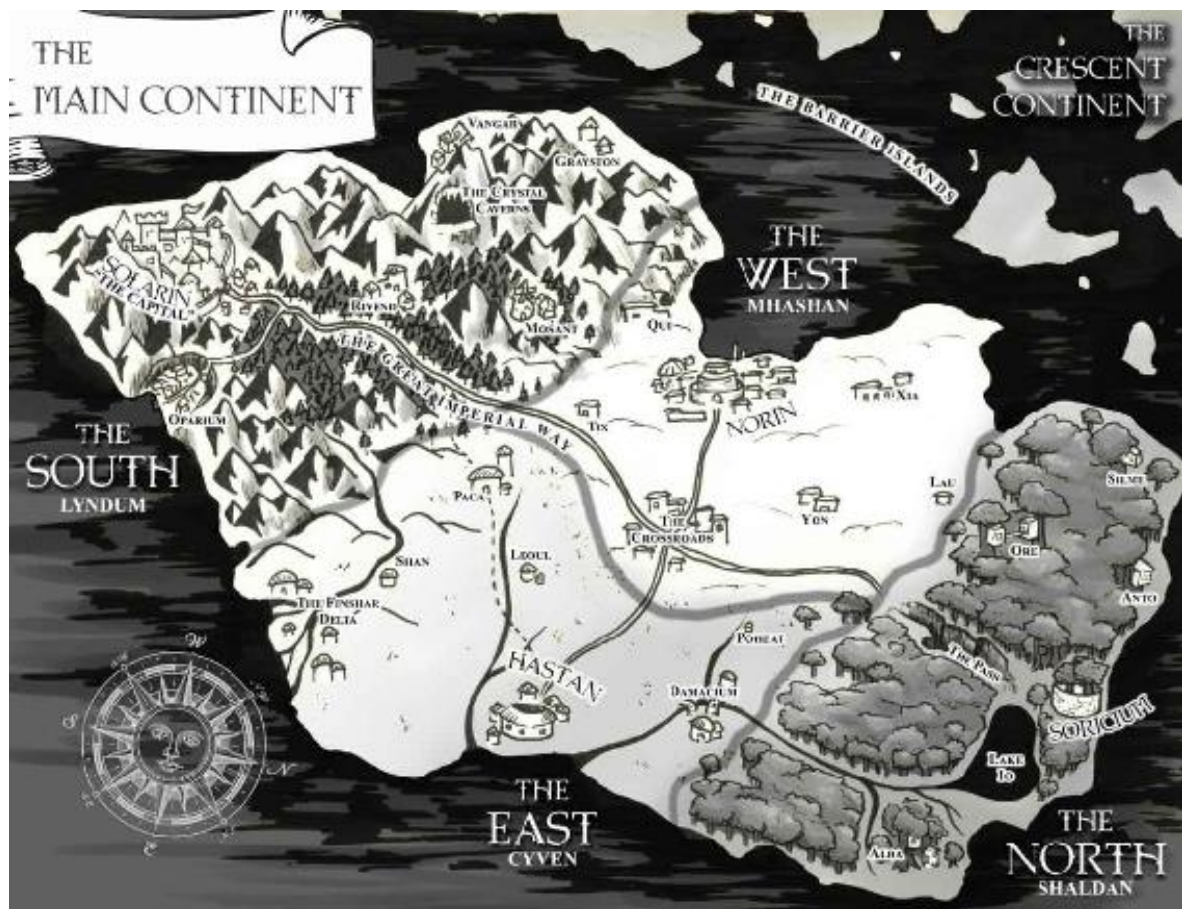
Clarification Word(s): —

**High Level Discipline: Narro** (*Acts of the Mind*)

Secondary Word(s): Hath (*Activate Communication Mark*), Samasha (*Awaken the Words*)

Clarification Word(s): Loreth (*Imprint a Communication Mark*)

## MAP OF SOLARIS



## SEHRA'S MAP OF THE WORLD





# THE STORY OF DIA

## THE FOREST STAR

DIA WAS BORN when a falling star was caught in the boughs of the tallest tree in Soricum. As she fell, the branches swayed and shook, bestowing life and a mortal form on her. Her skin was made of the bark of the tree, and her hair shone with the godly stardust still captured within it.

She healed the sick and taught the first clerics in Soricium how to use the earth to make salves, potions, and poisons with the knowledge the gods blessed her with. She showed how to craft the first sky cities, cutting through the branches with a magic axe bestowed on her by the Goddess Yargen and rebuilding them effortlessly. She carved Lake Io, the reservoir for all of the North's fresh water.

However, as time went on, Dia began to feel distanced from the changing people.

Their magic was far less potent than hers, and some were born without it at all. Dia vowed to find a way to ensure the magic of her people remained. Before she wandered into the jungles of Shaldan in search of the wisdom of the gods, she left behind two things to her people.

The first was her daughter, the first Chieftain, born from a seed of what was now known as the Mother Tree.

The second was her axe. When Dia departed, her daughter sealed the axe away, vowing that none were of pure enough body and mind to use it other than Dia herself.

Some say that Dia truly found the wisdom of the gods in the jungles and she continues to wander them to this day. That her power was so great she found the antidote to life's greatest poison: death.

The last time someone claimed to see the woman, Dia looked no older than any prior time. The stars still shone in her hair, her skin remained firm and weathered like the bark of the tree she came from.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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MY ORIGINAL FICTIONPRESS READERS—I don't know if any of you will see this... but if you're someone who was there from the start, I'm so excited to finally share the "second part" to the story I began with you years ago. Thank you for believing in me then, so I could give you this now.

COUNTLESS OTHER AUTHORS, BLOGGERS, AND READERS—I may not call you out by name here (because I can be wretched at remembering names, and acknowledgements can only be so long). But know that I realize how blessed I am to grace your inboxes, your social media timelines, and your shelves. Just because you aren't listed here doesn't mean you aren't important to me—doesn't mean I don't recognize the support you give me. Thank you for letting me be a part of this community.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ELISE KOVA

**[CLICK HERE](#)** to view a full list of Elise Kova's novels on Amazon.

IN HER PAST lives, she has graduated from an MBA program, lived in Japan for a bit, and worked for a Fortune 500 technology company. However, she finds herself much happier in her current reincarnation as full-time author. When not writing, she can usually be found playing video games, drawing, watching anime, or talking with readers on social media. She's happy to call Saint Petersburg, Florida, her home, but is always looking forward to her next trip.

She invites readers to get first looks, giveaways, and more by subscribing to her newsletter at:

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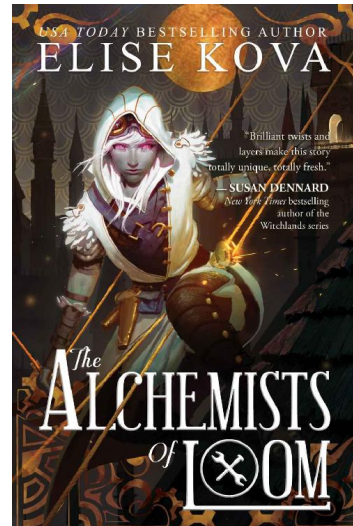
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