

# **Lacryma**

Skyshader



**Chapters**

Prologue ..... 5

Chapter 1 ..... 11

Chapter 2 ..... 17

Chapter 3 ..... 23

Chapter 4 ..... 29

Chapter 5 ..... 35

Chapter 6 ..... 41

Chapter 7 ..... 47

Chapter 8 ..... 53

Chapter 9 ..... 61

Chapter 10 ..... 67

Chapter 11 ..... 73

Chapter 12 ..... 79



# Prologue

Something grabbed the child and the soldiers pursued. Flavius and Theodore held their torches above their crested helmets. Their breathing was punctuated by water dripping above.

The child screamed. It must be a crocodile. Flavius clutched his spear. Crocodiles were only native to the province of Noein, but it was not beneath a wealthy patrician to release one in Thanatopolis' sewers.

Flavius waved his torch in the never-ending darkness. Arches decorated with gorgon heads greeted his tired eyes. Emperor Constantius had built the capital's sewers to complement the city's aqueduct and possibly to murder those he deemed undesirable. Flavius hoped that getting lost would not get him on the list of those Constantius had erased.

"The child must be dead by now. Let us turn back, while we still remember the way we came in," said Theodore. The man had fought in more battles than Flavius' own age. At seventy summers, the older guard must have lived through the fall of the Tiarmat Empire in his youth. Flavius asked him numerous questions on that cataclysmic event, one that the Medean Emperor wished to reverse.

"We must offer closure to the parents," said Flavius.

"Let the Vigiles take care of the issue. This is no work for Excubitores."

Flavius' shoulders began to feel the weight of his scaled armor and greaves. He had worn it for sixteen hours.

"We must press on," said Flavius.

Water thrashed in front of them. They raised their lances. Crocodiles were ambush predators. Knowing them, the beast would first sink beneath the waters and lunge at them. That was when its teeth would meet scale armor and steel.

Except, nothing came. Flavius and Theodore could not see a single reptilian retina glittering in the stream.

“It is afraid. Let us return. It has learned fear,” said Theodore.

Theodore screamed. Flavius shed his torch’s light behind him. There was a body. A man ridden with jaundice floated, his face petrified by horror. Blood ran from his forehead. Flavius shrieked. Whatever killed the man had crunched the upper part of the skull and emptied its inner contents.

*What kind of beast only feeds on the brain?* thought Flavius.

Theodore took three steps backward.

“We must leave now!” said Theodore.

Flavius agreed. They ran. The Emperor had to be informed. The entirety of the Excurbitores had to be sent down to the sewers to investigate. Perhaps that man Claradore would know something.

Tunnel after tunnel appeared before their eyes. Left turn, right turn, forward. They saw the same arches over and over. Was the entrance always so far?

“Stop! Stop! This is not the way we came from,” said Flavius.

“You mock me! We must keep moving!”

Flavius’ hair raised itself. Shivers crawled on his spine. Another corpse.

It was the child that had disappeared. His tattered clothes struggled to cover the bruises inflicted on him. The poor sod suffered the same fate as the man from earlier. Flavius was old enough to remember the last time he saw a child’s boy in the streets of Thanatopolis. The plague of Anastasian had taken old and young to the Gates of the Underworld. The ugly blemish on his cheek was a reminder of his triumph against the disease.

An old woman floated next to the child. The same injury as before.

“The Goddess be damned! How many are there?” said Flavius.

He should not have asked that question. A third body appeared, this time covered in maggots. The smell of death permeated the stagnant air.

“A creature could not have done this,” said Theodore. Flavius nodded in agreement.

“You are correct. A crocodile’s meal can last for weeks.”

“Who else then?”

Theodore rummaged through his beard styled in the manner of the Rauthengardian nobility.

“A butcher of men...” said Flavius.

“That is good news.”

Flavius shot Theodore a dumbfounded look.

“We can bring him to justice and make a name for ourselves, Flavius,” continued Theodore.

Flavius imagined the Emperor’s reward for bringing such a vile being to court. They could have statues of them commissioned by the finest artists in the Empire. Their pension could double no triple from this deed. Flavius would be able to afford a villa from his wife, Drusilla. They would retire from the capital’s noise and farm cabbages.

“We shall be rich!” said Flavius.

“A criminal cannot hope to win against two Excubitores,” said Theodore.

No man could hope to defeat an Excubitores in single combat. Only the elite Elysian Vodrath Ansar and the Rauthengardian Hearthguards could compete with the best of the Empire’s foot soldiers.

Theodore went on ahead, vaulting over the corpses. Flavius followed suit. It was not his intent to spend a night in this murderer’s haven. They would drag the vermin’s hide from his den and expose his vile deeds to the populace. If they were lucky enough, the Emperor would grant them a public execution. Flavius’ blood grew excited at the thought of seeing the butcher of men’s head fly across the Hippodrome. The Medean crowd’s applause was bliss to his ears.

A screeching hiss interrupted their run. Flavius froze, his legs struggling to obey his mind. In front of them stood a mockery of a human head attached to a long neck. The thing extended its seemingly human tongue towards them.

His grandmother had told him the tale of the Hydra, this being the Magi had created for their wars during the Age of Magic. It could not be true. The Age of Magic had ended a millennium ago. All Hydras should be extinct.

Flavius' lance shook uncontrollably in his hands. The unmistakable sign that magic had returned stood before his very eyes.

"For Emperor Ralens!" bellowed Theodore as he threw his spear at the creature. It caught the projectile with its teeth which now imitated a human sneer. Bloodthirsty and intelligent were the two attributes you did not want in a predator.

The Hydra splintered the lance in two.

Theodore charged, bashing his shield against the head. The monster snarled in pain.

"Come, Flavius!" yelled Theodore.

Hydras had reappeared. To Flavius, the Goddess' teachings were clear: the day the Magi returned signalled the beginning of the end. The Apocalypse dawned on mankind. He had to tell his wife and children.

"Flavius! Flavius!"

"I am coming! I am coming!"

Theodore unsheathed his sword. He hacked the abomination's head. Blood splattered on Theodore's chainmail armor. A strident whistling erupted from the lump that became the monster's head. Flesh sprouted from the morbid injury. Two new heads emerged. Theodore cursed. *Mother help me*, thought Flavius.

"Flavius! Get your arse over here at once!"

"Yes!"



Flavius took a step forward before turning away from Theodore. His legs carried him away from the duel. Behind him, steel collided with teeth. It was not the duty of men to face this vile creature.

Flavius reared his head. Blood seeped from Theodore's upper torso. The Hydra picked the Excubitores with its tentacles. Theodore's legs flailed helplessly. His helmet fell in the bloodied waters. A loud crunch reverberated through the sewer's corridors. Bone snapped. The beast opened its human mouth and bit its prey's head. Theodore's headless torso fell in the waters.

Flavius screamed. He ran into utter blackness, crying out the Goddess' name.



# Chapter 1

A finger could be a harpoon. Thinking about it that way gave the Faith an aneurysm. Nix knew that much. Yet the Faith seldom showed their white cloaks around Baba's abode. Baba claimed that was a good thing, thought Nix as her index finger melted, taking the color of blood. What would the Faithful say if they saw what her and Baba did every day.

*Lance.* She felt her blood twirl, reshaping itself.

"The blood is the quill. The body is the canvas," once said Baba the first time Nix had tried it. Had she been four or five summers when Baba noticed it? Not that it mattered now.

She concentrated. Her blood tickled as it extended again and again. This tingling sensation that she could never part with...It drove her to heightened plane, one she had hoped more people could understand. The red filaments spliced from her fingers similar to a paint stroke. *Beautiful.* Helices, foliums, butterflies. They espoused every form her mind commanded. Nix felt it. Touching the air and feeling its warmth and dampness. Air was made of water. What took the Faith hundreds of years to accept had been discovered by the Magi during the Age of Magic, Baba's funniest story. Nix laughed, causing the filaments to vibrate in a hectic manner.

*Stop.*

The filaments froze. She took a heavy breath. Slowly, her blood consolidated, the air becoming less palpable. She could no longer feel the water within it. Filaments which had been watery a few seconds ago were now as thick and solid as wood. Entwined with each other, they formed a tip, the same she had imagined when reading the tale of Regnant the Dragonslayer whose spear had pierced The Last Dragon. In her case, her finger was the lance. She brandished it high in the air, yelling from the top of her small lungs.

"Behold! The Lance of True Redemption," she yelled. Her high pitched voice making a poor imitation of what Regnant's voice would have sounded a millennium ago. The crows perched on the tree next to her vacated their perch on the spot. A squirrel ran between her legs, chased by a ravenous fox. Her remaining audience, a pair of the

ugliest toads she had ever seen croaked roughly. In her mind, they were applauding as they always had. *Drats! Too loud!* She bowed before the two amphibians, pretending to collect tips.

“Do not fear, ladies and gentlemen as the show has merely started. And now for the encore!”

With her bloody spear, she struck at the stream she visited every week. Orange bellied salmon, blue mackerels and black dotted trouts. Baba had five recipes for each type of fish found in the river. Today, Nix’ interest was not in any of those but the large catfish she had been stalking for the past week. It had gained a feet since she last saw it. Just thinking about broiling it on Baba’s pan made her salivate. Nix already imagined its tender flesh roasting with ginger, thymes and black pepper being deposited on her hungry tongue.

Her finger had missed. She cursed. Baba would have slapped her wrist. She swore in the Imperial Tongue instead, Baba saying it was more acceptable than in the Classical Tongue.

She attacked the waters again. Another miss, the clearing’s quietude now perturbed by her screams and water splashing. Seconds, minutes passed, her nemesis dodging her every attempt to harpoon it. Nix never thought a fish’s brain could allow it to be so nimble. *I need more.* Plunging it underwater, her right hand’s index finger now liquified. Its blood spun. Salt, small traces. She could touch it within the water molecules. It was the exact same texture as the one Baba used to season her plates. The filaments tied themselves to create another lance.

Nix smiled. She struck with the first lance. The fish dodged. Her second spear struck. She felt it. Blood and flesh on her fingers. Nix pulled her finger out of the water, the catfish’s body dangling from her harpoon. Her blood twirled again, hauling her prize back to the river’s banks. The catfish was brought to her arms, still flailing in a helpless manner. Nix took a whiff of it. Seawater, a taste she had the pleasure of masking with Baba’s spice collection.

Something tugged at her dress. Of all the animals she had come to know through her eleventh summer in the Known World, a bear cub was one of the most adorable. They were both of the same height and its brown eyes screamed pity.

“Are you not a cute one? I’m really sorry but this fish is for Baba and I... I can catch you a salmon if you want, little bear.”

The bear sniffed at the catfish, widening its eyes akin to a young puppy. *No, no, no, not for you!* She raised the catfish high in the air, causing the cub to whimper.

She started walking, the cub insisting on following her.

“No, stay. Stay! I can’t bring you home!” she said. The bear kept walking at the same pace as her.

A threatening roar behind her paralyzed her. One which dominated the forest. One which instilled fear upon her primordial senses. The legend Baba had told her spoke of the Men of Old who hunted giant versions of these beasts, one strike for their claws being enough to kill an adult. Nix had drawn a few of them after the scary bedtime stories. They had always been black with crimson eyes, oozing maleficence. Sometimes, she even gave them wings to make them as terrifying as the dragons she often confused them with. Nix wet herself. Her mind chastised her for her stupidity. She should have known. She should have known. Baba would scold her without remorse. Run. Run. The only option was to run.

She had never bolted as fast as she did, catfish in hands. The creature behind her bellowed, its ghastly cries echoing ever closer. Deers, pigeons and insects fled before her path. An earthquake seemed to rumble before her, its tremors approaching. Deafening wakes erupted in the river. Nix knew it outswam and outran her. Yet, her legs disobeyed her soul at this very moment. She could smell it, its animalist rage imbued with a desire to protect something dear to it just as Baba would shield her from any harm. *The luck that cub has.*

The path back to Baba’s house now looked long and infinite. She could sense the thing’s raucous breath behind her. A tree. It could not climb trees. The second bright idea her brain could think of today. She barreled her way to the top of a tree, her catfish thrown at the roots. All those years at climbing the Hollow Tree next to Baba’s house paid off after all. Nix perched herself atop a branch, watching her pursuer, this mass of brown and reddish fur with claws as sharp as shark’s teeth. Its stench as unbearable. Feces mixed with fish and a faint trace of wildberries. It growled at her with utmost contempt. Baba had once told her that humans were the most feared species on this world. By seeing this monster, Nix realized that mankind was a terrible liar.

It circled the tree, snarling and grunting. In Baba's stories, humans had always been the hunters not the hunted. That never made any sense to her. Humans were but bugs to the thing that pursued her. Her ancestors would have been displeased. Only the Goddess was aware if it was cursed with the fatal rage, the same possession that afflicted the deer Baba ended a year ago. They were not allowed to eat these fallen animals. The demon could jump hosts as Baba explained to her. All one could do was burn the husk.

She wanted to cry, curling herself into a ball. It started to get cold. She should have brought the new cloak Baba made for her on her birthday. What if she could not return? Would Baba go look for her? Would her puppy, Spartak, still wait for her at the doorstep? It still cried each time she shut the toilet door in front of it. Her bowels also screamed at her to relieve them. *Just take the fish and leave me alone! I want to go home.* She spat at the colossal monster, not even inconveniencing it in the slightest. She dared not imagine Baba's fury should she return past her curfew time.

Her bowels beckoned again. An idea Baba would have scolded her for hit her. Raising her tunic, she peed from the branch she sat on, ensuring the stream would trickle down on her adversary's fur. *How do like that, spawn of the Brood Mother?* If she was to depart from the Goddess' land today, she would at least make Baba proud of her struggle. The monster sniffed its own skin, growling in disgust. It clawed at her tree, unable to reach her position. Nix' tears of worry became tears of joy.

The creature seemed to listen to her or rather it grew tired of her whimpering before retreating. It emitted a nonchalant growl. She listened to each of its heavy steps. Only when she could no longer smell its foul odor nor hear other animals fleeing its might did she climb down her tree. *Bless the Goddess!* Nix breathed a sigh of relief.

The sun had begun to set, painting the forest in an orange hue. Nix walked akin to a revenant home, the owls and cardinals not chirping back at her today. On other days, she would frolic like the heroes she read about in fairy tales, chanting with the robins and frogs she encountered. Once, she had even kissed a frog, hoping to get a prince out of it. The next day, her lips had swollen to a comical degree. Baba had slapped her own forehead when Nix had told her the frog's color, forbidding her to touch any bright colored amphibian in the future.

Her feet kicked a few pebbles on the trail which still at some occasions showed the name of the Sarvitarian engineer or governor who helped maintain it. It had been useful to learn the Imperial Tongue.

“Baba, why do I have to learn two languages?” Nix had asked.

“The Classical Tongue is for the civilized and the Imperial Tongue is for the uneducated,” Baba had replied.

Smoke rose from Baba’s hut. Not so far away laid the village of Miroconium where Baba bought her books and where all the people her age lived. And further away were the two cities of Thanatopolis and Metarexia, places where one could contemplate their smallness according to Baba. The princesses and princes she had heard from in fairy tales lived there. Them, their beautiful costumes and the adventures the songwriters and poets wrote about in abundance.

“Baba, can I go there when I am older?” Nix had asked.

Baba would hug her with a smell reminiscent of home. Why Nix could not address her as Mother was beyond her. Baba would then open the encyclopedia the Sarvitarian Empire wrote on Thanatopolis during its rejuvenation, detailing with lavish hand drawings the monuments and landmarks from the Hippodrome to the Palace Complex. Why could Baba and she not live in this city was beyond her as well?

“I am too old to live next to emperors and empresses. Handling one in my home was enough for me,” said Baba.

“But Baba, doesn’t the Emperor owe you a favor?”

Baba had cackled at that suggestion, not remembering the date when she saved a Sarvitarian Emperor from certain demise. It had been Emperor Vitiatus and if Nix had learned anything during her history lessons, it was that emperor died two hundred years ago. Who knew humans could live as long as Baba? Even Baba herself said that the average human being was lucky to be able to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary.

“The Emperor grew old as we all do, Nix. Do not think too much about life in the city. It is not a matter of how but when you will go there, my gold coin,” said Baba.





## Chapter 2

“You are late,” said Baba who was waiting at the door, spatula in hand. Only when they visited Miroconium was it that Nix noticed that it was out-of-the-ordinary that a house could stand on mushrooms or that one could cook these mushrooms without the building collapsing on itself. The other houses she saw in the village used bricks instead of wood, a strange decision for Nix. Baba had explained to her that the people there feared fire, another oddity for Nix to hear. Why fear fire when she could hold it in her hands to light candles?

“I saw it! The mother bear!” answered Nix as she smelled the broccoli stew that came from the chimney. Her stomach rumbled.

“The mother bear!?! You bratty gold! What were you doing near that? It is its breeding season for them!” said Baba.

“I was fishing,” Nix said, pointing to the catfish she had recovered. She was expecting to be scolded for a full day, condemned to reread the events leading to the separation of the Sarvitarian Empire into the Tiarmat and the Medean Empire.

Baba slapped the top of Nix’ head before taking her into her arms. Much to her surprise, Nix was sure she could see a tear from in the corner of Baba’s left eye which was blue whereas the other brown eye glowered. Baba would never let her mention this again. Like in the animal world, softness could be interpreted as weakness. Nix had read as much from the authors of the Regnassian and Sarvitarian eras. “Do not do this to me again. You are not her. Bring Spartak with you the next time. He is old enough to know.”

“But I can use magic! If you show me a new...”

Baba whisked her fingers. Nix had been too loud. Someone from the village could have heard her. Why this could be an issue, Nix did not know. The only thing she wanted was for Baba to teach her that spell.

“That is too dangerous for you, my treasure,” said Baba.

“I am old enough!”

Baba raised her voice. Somehow it trembled just like every time she spoke about her, the other girl. “No! She said the same thing too! She said she was old enough...Oh children these days!” said Baba. Nix now swore she saw tears on Baba’s rugged face, a visage on which age had laid its work but had not completed it. It was a face which the villagers said had not changed in decades. Perhaps Baba had found that sacred Fountain of Youth Regnant the Dragonslayer had died seeking.

“But I am not her! I am not that man Claradore you keep complaining about either! You know that Baba!” Claradore. A name she had gotten used to hearing throughout her life. Was he her papa? Baba had never answered that question. He too had lived with Baba for some years. Claradore had to be her papa. Nix was jealous of his exploits, him having mastered the blood harpoons when he was but a year younger than her. Baba would always console her saying he had an advantage.

“The Age of Magic is Claradore’s home,” said Baba when she was not ranting about him bringing another child to the house. Nix had argued that more children meant that more people could aid with her chores. It seemed Baba spent her days riding a broom or collecting berries and mushrooms. Surely she did not mind more helpers seeing how the dishes accumulated in the kitchen.

“I know you are not her nor him...You are you...My little gold coin...” said Baba. *Has she always looked sad when talking about them?* At night, Nix would sneak out from her bunk bed to salvage food only to find Baba crying while muttering their names. *What did they do to Baba?* Baba never talked about them no matter how obstinate Nix asked, a maze of secrets she harbored.

All Nix could guess was that they were also taught in the arts by Baba with Claradore being the most talented. Had they even lived all together at the same time? Perhaps not. The other spot on the bunk bed had been salvaged to build a chair long before Nix’ time. The other girl and Nix had been the same: brought here as babies. On another hand, Claradore found Baba. Baba said only women sought her. In fact, Claradore was aware, before he met her, that Baba was a Magi. The sole possession that remained of him at Baba’s house was that notebook in which he drew places Nix had never heard of. From floating palaces high in the skies to warriors riding dragons, Claradore’s sketchbook was something to behold, an imagination capable of generating an entire universe. And then there were the spiders. To Nix, the exactitude of Claradore’s drawings or rather his obsession with a spider’s anatomy was bewildering. There was this passion and melancholy from the way he depicted their eight

eyes and their mouths. Maybe he had been hired to illustrate the books Baba gave to her. It would make a good story.

“Then, show me how to do it. I want to make that bear run away like you did with those wolves! I will be able to protect you and Spartak the next time those wolves come to the farm,” said Nix.

Baba breathed a sigh of exasperation. “The Goddess damn you children, making this old woman reveal all her secrets one at a time... I will show it to you, on one condition: that you skin me another coat for the winter.”

Nix jumped around like a giddy child. Finally, she was going to learn it. The wolves raiding their farm yelped much the first time Baba did it, morphing her entire body into the semblance of a red armored knight with shield and bloodied lance. Nix had applauded for almost an hour, begging Baba to teach her that spell.

“Yes! It’s a promise...What is there for supper? I am hungry,” said Nix.

“Salt your fish and put it away in the kitchen. I made some pork ribs to go with the broccoli stew.”

There were three knocks on the old bamboo door. *A customer?* They always came at night. As if they were ashamed of it. Nix never understood why. She was about to head to her bunk bed, the sound almost causing her to slip on that one uneven step Baba had built out of spite.

“You will understand as you grow older,” simply said Baba. The door opened, revealing a girl not much older than Nix. If she had to guess, the girl would be at most fifteen. Unlike Nix, her skin was not as tanned. *Not an Elysian, like me.* In addition, she wore earrings shaped in the form of doves. *A believer.* Maybe after the ceremony, Nix would ask her where to buy those.

“How much?” asked the girl, her green eyes betraying her wariness.

“Twelve drachmas,” said Baba. The same lie she told for the past year.

The girl clasped Baba’s hands. “I can’t afford this. Please.”

“Go home, I am not offering this service anymore,” lied Baba. Why did Baba have to lie? Nix knew it was related to the Faith. The Goddess forbade it for a reason she could not pick up. Yet Baba held the ceremony at least four times a year.

“Please! You have to understand! I had no choice! He forced me! Please! Please! Please! You are the only one who does this!” pleaded the girl as she put herself on her knees before Baba. The few times Baba became a Goddess to these girls.

Baba began closing the door. “You are putting all of us at risk, girl. If the Faith finds out about this...”

The girl put her foot at the door’s hinge. “No! Please! The bishop! The bishop sent me! I-I had no choice. I-I couldn’t refuse him.”

“The bishop?” Baba said, her hand placed on her forehead.

“It is true, madam! I swear by the Goddess! Please! You have to help me! I cannot live with this!”

Baba groaned. She always ended up yielding and Nix knew it. Bargaining was never her strong suit. None of the lies managed to hide the truth: Baba would always do it, free of charge. “Grab the silphium, my little gold coin,” said Baba to Nix.

Nix opened a jar of herbs. The plant she was looking for had yellow flowers and stumpy leaves. On a normal day, Baba would extract its sap as odiferous as it was savourous. She had an exquisite recipe involving sauteed the plant to make the stalks crusty and crunchable. Nix tried her best to hide her annoyance at the herb being used on a complete stranger, an expensive one on top of it. Legend has it that the Sarvitaurian Emperors kept a cache in their treasuries. During the last days of the Tiarmat Empire, the plant was as valuable as gold.

Baba boiled the plant, telling her client to take off her clothes. Sometimes they screamed. A lot. Once, a middle-aged lady cried throughout the entire night. Nix thought she had lost her hearing from the ordeal. This is why she had to gag them while dodging the flurries of kicks and nail swipes. How one could strike the people that they asked for help was beyond her. She hoped this one would miss all of her hits, her last bruise taking months to heal.

The girl was laid down on a fur mat made of deer hide. Nix gave her a spoonful of soup, in the hopes that this would soothe prior to the ceremony. She could hear the girl's frenetic heartbeat from here. Why were other women as anxious as this during the service?

"You will understand as you grow older," said Baba again. *Every time. but I am old enough now. I should know.*

Silphium. In the simmering pot, it smelled like Baba or Nix associated it with Baba. She did not know what came first. Nix never sniffed her own mother. She had assumed every mother smelled of silphium. Fifteen minutes under high heat were needed to create the concoction.

"What is your name, girl?" said Baba.

"Hippolita," said the girl. *Typical name of the Imperial Tongue.*

"How old is the bishop?" said Baba.

"Seventy two," said Hippolita. Baba winced in utter disgust. Seventy-two was the highest answer Nix had ever heard. *Aren't large numbers a good thing?*

By the time the recipe sizzled, Baba collected two cups in a bowl.

"Will it hurt? Please tell me that it won't," asked the girl.

"Yes," said Nix who seized the girl's legs. *Please don't kick me in the face.*

Baba poured the bowl into Hippolita's mouth. Her customer gagged in an instant, her body contorting itself in demonic violence. Baba restrained her arms while her legs gyrated and flailed, Nix's arms aching in pain. The screams. Nix rolled her eyes. The part she absolutely adored was upon them. The girl let out wails that ruptured through the small house, shaking a younger Baba's portrait hung on the walls. Wails so strident that they could have burst the cracked windows. Wails so unholy even wolves and grown bears dared not approach the house at night. Nix wanted to slap the girl. *I am definitely losing my hearing for this.* She held on in spite of the throbbing pain in her shoulders. They spent ten minutes. Ten excruciating minutes holding their client.

Pee. It was all over Nix' face. She was thankful anything solid had not come out of the girl unlike the previous ones. Her hands craved for a towel. Hippolita's spasms had been relentless. The hot bath could not come any sooner.

The violent cries stopped when blood leaked from Hippolita's lower parts. *It's over. It's finally over.* Nix felt her grip loosen up.

"Do not look, Hippolita! It is not for the faint of hearts," said Baba.

Baba gestured her to bring a towel. Hippolita was drenched in sweat, blood and urine. Another mess for Nix to clean up. *Maybe Baba should stop giving the service after all.* She grabbed the mop and began swiping the desecrated floor. The entire house would continue to stink for the next week, Baba asking her to buy some perfume at Miroconium every time.

"It is done, girl. Go home and tell the other women to not come here again," said Baba. Another lie. *Why do you have to lie again Baba? I don't understand.*

## Chapter 3

Baba was sewing another tunic for her. She had acquired some red silk from the village, at a reasonable price, the cherry on top of the cake. How was a question that Baba always teased her about. Maybe it came from a princeling's tomb, an answer which would always frighten Nix who had a total of seven outfits, all made by Baba, some of the fabric even lasted her entire childhood.

"Do you want a motif on it?" said Baba. The patterns and embroidery Baba made were out of this world. Nix looked at the Tiarmat hydra on her robe, its five heads intertwined with one another. It seemed to hiss with the energy of despair, a struggle long lost. The inspiration had been obvious: the famous painting where the Molochian centaur was locked in a fateful battle with the hydra who wrapped its venomous fangs on its enemy's limbs. Nix admired how all of the heads expressed their anger and demoralization in a different way. She had little to no sympathy for the centaur who had willingly ventured into the hydra's den. *The hydra has children too, like the mother bear. If someone went into my nest, I would attack them too.*

"A phoenix. Can it be a phoenix this time?" said Nix.

Baba nodded, tucking her under her bed cover. "A phoenix it will be then. Have you taken a liking to the Medean Empire now, my gold coin?"

"I want something else than a hydra. I have already five tunics with hydras."

"It is a shame the Tiarmat no longer exists."

That answer always disappointed Nix. The Tiarmat Empire, one of the successors of the Sarvitarian Empire who authored much of the encyclopedias she devoured, gone before she was even born. Baba told her about the times when the legions still patrolled the imperial roads next to Miroconium, the days when she still received shipments of grain from the provinces now occupied by the Cachalots. Back then, cities did not need walls. Children could play outside the makeshift palissades without meeting a single Molochian. In the golden days of the Sarviatarian Empire, Baba had travelled extensively, some of the dishes Nix ate in came from Persiphon, other utensils were forged at Cyclonia, now ruled by the Vyrmogothians. *How lucky Baba was lucky to have lived under the Sarvitarians' protection.*

Baba had told her the tales of the first time the Known World faced the Molochians. It had been the only time she agreed with the Faith. Molochians, the Scourge of the Goddess, men who were drawn with such grotesquery in Nix' books that she got nightmares for three consecutive days after reading that chapter. They were depicted as horned devils with teeth larger than the mother bear's, their skin as red as the Medean phoenix and their eyes devoid of pupils. It was then that Nix noticed how the lack of eye contact could sour any first impression.

The novels spoke about these men who ate children, slaughtering all before them. One of the greatest sections Nix had ever read described how all barbarian people: Cachalots, Rauthengardians, Clovians, Domaceans and Vyrmogothian banded together with the Tiarmat and Medean Empires, clashing with the invaders during the Battle of the Megidollaeen Plains. Even the Elysian Empire from which she was supposedly from, sent contingents. So much of Nix' time had been spent drawing sketches of that titanic struggle for the waning empire's survival, works of art that Baba framed in her own room.

Of course, Nix could never hope to compete with Claradore's skills. A single of the mandibles that man drew had more details than any of the hydras Nix showed to Baba with enthusiasm.

"Baba! I'm never going to be as good as Claradore," Nix said.

Baba would always pinch her cheekbones. "You don't have to be as good as Claradore, my little treasure. Look at the variety of your drawings. All that boy ever drew was those accursed spiders," Baba said.

"Why did he only draw spiders?"

Baba would make this exaggerated sigh. Somehow despite her endless complaining about him, there was this ember that lit within Baba's pupils every time she talked about Claradore's aptitudes in the magical arts. Nix always imagined what her life could have been had both of them shared Baba's roof simultaneously. Having someone who bested her at both magic and art. A challenge she would welcome. With enough training, she could do it: surpass him and make Baba applaud her. Baba would then never complain about Claradore again.

"His...misfortunes made him obsessed with spiders. He has lived through ... exceptional events."



*You did not answer the question, Baba!*

One of these days, one of these days, she would ask Baba for the entire story on Claradore and that other girl who stayed here. Who were they really? How good was that other girl with magic? Were they Elysians too? Were they also as old as Baba right now? Why spiders of all things for Claradore? Did they also read the same books as her? What did they think about Regnant the DragonSlayer? Did they also want to save the Tiarmat Empire like she does? What were their favorite color? So many questions.

But the questions that Nix wanted answers to the most...Baba had also promised to talk about Nix' parents on her sixteenth's birthday. *Only five more years.* No matter how much Nix had insisted on that topic, Baba would always rebuke her, claiming that she was not old enough to understand. Sixteen. Baba had promised to bake her her favorite recipe for a cake, one she had not done in a century. Nix had seen it in the cookbook. Baba had called it the sponge cake, its secrets derived from the Unknown World itself. One had to mix eggs, mint, flour, sugar and pandan leaves, which could only be obtained from the fringes of the Elysian Empire in order to make this delectable fantasy that made Nix salivate intensively everytime she read the recipe. She could not wait to be sixteen.

"But the Last Tiarmat Emperor, Darnik! He can reclaim his throne like Regnant the Dragonslayer did!" said Nix.

Baba burst into a series of playful laughs, almost dropping the tunic she was working on. She rocked her chair with such force that Nix was worried that she might fall off.

"My gold coin, Darnik is not Regnant the Dragonslayer. The last Tiarmat Emperors were not the charming princes your books, written by the Medeans, claim them to be."

"What do you mean, Baba?"

"What if you were to write a book about yourself? Would you ever describe yourself as feeble, as incompetent, as a mere puppet to the generals and eunuchs who you are supposed to command? Of course not, my gold coin, trust me. I have had a Sarvitarian Emperor stay in this very room you now occupy. He too wrote himself like the fairest of all men, the most intelligent of all. He who lost while outnumbering Rauthengardians of all barbarians made himself as a fantastic general in his memoirs.

Oh the agony of having read that turd of a book he sent me as a thank you note,” said Baba.

It was Nix’ turn to start laughing. Baba had told her many stories of that Sarvitarian Emperor requiring her assistance to do the most basic of things from washing his bloodstained clothing, folding laundry to skinning a duck. The sight of Tiarmat, Medean, Sarvitarian Emperors being followed by a swarm of eunuchs attending their every need like a queen bee made her giggle. Once, Nix had the audacity to draw a dwarf acting as a toilet for an emperor. That drawing. It was the only masterpiece Baba helped her personally complete. It now hung next to what Nix assumed was a wedding portrait from the heyday of the Sarvitarian Empire.

“Maybe Darnik just needs the Goddess to help him expel the Rauthengardians from Metarexia...” said Nix.

“Ooooooh, I would not count of that woman...” said Baba.

“Why not? Doesn’t the Faith say she is almighty and the most powerful woman in history? The books say she can destroy dragons with lightning bolts. What can the Rauthengardians do against her?”

Baba stopped sewing. *Did I say something wrong?* She pondered looking at Nix’s room. Only then did Nix notice that she never cleared the cobwebs Baba had asked her to clean up yesterday. Somehow, she shared this bad habit with that man, Claradore, according to Baba. How did she not come to fear spiders like Baba and the girls in the village was a mystery even to Baba. Spiders, these allies that ate roaches and mosquitoes, waiting with tedious patience for prey to enter their domain. Spiders, these creatures that were not insects because they had eight legs instead of six. There was something admirable or rather elegant about that quality. Why run after your food when you could simply watch them from your bed while they inevitably land on your territory? *It is a smart way of hunting.*

“The Goddess...There is a lot of things the Faith’s scripture do not tell you. What can I tell you? She may be the strongest woman in the Known World but she will surely not help the girl we assisted that other day, nor the others,” said Baba.

“Why? Why doesn’t she help these women like you do? What is stopping her from doing it? She was there when the Rauthengardian deposed Darnik. Why was she not there in the Battle of the Megidollaeon Plains? Why did she let the Tiarmat Empire

fall? Why is she never there in the books when people need her? I don't understand. People always pray for her to be there!"

Baba touched Nix' braid, five-stranded, the same style as her own. The village women had told her that this fashion was outdated since the beginning of the Molochian invasions. Nix never paid much attention to that. She felt she looked like one of these women whom the artists of the Sarvitarian Empire's zenith loved to sculpt. Perhaps one day, a sculptor would ask to make a painted bust out of her similar to the hundreds she had seen at Miroconium. Moreover, her hairstyle was simple and pretty, why change it?

"Maybe you can go Metarexia and ask her yourself when you are older. You have read the books. Every year, the Goddess meets the Faithful at Metarexia during the Day of Humility," said Baba.

"If she is too busy, why can't someone else do it? Someone who can use magic?"

"You will find out when you grow older that no matter how strong you think you are, it will never be sufficient to save all of what you love. Such is life, my gold coin," said Baba.



## Chapter 4

Her arms melted first. She concentrated her thoughts around her very self. When one performed magic, it was imperative that the soul must resonate with the body. Baba had told her that much. *Breathe...Slowly...Relax* The first time, her body had been too stiff, preventing the magic from coursing through her veins. Nix heard the grass rustle on this uneventful morning. She no longer smelled the cow manure coming from the village. Curtains of red descended from her eyelids. The play had started. She felt her head melt. Voices, male and female whispered in her head. Some of them spoke in the Classical Tongue, others in the Imperial Tongue. There was one tongue, though, one elusive language which she had never deciphered. It always said one word. Three syllables.

To conduct magic was to travel through the plane of one's existence. Nix witnessed again the time Baba gave her a book on the Conquests of Magnavalon, where the modern day Clovians now occupied. She remembered how perplexed she had been seeing all these characters strung along that Baba made sounds with. To start with the Classical Tongue was to master all other languages, save that one tongue. It whispered again the word. *What does it mean?*

Her neck liquified, then her torso. Her legs supported nothing. She let them fade away as well. The sensation of being unaffected by gravity. Nix failed to describe it. She moved on the soil as swiftly as the deadliest vipers, as silently as a wolf stalking its prey, as naturally as a waterfall.

She flowed, wanting to become a river that followed its natural course. Her flesh went down hills, cascading upon pebbles and rocks, mice, beetles evading her current form. The limitations of a solid state befuddled her. A fact Nix had not accepted was that everyday people went on without being able to traverse the most simple of obstacles. Lock or not, doors could be defeated by going beneath them. All walls had holes and tears, created by years of decades of wear. Here, Nix could sashay between twigs, masquerade as a shadow, enter ants' nest. A sense of unattainable freedom. Freedom from the hardness of materials, freedom from tangible barriers. Nix laughed, her body not even being able to make a single sound at this very instant.

She swore. She cursed. She yelled. Nothing. Nothing but peace and the sound of nature calling. Nix heard all from the foxes doing their mating call, the larks and pigeons singing their odes from their balconies of branches to the cicadas conducting their symphonies by the use of their miniature timbals. As a liquid, the animal kingdom welcomed her with open arms like Baba did at home. Nix giggled, turning her form towards a glowing stream.

Diving into the river, water and blood became one. Nix closed what were her eyes, letting the stream rock her being. Her soul swayed upstream, downstream, left and right. A multitude of droplets massaged her body. If she had any worries coming into the river, they had been dissipated. Such was the uniqueness of merging one's existence with water, a fluid that was quintessential to life, One of the five elements according to Baba. The Faith said The Goddess created water from her saliva. All humans being children of the Goddess meant that all kissed their mother when drinking water. *How poetic.* It was in this mental state that Nix wondered if she had ever tasted her mother's water.

"Who is my mother?" Nix had asked Baba once. Baba's face was afflicted by such pain that Nix had never dared to bring up the topic again. It had been one of the rare times Baba's voice failed to find any words, similar to someone having stabbed her in the groin. The pain. Nix had never forgotten Baba's eyes as pitiful as a lost kitten's. Then, she had learned that adults could cry.

Mother. A word Baba had refused to let herself be referred to as. Nix had accepted that as a fact.

Father. Men never came to Baba's house. In fact, she had never spoken more than a sentence to any man. Buying bread and trading fur in the village were her only occasions to interact with them. Nix knew everyone had a mother and a father. Some children played with them games she had played with Baba.

"Who is my father?" she had asked Baba, hoping the answer would be Claradore.

"A putrid mess like Claradore and all men," answered Baba who would often cry out a man's name in her sleep, her voice ridden with righteous anger. Nix had heard the violent thuds when Baba kicked her bed's frame while cursing. From what she could guess, Baba's fairy tale wedding happened in a time when Baba could be imagined as young, a mental image Nix could never hope to form inside her head. Her charming prince plucked Baba's petals, gifting them to another flower, one less eloquent and less

ravishing, leaving only the thorns to Baba. Nix' intended name for Spartak had been his name. She would never forget how Baba berated that name for two long hours.

As for Claradore...A name Baba had wanted to teach her as the synonym of male disappointment. When Nix came to the village, she had been surprised to learn that this meaning was Baba's invention and not a current idiom.

"Was he a good magician?" she had asked Baba.

"The best, my gold coin. I have never seen anyone like him. The Known World thinks us Magi are extinct. Claradore is living proof The Faith has lied for centuries," said Baba.

"Then, he can teach me magic! He should know how to breath fire from my lungs like your books show!"

"And have you follow the same path of shame that he did? Not a chance, my gold coin, you are too valuable to this old woman," said Baba as she buried Nix 's head in her arms. "Losing another to the vices of magic...I do not know if I will have the strength to relive that."

Water thrashed around her. Something howled horribly. Her vision was confronted by a fox, its fur as bright as a sunrise. She felt herself enter its body through its tongue. Nix screamed. Nothing came out. The fox' squeals grew ever horrendous, their ringing screeching in what were her ears. Her body flailed, contorting itself in an abrupt manner. Lungs, throat, stomach, every fiber of the mammal's body absorbed her essence whether both of them approved of it or not. She did not understand. None of her books ever drew this scenario.

Nix saw a combination of black and red swimming before her eyes. Everything around her twirled violently. Her head spun. She struggled to maintain control. Control. Control of what, she asked. The world turned and turned at an increasing velocity and so did her soul and flesh within the fox' insides.

She awoke in a starry void. Galaxies and planets orbiting around her. Her hands. They had materialized. Nix touched her face. Skin. Solid flesh. *Where am I?* Her feet dangled in mid air, neither feeling cold nor tepid. No wind, no soil, no water, only emptiness greeted both her toes and her fingers.

A boy stood before her, a tarantula tattooed on his back, drawn in the same style as Claradore's.

"You have done it, my dear," said the boy in the Classical Tongue. An accent she had never heard. They were around the same age yet this feeling...She could not ascertain it but he seemed older.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"That is not important right now, my dear," he said, making a grin that managed to draw and repel her at the same time. *What do I make of this?* One step backwards. One step forward. Flee or approach. What did her body desire? Even Nix could not solve that dilemma. Seeing her reaction, the boy smiled in a tender way, one that copied Baba's kindness. He glowed, radiating this known homeliness that made her heart beat with anticipation. *A friend?* She took a step towards him.

"Do you know what you have even accomplished just now, my dear?" said the boy.

He spoke in riddles and she disliked riddles. "Why do you call me my dear and what are you babbling about?"

"You have yet to realize it, my dear Nix, but you have paved the way for our ultimate triumph."

"I don't understand, what are you talking about? And how do you know my name?"

"Breathe...Then open your eyes. You will see what the True Goddess has in store for someone as unique as you, my dear," said the boy. He clapped his hands, causing Nix' body to gasp for air. *It hurts.* Her lungs seared from the inside out, the boy lit a wildfire within them. She tried to breathe. The galaxies and planets hovering around her disappeared in a white flash while the boy fell apart, reduced to dust.

An orange paw greeted her eyes when she could open them again. Water. She was before the river again. Nix howled at her own reflection and so did the fox gazing back at her. *Impossible! How did this...* Her being swallowed by the animal. The boy's cryptic words. Astonishment and clarity clashed over her mind.

Nix showed her tongue and teeth. The fox followed. She raised a paw. The animal copied her move. What had transpired could not have been possible but reality now



disappointed her in another way. She made the fox lick its claws and wag its tail. *This... How? Why?*

*Drink.* Water tasted the same as a fox, somewhat upsetting her. With her new ears, the stream now seemed to roar within the confines of its bed. Even the shy rabbits and peaceful cicadas bellowed instead of making gentle sounds. Her mind could deduce even the distance to the nearer rabbit, a thought that would have never crossed her as a human. *Splendid! I must tell Baba about this!*

She ran. Treelines, bushes, protruding roots, all zoomed in front of the fox's eyesight. Her speed amazed her, being four to five times faster than when sprinting as a human. Nix ordered the fox to do joyous barks, having run around the river for an incalculable amount of time. Time. A concept she was sure animals had no idea of. Her mind could not tell her how many minutes nor hours she had spent loafing around in this body. She rolled on the trail, licking the mud off her fur, tasting mushrooms and berries. Baba forbade her to eat, chased after rodents as small as her hand. The ability to spot any mouse hidden in the densest vegetation baffled her.

Nix found herself resting on the banks of the river, her mouth panting in profusion, only growing alarmed when her eyes stared at the ending sunset. *How do I exit this?* The fox's heartbeat accelerated. Its legs and head convulsed, its mouth made dreadful sounds. Blood raced from one organ to another. Nix listened to it: the flow. She felt it anew. Nix had to become one with the water again. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to be ferried.

Before long, she found herself face down on cold sand with a sore throat. She coughed and vomited, spilling mucus all over herself. The rest of her body ached. Hands and feet tingled as she readjusted to having a physical body. Blood. Her nose bled. Baba would scold her again on top of returning to the house without her clothes. *I am in so much trouble. What will I say to her?*

Next to her, the fox rasped as if it was dying, vomiting in abundance. Never would she forget how fast it scurried away from her when it noticed her presence.



# Chapter 5

“Wake up! Wake up!” Baba said. Nix groaned. An orange light flared in her room, lighting Baba’s worried face. Nix had never seen her as alarmed as she was.

“What is going on?” asked Nix.

“Get dressed and stay in the house no matter what. Do not go outside, “ said Baba as she snuffed the candles.

“I don-t...”

Baba hugged her with such intensity that Nix’s bones could have snapped. *I can’t breathe.* The tender touch that patted her back every night returned. Nix did not understand. *What is going on? Why did you wake me up just to hug me?*

“Do you love me?” said Baba, her blue and brown eyes as luminous as a child’s.

“O-O-Of course!” said Nix. Baba’s teeth made the prettiest smile Nix had ever witnessed. To see Baba so happy made her night.

“I’ve never told you about your mother now did I?”

“I don’t need a mother! I have you!”

“I am glad, my gold coin.” She dropped something in Nix’ hands, a medallion. Dried blood covered a silver griffon. Actual silver. Nix assumed the ornament was as expensive as the entirety of Baba’s possessions. The writing on it, a tongue Nix did not recognize. She rotated the medallion to find a keyhole.

“It is written in the Elysian Tongue. Perhaps if you go to the Elysian Empire you will find answers on how to open it,” said Baba.

“I don’t want to go the Elysian Empire! I want to stay here with you! You told me we would go to Thanatopolis next year!”

Baba made the same expression as Spartak when it got injured. *Did I do anything wrong?* She gave Nix another hug, this one more passionate than the other. A hug that wanted to be reassuring through its desperation. Nix had never received this type of hug. She had expected Baba's embrace to bring this warmth and this courage that guided her against the monsters which hid under her bed. Cold. The word was insufficient to describe this hug. Nix' hair was raised. The temperature in the house had dropped by at least ten degrees. Had winter come this early this year? "Thank you, my gold coin. I love you too. Please, please hide in the house before I come back," said Baba, her voice cracking.

"This is bizarre, Baba. What is going on?"

"OPEN THE DOOR!" screamed a man's voice coming from the kitchen. Infernal knocks were heard, each pounding the wooden door with the aggressivity of a mad boar. Shoes and boots stomped the premises of Baba's abode.

"I am coming," said Baba. Nix sensed that Baba was struggling to form that sentence.

"I'll come with you! I need to get Spartak," said Nix.

"NO! YOU HAVE TO HIDE! STAY HERE AND DO NOT UTTER A SINGLE WORD. AM I CLEAR?" Baba screamed with the ferocity of the mother bear. In that instant, she commanded Nix's full obedience. In that moment, even the Medean Emperor could have bowed before her.

Nix wrapped herself in her drapes while Baba headed downstairs. Peering through the window, she saw an army of torches arrayed in front of the door. The Faith's dove banners were flown by Men of the Crucible or monks dressed up in soldiers' gear as Baba loved to call them. Men and women, their pupils glowing in the tranquil darkness, all armed with pitchforks and clubs. All looked at the door with the same intent as the mother bear. The girl Nix and Baba helped stood next to a man dressed in a formal attire. *What was her name again? I forgot.* Bruises and dried tears had found their way into her face which Nix could relate to. She had made the same expression when seeing the mother bear. That man. Nix had only seen his costume in encyclopedias relating to the Faith. Gold embroidery glittered under his torch. Unlike the other men, the Man in White remained calm and composed, his lips singing the Faith's hymns. Men of the Crucible flanked him, reciting verses of the Gospel. The pungent smell of incense invaded the air, as if Nix had stepped inside one the Faith's churches. *A prince or a cardinal?*

"I am here, what do you want," said Baba as she opened the door.

"WITCH! BABE KILLER! MAY YOU ROT IN HELL!" screamed a man. The other humans repeated the words in synchrony. Another spat at Baba's face. *What are they talking about? Baba is not a witch.*

"You people certainly know how to make friends," said Baba while wiping the saliva from her nose.

"You do not have the luxury for sarcasm, witch. Do you have any idea what sacrilege you have committed? An affront to the Goddess on MY holy land?" said the Man in White.

"Sacrilege? Everything is heresy to you Faithful! What I am accused of this time? Of shitting in my own toilet? Feeding my cows? Wearing a skirt? I do not have the time to entertain you lot. If you have any complaints, tell your Emperor, what was his name again? Ah Vitiatus! Tell Emperor Vitiatus, he owes me his life! That brat wouldn't be on the throne if I hadn't nursed him!"

"You are mad as they say. Emperor Vitiatus? That was two hundred years ago, witch! What kind of demon has possessed you to believe you saved a dead man?"

"She is a witch, Father, you have the evidence, burn her!" implored a Man of the Crucible, his eyes reddening like a rabid wolf.

"WITCH! BABE KILLER! DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!" echoed the crowd as they banged their pitchforks on the ground.

"SILENCE! We are not the savage Molochians but civilized beings, fellow citizens. What would we be without our morals and standards?" said the Man in White. The men and women stayed silent, looking at the Man in White the same way Nix looked at her favorite book. "Yes, we are the Faithful, the paragons of justice and goodness in the Known World, the harbringers of civilization, the light that shines through the eternal darkness, are we not? It is our responsibility, is it not? To show this witch the goodness of the Goddess, we shall grant her a fair trial. Let the Goddess decide if she is guilty!" said the Man in White. Nix sighed. The crowd exploded in frenzied applause, showering the apostle with incomprehensible praise and with prayers. "Seize her."

Two Men of the Crucible grabbed Baba's wrists with their bronze gauntlets. Baba attempted to bite one of them only to be jabbed in the stomach. Nix gasped, shuddering under her drapes. *Should I do something...What should I do? What can I do? But Baba told her to hide.* Nothing could bring her warmth. Everything froze when she touched it. She heard her own heart's pulses animated by a folly, one which caused her legs to shake faster than a woodpecker's pecks. *Leave us alone! We didn't do anything wrong!*

"In accordance to the fairest of all trials, The Goddess asks us to bring forth a witness to this witch's crimes. The Goddess be exalted! Today we are blessed by Her Eminence: a witness has agreed to testify against this vile fiend... Come, girl," said the Man in White to the girl Nix and Baba helped.

Nix saw that Baba glared at the girl, her eyes making this sort of silent accusation Nix had only seen when she had made a terrible mistake.

"Girl, have you truly witnessed it? This witch, has she murdered an unborn babe in front of your very eyes," said the Man in White, a wide grin creeping up on his face.

"It is true, Father," said the girl. The crowd uttered gasps of disapproval, raising their pitchforks. They hurled profanities at Baba, more spat at her. A Man of the Crucible struck Baba's face. *Stop it please!*

"Do you swear it? In the name of the Goddess who gave birth to us all?"

"I swear it, by the Goddess."

The crowd's insults grew louder and louder. Their mouths appeared to transform, bringing forth sharp and elongated teeth craving for blood. Bloodshot eyes gazed hungrily at Baba. The Men of the Crucible now looked like metallic hounds released from the far depths of the Underworld. Nix waited for the moment she would wake up to find herself in Baba's arms again. There were too many monsters in this nightmare and she was afraid.

"Guilty! GUILTY, my most pious citizens, is the Goddess' verdict! In all her wisdom, the Goddess has proclaimed this accursed witch guilty of murdering a babe in cold blood. Oh! The humanity! To think that a serial killer was living in our peaceful community! One that slaughters children! CHILDREN! CHILDREN! The most vulnerable of all! What is more important than the sanctity of a child's life? Oh! Goddess! Children of the Faith, we cannot possibly let such a monster live in

our faithful community, can we? No, no, no, you are all as intelligent as the Goddess wanted you to be. I hereby offer this witch the death penalty as the harshest and fairest punishment for her deeds,” said the Man in White

“What about the witch-spawn, milord? An Elysian. She lives inside the house. As far I know, she is capable of witchcraft too,” said the girl. Nix stopped looking through the window. *What do I do now?*

“NO! NO! NO! DON’T YOU DARE! It is me you want, not her! Grant her the dignity of life!” screamed Baba, her nails attempting to claw away at her captors. A stick was inserted into her mouth to silence her.

“Burn the house, let the witch-spawn join her corruptor in Hell. Mercy for the child tainted by paganism,” said the Man in White.

Baba hollered horrible bawls as they tied her to a tree. The girl pelted her forehead with a stone. Men of the Crucible landed blow after blow on Baba’s head. The sound of bones snapping. Nix shut her ears as she sprinted to the front door. She had to save Baba and Spartak. Nix went down the familiar spiral stairs, knowing that the third step had always been uneven. The marinated chicken Baba put on the kitchen table watched her try to unlock the door only to encounter a perverse resistance. *It’s jammed from the outside.* Nix banged it incessantly, screeching with deafening intensity. She had to save Baba. Smoke. There was smoke. Torches were flung at the house, the flames they ignited devouring the roof. She had to save Baba. Nix kept on hitting the door with her hands, feet, back, head. It would not budge. Above, a black mist consumed the chimney where Baba had taught her how to light a fire with magic. The flames consumed Baba’s portrait in the living room, one that portrayed her marriage when the Sarvatarian Empire was still whole. Nix’ hands and feet bled. Outside, Baba wailed when Nix heard projectiles hitting her body.

Behind Nix, the stairs she had came by disintegrated in a trail of ashes. Her bunk bed covered in soot crashed into the kitchen. The pillow she needed to fend off the darkness. Gone. The tunics Baba had knit for her in eight different colors. Turned into black powder. She inhaled the smoke, coughing at the destruction of what she had called home. Home, a thing some children in fairy tales did not possess. She had been lucky to have a place she had called home. Nix wept and wept as she kept battering the locked door with her wounded body parts. What was she to do? Her true mother’s medallion laid on the broken floor.

*No! Please! This is too cruel.* If she could save Baba, they could rebuild it. They would run. Far. Far away from the Man in White. Maybe near Thanatopolis where they could build a bigger house with a room for Spartak. She had to save Baba.

A blazing beam fell on her leg. Her upper body rolled in pain as the flames seared her flesh. The smell of burning skin and blood flooded her nose alongside the already overwhelming smoke. Her tongue tasted blood. *So that is how death smells like.* The sealed door stood before her. Impregnable, indestructible, undefeatable, condemning her to suffocate in the place where she had felt the safest. Nix hit it one last time to no avail. *Baba...I'm sorry.* Her eyes closed, resigning themselves to eternal slumber.

In her sleep, she felt someone grab her. Her eyesight fluttered, seeing a man burst through the door, a tarantula tattooed on his chest. Baba's body hung on the Hollow Tree, lifeless tears drying out on her maimed face. Perhaps Nix was waking up from the nightmare.

"If only I could have come sooner. Destiny has its own strange way of reuniting both of us, my dear Nix," her savior said. She glanced at him using the last ounce of strength she had left. Eyes that fit the description of a fairy tale prince. A stout body that could match the most proud of bulls. And the spider tattoo, an exact replica of Claradore's artstyle. The resemblance was uncanny if not lacked subtlety.

"Baba..." she croaked.

"I'm sorry...We shall both mourn her, my dear," he said.



## Chapter 6

She cradled Spartak in her arms, walking in this wretched monotony that was now her life. *Baba...* Home...She wanted to go home. Above, the sky always seemed dark now, no matter how blue Claradore said it was. The black crows that flew overhead hid whatever sunlight the Goddess shed on the path her body walked on without her permission.

*How did it come to this?* The first morning without Baba waking her up. The first day without a breakfast on the table she had come to know. The first day without access to Baba's arsenal of kitchen tools. The first day without climbing the spiral staircase, reaching for Baba's book collection. The first night without a bedtime story. This surreal sentiment of living in a dream. Nix' body moved on its own. Her mind loitered around, the villagers' deranged screams and Baba's bones' snapping echoing in her ears.

*How could they hate us so much?*

"Hear me now, a new decree I lay upon you: Love one another as I have loved you. Let it be your shield and your flag of honor. By this shall the realms of men know you as my true heirs—not by blood, nor by steel, but by the love you bear each other. So it shall be spoken; so it shall be done," said the Goddess to the army Regnant the Dragonslayer amassed at the end of the Age of Magic. The Man in White, he said they were all children of the Goddess. *Why? Why do they hate us then?*

Her encyclopedias always mentioned violence in this rather casual manner. She knew wars happened and that men died. Yet wars and battles had been something of the distant past to her, something rare and foreign that Baba's abode was immune to. To read this one line in a book in contrast with what The Faith had done to Baba... Nix could never fathom the extent of human brutality. That none of the adults that followed the Man in White thought to save her nor Baba like in the stories she was told ...That they actually cheered as Baba agonized before their very eyes. It was unbelievable.

"You will not find any answers, thinking about it, my dear... Baba has proven herself to be weak...And the weak get beaten," Claradore said, offering her a fruit. "You should eat..." Spartak barked, her only cue to accept the food. Had one apple always been

enough to fill her stomach? She had never realized how heavy an apple could be while digesting one and that it could be without a taste. Anything now weighed at least six times more and tasted the same. Drinking and eating were now necessities she had no concern for.

*Baba...* Baba, a word that twisted the dagger the Man in White left in her soul. Baba, a word she would never say to Baba ever again. Claradore had healed her leg but the memory of flames ravaging her home eroded her like waves against a promontory. Eventually, she would fall down in the turpid ocean. Maybe that was a good thing as she would see Baba again.

“I want to go home,” Nix said, her eyes fixated on the crows which now battled a dove in the sky. Their plumage...Black had never been as beautiful. She had been a fool to believe that yellow was her favorite color. Yellow, its brightness now irritated her beyond rationality. *Baba always wore black.*

He patted her head. His touch was gentle so far. She stank of ashes and she knew it. He would not accept any of her apologies. “I’m sorry...You and I both saw what happened to your home...” he said.

Nix wept, causing Spartak to whimper. The sight of Baba’s body. This never happened in her fairy tales. Somebody should have saved her. *This is unfair!* All her mind could do was show the body again and again. A page in a terrible children’s book that she could not turn, one that begged her to stay. Nothing. Night, day, wind, water, no element could delete this page from this nightmarish book. She screamed, ousting a flock of crows from their perches, hoping the extent of her rage would resuscitate the dead. The Goddess had to know. She had to know what pain her children had caused. *You didn’t do anything, Goddess! Why! Why! WHY!*

Claradore hugged her. His arms were stronger, that she could tell. While they lacked the finesse of Baba’s embrace, they compensated with this tightness, the same feeling Regnant the Dragonslayer had when he first put on his dragonscale armor. Her bedtime hero had felt unbreakable, invincible when he had charged against the enemies of the Goddess. She could cry here to her heart’s contents and so she did, emptying herself on his chest. Never had she screamed so much in her entire life. Sleep had become near impossible without her bunk bed. Cooking was an ordeal without Baba’s elaborate kitchen set, one as extensive as a Sarvitarian legionnaire’s arsenal of spears and swords. Even peeing without Baba’s toilet...A comfort she would never have again.

“Please...You know magic...Bring her back...” Nix said.

“If only it was that simple, my dear...You have known Baba longer than I ever had... Even if we could, what would she have said if you managed to drag her soul back from the Gates of the Underworld? Will she still cherish you, the one that prevented her from being reunited with her parents, her lover and the daughter she had to kill...Oh? Oh, you didn’t know, did you? She never told you? There is a reason tampering with the dead was forbidden in the Age of Magic. The dead must be allowed to cross the Gates so the living can continue their voyage,” said Claradore as he let go of her. Magic. She saw that book he kept in his backpack. It whispered. It spoke to her with both female and male voices. It called in a tongue she had never learned yet understood.

“The Gates of the Underworld...Where are they?”

Claradore put himself at the same eye level as she did. Spartak licked his cheek. She could not believe how fast her dog had allowed itself to be fed by this stranger. Even though he was not Baba’s son, it was as if Nix saw two of Baba’s brown eye. “My dear, don’t you remember? You have already been there. In fact, both of us have already seen them in person.”

*What? I don’t understand.* Riddles and vagueness. This man adored riddles, his tongue delivering one every minute it would seem. Nix now understood why Baba had kicked him out.

He turned his back to her abruptly, his left arm gesturing for her to stay behind him. The book. Claradore unveiled it. As big as one of her encyclopedias, a tarantula was painstakingly drawn on its cover that showed traces of a craftsmanship that could not have originated from either Regnassian nor Sarvitarian Empires. A foreign culture, people, their hopes, their stories and their grief, leaked from the papyrus pages. Nix was sure of it. The voices told her so. There was a way to reach the Gates of the Underworld inside.

The ground shook, whatever tremor approached them fast. Spartak barked with apprehension. They were but twenty imperial miles from Miroconium. It had to be the villagers. They had followed her. She started crying again. She could not do it. *Leave me alone!* Why had the Goddess brought Baba to the Gates of the Underworld? Baba who had not wronged her? Metarexia, the Goddess’ residence. Nix would go there one day and demand answers.

The embodiment of years digging into her encyclopedias appeared before her eyes. Four riders, all Molochians emerged, wielding their bows. To her surprise, the infamous Scourge of Goddess had boring faces with short mustaches. Their miserable attempt of having facial hair made her laugh. *Baba was scared of them?* Nix immediately spotted the officer, it was none other than the man who sported the crested helmet on which was embedded rubies and lapis lazuli. He donned a white cape, covering his lamellar armor, on which was painted the Medean crimson phoenix. And the shield, one which still showed the Tiarmat hydra hissing at any opponent who had the misfortune of gazing at it on a battlefield. *A Scholae Palatinae. Baba...The encyclopedia...If only you could see this...*

As for the other Molochians, the books spoke true of them. They were barely taller than Baba. On horseback or on ponyback since Nix refused to consider those tiny mounts as horses, Claradore's height still appeared higher. Their clothing varied from light and plain tunics to chainmail dubiously acquired from imperial forges. She hoped she would get to see their mounted archery skills. Baba had said that she had tried to imitate their style but had failed when she had sprained her knee while mounting her horse.

Claradore withdrew his spellbook. He turned to her with a friendly smirk. "We shall speak about the book later. Right now, it seems we will reach our destination faster than I have envisioned."

*Destination?* She noticed that she never bothered to ask him where they were going. Baba would have scolded her. Little girls should never trust strangers without a sense of directions, Baba would have said. *Well, I don't have a choice right now, Baba. Sorry.*

"Where were you intent on taking me?" Nix asked.

"Magister Herbarum, we thought you were at Miroconium...I see your pilgrimage ended early," said the Scholae Palatinae.

"Scholae Palatinae Ordogan, a great pleasure to see you again," said Claradore with the same tone Baba used for sarcasm. *Are you sure Baba that he is not your son?*

"The Emperor requests your immediate presence at Thanatopolis." The man signalled one of the Molochians to bring a riderless horse. "You will follow us."

*The Medean Emperor never takes no for an answer. Thanatopolis... Baba has been there...Are we really going there? Oh, Baba, why? Why couldn't you be here with me?*

“My, my as direct as always, Ordogan. There is a tiny hiccup: I have brought a student from my pilgrimage, one as talented as I was when I was her age. I humbly ask your permission for her to accompany me on this journey to the capital,” said Claradore as he moved sideways, revealing Nix to the soldiers.

“An Elysian? This far away from home?” muttered one of the Molochians in a heavily accented Imperial Tongue. Such an outrageous pronunciation would have grated Baba’s ears.

Ordogan unmounted his horse. Claradore gestured for Nix and Spartak to come closer to the riders. To her surprise, the Scholae Palatinae knelt before her before saying something she did not understand. Seeing her reaction, he repeated the same syllables to no avail.

“He asked for your name in Elysian. Do not worry, my dear, I intend to teach you that language,” said Claradore in the Classical Tongue. She saw that Ordogan’s eyes had widened. The other Molochians shouted in disbelief.

“The girl has lost someone dear to her recently. Please be kind to her,” continued Claradore.

“My condolences for your loss,” said Ordogan in the Classical Tongue. The Scholar Palatinae presented his water bottle before her. Her entire body told her that she had already heard his voice once, somewhere, some time. Her memory had reacted the same way when she saw Claradore on that horrible day. *How?*

“My name is Nix, sir Scholae,” said Nix who drank copiously from Ordogan’s bottle.

“Spoken like a native. She even puts Nosrau’s ambassadors to shame! Why don’t we sell her to the Magister Susurri? She could be of use to him at Persiphon,” said one of the Molochians.

“She is a student of mine, not a slave,” said Claradore dryly.

Ordogan ordered his men to start trekking. Nix found herself saddled by Claradore. Being on top of another animal, this was a sensation she had not foreseen. Her legs dangling in the open air, the smell of horse manure behind her, being taller than a

man for once. The horse's back made this sort of amateurish massage on her lower body. She smiled. If only Baba could see her at this moment.

"Why don't we buy a horse," Nix had once asked Baba.

"A horse? What do I look like to you, my gold coin? An equestrian off to ride to battle with a Medean Emperor or with one of those kings from the New Kingdoms? See how you have difficulties potty training Spartak? A horse shits wherever it wants. There is no potty training for that kind of beast," had answered Baba.

Claradore embarked on the horse with her, taking the reins. Before she could even ask how fast they could go, the Molochians yelled one syllable. Her beast started galloping, her ass struggling to stay in contact with the saddle. Nix hugged Claradore for her dear life, her nails almost digging into his thick skin. It was as if she was running as a fox but without any semblance of control over the animal. The fact that it could run at this speed while carrying both her, Spartak and Claradore was flabbergasting. For the first time in a week, she giggled, hoping Baba could see her from beyond the Gates of the Underworld. *I'm going to Thanatopolis after all, Baba.*

## Chapter 7

They smelled Thanatopolis before seeing it. It was logical that a metropolis that immense would sense their presence first and not the other way around. Miroconium had been characterized by the cow and horse manure whose odor would float by Baba's house during summer days. In Thanatopolis' case, she noticed one thing: chimneys. A lot of them. It had seemed the population's entire supper flew in the air, the scent of tons of spices and oils coalescing with salt. Nix' encyclopedias had told her that the city bore 300 000 inhabitants by the start of the previous century. Ordogan had corrected her: 500 000 souls now lived in it.

*500 000! 500 times more than Miroconium!* How would all of them fit into the same space as Miroconium? She realized this was a stupid question once they reached Vitiatus' Mount overlooking the peninsula. If a human's jaw had any flexibility, hers must have reached its limit once Thanatopolis unraveled before her. *Oh Baba!*

The artist had done a superb job at illustrating the imperial capital but no image could ever suffice to make a child comprehend the scale and size of the settlement. The aqueduct of Charov, glued in the corner of the page of her book, was actually this enormous brick serpent traversing the entirety of the city, stretching beyond Vitiatus' Mount. It undulated making arches across rivers and the fortifications. To think humans could build such artificial snakes. She stood next to one of its pillars, her mouth agape. A single one of its supports was thrice as tall as Baba's home, some delinquents having drawn graffiti of lower parts only men had. *Idiots.*

Past the Marroan Walls, which she could see from at least fifteen kilometers away, was this entity that she only knew through literature. It separated continents, a mass of water, home to various animals she had seldom seen in fishmarkets. Only when one was next to it, the waves caressing one's feet that one truly grasped how insignificant one was in their existence. For this seemingly endless body of fluid extended far beyond the horizon. So many of her books had theorized of laid beyond the boundaries of the Known World. From gigantic waterfalls leading to a starless void to an undiscovered continent to the spiritual realm that birthed the Goddess, no human, not even Baba had the answer to that.

And of course, Emperor Vitiatius had his capital built next to this entity. The Palace Complex she had heard multiple things about laid before her pupils, its five domes she wanted to replicate in her sketchbook. Right now, its white marble shone next to the glittering water, casting the illusion of a swan deploying its wings, a crown of gold reminding of all other beings of its magnificence. If only Nix still had that book. She had known the building as an ugly duckling, a mere amalgam of stones and bricks when it had hatched on the shores. *So that is where all the fairy tales got their inspiration for their castles...*

Claradore put a hand on her shoulder. She smiled back at him. He pointed to the Marroans Walls. Baba had told her the tale of the Molochian Emperor Ultzindur who turned away with his tail between his legs at the sight of the battlements. Nix looked over to her Molochian companions. Instead of fearing the walls as she thought they would, they were playing dice with Ordogan, with pepper and salt on the line. Nix had counted a total of sixty towers, a number Ordogan confirmed, around thirty meters high.

“See...We will be safe here,” said Claradore. She had no reason to doubt him. Baba always said they would flee to Thanatopolis if the Molochians ever returned. It had also been her first contact with a moat, something she only heard about in fairy tales. Three layers of walls were separated by two extensive moats which she imagined must contain crocodiles or hippos. Claradore had laughed at that suggestion, claiming the city workers were not paid handsomely enough to collect the resulting waste.

“We should go through the gates. I have sent couriers to the palace. The Emperor is expecting us,” said Ordogan.

“We shall move when Nix is ready to do so,” simply said Claradore much to Ordogan’s surprise.

“Do not worry, Scholae. The heir can wait. He will understand...”

And the houses. From her vantage point, she could contemplate the array of red, blue and green rooves, this kind of jungle where roses, violets, tulips, amaranths and orchids shared their existence. Those were all plants starting as different colored seeds, growing with roots which could be deep or shallow depending on their needs before sprouting with frail or strong penduncles. Yet to the human eye, the sole element that mattered was its beauty and what that was worth to each human differed. “Humans were flowers after all,” said Baba. All vied for water and nutrients from the soil. All had



vivid and dark colors under the myriad of seasons. Having a plethora of multicolored plants living and breathing in harmony was a testament to a gardener's success. She thought of the bouquets Baba brought to Miroconium for sale and how her choice of colors reflected that of Thanatopolis.

*Look at it Baba, how beautiful this all is.* She hoped Baba could hear her, wherever she was.

Another landmark Nix was glad to see in-person was the Hippodrome, this ellipsoidal structure that was six stories high and almost matched the Palace Complex in height. There was no shortage of vivid descriptions of races in her books. Baba had even forbade her to attend the one time Viroconium hosted horse racing, having apparently herself gambled seventeen drachmas on a fair mare that ended up being beaten by the most hideous horse Baba had ever laid her eyes upon.

"Who is your favorite team, Claradore?" asked Nix.

"The Rubies, my dear." He saw her doubt him. There were only four teams at Thanatopolis: the Silvers, the Golds, the Emeralds and the Sapphires according to Baba. "We are new to horse racing, my dear Nix. As a matter of fact, I founded it a decade ago. We are almost as large as the Silvers and the Golds. The Goddess be exalted if we manage to lift the trophy this season."

"Pffft, do not let his propaganda fool you, child. The Rubies are but leagues away from the Golds in sheer talent. Last season, the Gold rider was at least two laps ahead of the Red rider," said Ordogan. Nix let out a playful laugh.

"Do not laugh, my dear! The Red rider...That was me!" said Claradore.

How long did she and Claradore spend gazing at the city that brightened its surroundings in no other manner as Thanatopolis...Even Spartak loafed next to her, sitting lazily and wagging its tail. Seeing the quadriremes and quinquereemes sail, their small silhouettes seeking refuge within the ramparts, was something she could do all day.

Only when hers and Spartak's stomachs beckoned for food did Claradore allow the party to take them within the city. As they went down Vitiatius' Mount, Thanatopolis' size magnified as if she was looking through a looking glass, the towers and walls now intent on showcasing their menace instead of awe.

How much time would it take for her to climb them? Five minutes was all she needed to climb over Baba's house. No, maybe seven minutes if Baba was below yelling at her to come down at once. These walls with their towers...Perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes for the smaller intermediary ramparts and half an hour for the colossal outer structure, one that spanned at least eight kilometers. Those towers provided a good lookout for watching the constellations at night. Nix would have to buy a backpack to carry Spartak when she climbed. She had no money but Claradore could give her some.

Miroconium never had a queue at its entrance nor did Baba's house. In fact, queues should not exist according to Nix. Waiting to enter some place was an affront to anyone's patience. Why should anyone wait to get in? At the Sombrae Gate, there were three hundred caravans in-line, men and women dressed in some of the most varied clothing she had seen in her lifetime, speaking in all the languages that ever existed. Patricians wearing purple tunics, merchants donning a mix of Rauthengardian, Elysian and Medean attires. Even children with Molochian fur hats were playing in the mud, their parents struggling to keep them away from the clear water moat. She was convinced they would only let them in at dusk. *This is absurd. Why?*

"My dear, why are you complaining? You are not of age to understand the concept of customs and taxes," said Claradore.

"What are those?" she asked, Ordogan's companions chuckling at her question. *What is funny about that?*

"Have you ever wondered how the Sarviatarians built that aqueduct and those walls? It is with what we call taxes, a small amount of money every citizen has to give to the Emperor. For example, that road near Baba's house. That was made using Baba's money, my dear Nix," said Claradore.

"Ooooooooooooooh!" She now knew why Baba loathed seeing that one man who knocked once every year at their door. The thief in prince's clothing she would call him. Everytime, she would bake him biscuits. He always protested but ate the cookies nonetheless and went back empty-handed. It was someone Claradore told her was a tax collector.

Ordogan went ahead of the group, with a scroll in-hand. Nix saw the Limitanei at the gates saluting him before he motioned them to skip the line. *Humans are not made for lines anyways.*

What caught her attention as she stepped into Thanatopolis' walls was the ocean of humanity that flowed within narrow streets. Brown water rushed below stepping stones at intersections, no one needing to explain to her why those were required. Her group swam on this body of warmth and sweat, among the other schools of fish that somehow found their way amidst the divergent streams. Claradore pushed her at almost every step. The amount of details she had to take into account. Food stands waving at her to sell some sort of shrimp dumplings which smelled like the heavens to both her and Spartak, orators preaching the Faith's scriptures, picturesque houses where women sprayed perfume from their balconies. A cacophony of donkeys, horses, shouts, prayers and other children bumping into her met her hearing. In contrast to the quietude of Baba's house, here she would never be alone.

Nix had to stop when they reached the Hippodrome. Each of the arches in the arcades framed statues painted even more meticulously than those found in Miroconium. She recognized the Goddess, Emperor Vitiatius and his dove sitting on his lap marking his conversion to the Faith, Empress Zenobia with her four meters tall sarissa. To think that 80 000 people could be seated here the last time Baba had been here. The most mind-boggling story from her encyclopedia was that the Sarvitarrians had simulated sea battles using the Hippodrome. In fact, Baba had watched a re-enactment of the Battle of Thunegard between the ailing Regnassian Empire and the ascending Sarvitarrian Empire, her stories of how the stadium was filled with water and how the boats were carried into the premises filled Nix with jealousy

Threading in this sea of humans, she saw the Palace Complex creeping ever closer. The Sarvitarrian and their successor states, the Medean and Tiarmat Empires, prided their rulers as being descendants of pagan gods. It was only when one was faced with the stunning colonnaded corridors leading to the hundred of marble stairs, free of any dust particle that one could believe that one dealt with divinities.

"See that building there my dear Nix, that will be your new home?" said Claradore.

*Palace? Wait I do not understand...*

"I have long promised Baba that I would provide you the wings you need to soar in this world. After all, we who have seen the Gates of the Underworld must stay close to another, should we not?" said Claradore.

The palace, full of lavish dining rooms serving portions equivalent to five dinners with Baba. The palace, containing this extensive wardrobe for the Emperor under a

Magister Sacra Vestis. She had read about the costumes designed for Medean royalty. The most wonderful was this purple gown on which a lady could wear a golden brocade laden with rich phoenix motifs she had aspired to own on the day of her wedding. She would give anything to be able to try out those outfits in front of the mirror or for someone to make a sculpture of her while wearing them.

She knew however that there was only one way to be able to commission as many fancy dresses as she pleased. A dream Baba had laughed in derision countless of times the past two years. Yet Baba could never imagine that Claradore would find her nor that they would live here.

“There is only one woman in the Known World who has a fragrance unique to her. That same lady can order clothes made of silk traded from the Unknown World with dyes extracted from snails living underwater. Those ball gowns, my gold coin, cost the totality of the Cachalot Kingdom’s treasury and are the envy of all young ladies in the Known World. Who is that woman?” had asked Baba.

“The Medean Empress,” had said Nix.

# Chapter 8

The sky bled above the land of crags and sequoias. Dragons melted in the air, their hardened wings incinerated by the Goddess' lightning bolts. The sound of her fingers cracking as they produced those nightmarish projectiles, the cries of the beasts crashing down from the firmament with their wailing riders, the roaring flames eating away at the World Tree. All would haunt him for the rest of his life. In a matter of months, the non Magi had found the confidence to challenge dragons with the strength of betrayal. The Regnassian armies shook the ground. A horde it was, uprooting forests, drying out lakes and riverbeds. The Sunken Continent had ceased to exist. It took a full year to receive the news. From the battlements of the Secret Village of the Clarans, Dorian watched the dove banners slowly approach the final bastion of sorcery. He had gotten sick of the smell of dragonfire and blood sorcery.

His mother and father mounted The Last Dragon. Dorian's ten year old face saw itself in their dragonscale armor.

"She calleth herself the Goddess now," said his father.

"The Goddess, sayest thou? The Children of the Sky wouldst be rolling in their Ark. What cometh next? Did she slay the Creator with her own hand?" said his mother.

"Mother, Father, go not," said Dorian.

Dorian's father stroked Dorian's hair with his glove. The other hand carried the last tarantula banner, the largest one the village had ever produced. Dorian had helped sew it. He had hoped the Faith's armies would be terrorized by it. A foolish thought and he knew it. "Dorian, one day shalt thou understand the choice we maketh this day. Thou hast thine orders. Go to the Tree of Life. Thy apprenticeship shall end upon our return."

His apprenticeship...Dorian had yet to master any spell contained in the Grimoire of Red. A boring book. He had wanted to become an artist not a battle mage. Magic and its intricacies should be left to the other Magi.

"I...Choice...Heum...Hmmm...Hmmm..." said Dorian from whom strings were attached to his wooden teeth. Behind him, a background proudly colored by orphans

depicted the apocalyptic scene Claradore had told Nix about many times. Her thoughts went on about the sun, an orange ball with eight straight lines protruding from its circumference. Nix groaned causing Dorian to flail in the miniature stage.

*I forgot my line.*

The Dorian puppet in her left hand levitated in the air awkwardly. Its strings entangled themselves with the Last Dragon's. Nix cursed. She had only applied one layer of varnish on both puppets. To her spectators, it would have seemed that Dorian kissed his mother's doll in an execrable rendition of Claradore's story. Prince Ralens the Younger clapped. Nix smiled back at him, her unwavering supporter or was it actually because she had baked him Baba's cookies this morning?

Nix scanned her audience. Silk garments, tunics embroidered with golden phoenixes, stolas on which were pinned octagonal jewels lit by the four braziers in the stands. Only now did it occur to her that the red tunic she had been so proud to sew might be inadequate for the occasion. Some members of the audience had the gall of eating those lobster and shrimp dumplings she had grown fond of. The smell of those. She had hoped no one saw her saliva drip on the stone floor. Torture. Pure torture. She would personally petition the Emperor for that to be considered torture.

The decent spectators had been her loyal customers: the marble statues of Emperors Vitiatius, Charov and of Empress Zenobia the Liberator which flanked the seats. As a child, she would imagine them assisting her plays from the afterlife, smiling at her poor retelling of their brave exploits.

Ralens the Younger's elder sister, Livia, had fallen asleep over an hour ago next to her brother. Nix' eyes twitched seeing Livia's purple silk dress, one that costed twenty times as much as her annual salary. Why was she not allowed to own such vestments more beautiful as the tunics Baba had once knit for her? *I am the one who had to fetch that gold cloak you are wearing right now!* To add insult to injury, the crown. The crown. The Goddess damned crown sitting on the sleeping princess' head. Gold molded into the shape of a phoenix stared right back at Nix, calling her, taunting her, laughing at her. Never had an inanimate object been so irresistible to her. What was it about that item? Was it that it reminded of something she could put her fingers on? Nix did not know. Being in Livia's presence was a constant reminder of her own insignificance.

*It would look better on me.*

Emperor Ralens the Elder merely blinked. Impassible, unreadable. The face of a sphinx presenting an unsolvable riddle. He had always been impressive to her. Like her, the Medean Emperors were taught to camouflage their true emotions behind a mask, one that Claradore had forced her to study. Like her, they had to perform before an audience, an entire country, wearing elaborate costumes, most of which being impractical for the common of men. Yet, unlike her, they did not possess the luxury of taking off their mask once the curtains fell.

“A ruler has officially two faces for the realm: a public one, a mask for the Known World to behold, the second, a private one for close friends and the women he beds. Yet there exists a third one, one whose existence is only known to the emperor himself and glimpsed only in the reflection of the mirror’s gaze. Once that mask was uncovered, a ruler’s weakness was revealed and the weak... The weak get beaten,” Claradore had taught her.

Ralens the Younger continued to applaud. The palace’s amphitheater followed him. Silver coins were thrown at the stage. Nix blushed, bowing before her spectators. She could get used to it, the adulation. After all, politics and drama branched out from the same root, both characterized by an emphasis on performance and grandiose eccentricities. Intentions were disguised through contrived words and gestures. In a way, the imperial court was an amphitheater itself.

“The play is not over yet, my Prince,” said Claradore when Nix began putting back the puppets in their box. He emerged behind the stage, his presence causing the noblewomen and noblemen alike to throw every bouquet they had at him. In fact, Nix was sure people only attended the play because of Claradore.

“I’ve never heard this story before. It must have taken quite the imagination to create something with what little the archives could provide,” said Ralens the Elder.

“Trust me, your August Majesty, fiction is not my greatest strength. In the desert of history, many stories have been swallowed by the sands of time. It is but the duty of the informed to share that knowledge with those whose time is but a primordial commodity,” said Claradore.

“This book from which you extract your stories...”

*The Grimoire of Red. Do you really want to read it? You would lose your sleep if you knew.* The Known World was not ready. None was ready. Not even Baba could have

predicted its contents. At long last, Nix understood why Baba and Claradore drifted apart. Baba, in her isolated shack, never understood the potential the book offered to a Magi.

“Written in the Forgotten Tongue, your August Majesty. Our translators are working day and night to bring a copy to your desk,” said Claradore. *Clever liar.*

“Can we have another story, Father? Pretty please?” said Ralens the Younger with the eyes of a younger Spartak. With those pupils brimming of innocence, he could ask Nix to do anything for him.

Ralens the Elder looked at his daughter. Nix had overheard his conversations on the marriage he was arranging. She had yet to relay this information to Claradore. A mistake or rather an inconvenience due to her ejecting herself from a cat’s body. “Your sister seems to disagree. She needs to rest,” said the Emperor.

“B-b-but, my Scholae Palatinae can carry her to her bedroom. I want to stay! You said yourself you never heard this story! We never hear stories from the Age of Magic!”

“That is an order, Prince of the Medeans!”

“I too must beg your leave for tonight, your Eminence. We are hosting a soup kitchen at the Grand Cloister in a few hours,” said Claradore, bowing before his liege.

“Can I come too?” said Ralens the Younger. Nix stopped disassembling the puppet stage. She noticed the nicks and gouges on some of the puppets she had hand painted, cursing silently. Another dent in her budget she would have to take. One of her hands reached for a hidden object beneath her tunic only to return with nothing. *I did not bring my knife.* Escort duty was not on her list.

“No, your polo instructor will be at your door before the rooster calls. Your punctuality is to be impeccable from now on as we agreed,” said Ralens the Elder. Nix caught a whiff of his cologne, this gargantuan scent sinking its teeth into her nose before ripping it wide open. It reminded her smoked and charred wood, hinting a premonition of rebirth. Similar to the Medean Empress’ perfume, this scent could only be worn by a single man in the entire empire. Nix saw the bottle countless times in the imperial wardrobe, barely restraining her hands to open it every time.



“But the Master of Herbs said that a good ruler must be able to sympathize with the commonfolk. How can I do that if I am always in the palace?” His hand pointed to Nix. “Nix here even said she would give me a tour of the Studion if I taught her how to ride a horse.”

*You goof! You were not supposed to say that to the Emperor himself!*

“There is a time and place for everything, my Prince. You have long life ahead of you unlike many of us. It would be wise to savor the little moments. Most of us can only dream of getting access to polo lessons,” said Claradore.

Nix threw the minced broccoli into the mélange. A sublime mix of coriander and pepper entered her nose. Her stomach rumbled. Taking a sip, she let peas and chicken powder flow over her tongue. Waves of elation rushed through her taste buds. *Delicious. But not salty enough.* This had once been one of Baba’s recipes. Like with everything he touched, Claradore had vastly enhanced it.

Above Zastrian’s Grand Cloister, frescoes that still showed the Tiarmat hydra devouring the sun unwinded on the ceiling. Ruby rosettes decorated indentations that had been cut in the domed roof by Sarvitarian engineers. Each quadrant of the rotunda was home to one of Nix and Claradore’s favorite emperors. Moonlight passed through the oculus located at the center of the ceiling. Claradore often made his speeches at that exact location. Texts from the Grimoire of Red passing as the Faith’ hymns were chanted by the choir. The people attending the service were no less the wiser.

She glanced at the long line in front of the eight soup cauldrons. Women, children, the elderly, slaves, freed slaves, all wearing plain tunics. It seemed the line has gotten lengthier ever since that problem with the Elysian Empire started last month...Has Claradore cooked enough? Would there be enough seats?

One by one they came. Smiling at each one, she filled two spoonfuls in every bowl. Spoon was an understatement for the utensil Claradore had given to her dwarfed the largest of Baba’s spatulas. Children got an additional piece of candy. All thanked Claradore and Emperor Ralens. *What would have they done without the Red Guild?*

The night continued with her cleaning the emptied tables. During the resurgence of the Plague of Anastasian, she used to wipe all of the eighty tables within the nave. Today, only forty needed cleaning. Perhaps she would have the time to walk Spartak in the evening. Did she not promise him his favorite steak a moon ago?

"One bowl, please Nix," said a familiar voice under a hood. A boy no more than fourteen summers stood before her.

"You snuck out again?!? What are you thinking? There are still muggers lurking around!" she whispered.

"Please! Don't tell Claradore!"

"Let me guess, you also tried to bring your sister along, but she slapped you."

"Hehe. You know Livia. She never walks outside without a litter. Can I have a bowl now? Goddess please? It looks so appetizing!"

"Fine, you owe me for this!"

Nix sat down with the boy who removed his hood. She never resisted the urge to pat his curly hair. Him and her friend's Serena had adopted the same style. "Stop that tickles," he always said.

"Why would you skip caviar at the palace to eat in the Studion of all places?"

Prince Ralens the Younger gobbled the bowl whole causing her to burst out laughing. "Claradore and Father told me I should strive to be closer to the people. What better way than to eat and sit with them?" *Always too good for your own good.*

"Claradore told me that your father is ill..."

A round of applause reverberated through the church. She turned. Claradore had come, greeting his congregation. Kisses on the cheeks, handshakes and prayers. He personally lifted sacks of grain to be distributed. She knew the drill. The Magister Herboraum carried a notebook with him. From handing over medicine, petitions to the Emperor himself, inconsistencies with the grain dole, anything was written on the calepin. "The Faith has long forgotten what generosity is. Let our kindness be the greatest weapon against them," once said Claradore. He toured all who were fed before stopping at her table.

"It seems we have quite the bold guest, tonight. It is an honor to have you here, my dear student," said Claradore, showing that disarming smile, the one he had shown her on that terrible day at Baba's house.

"I noted the prices of items, Magister Herboraum as you suggested!" said Ralens.

"What have you noticed, my dear student?"

"Silk and all fruits from the Unknown World have more than doubled in price."

Claradore stroked his chin. "Do you understand why?"

"The Elysians. The Emperor of Kings Nosrau sent their ultimatum last week. F-father has not answered it yet."

"You have only mentioned the prices of luxury goods so far, my dear student. The common folk have no ears for geopolitics. They care however when their subsistence is threatened. Tell me, have you written down the price of a kilogram of rice or half a kilo of chicken breasts?" said Claradore.

Ralens the Younger returned a blank stare. "Uhhhhhhhhh...."

"Then take the opportunity on your way back to take a look at them. I also noticed, my dear, that you have only used your eyes so far. Have your others senses reported anything?"

"No, you told me to watch, and so I did. Eyes are a ruler's most important assets. Without them, I would not be able to see if my subjects love me or not."

"My dear student, smell and hearing are as essential to an emperor as eyesight. Lips do not always convey betrayal and subterfuge. You need words to gauge the intentions of your courtiers, your enemies and your presumed friends. Smell them too, the people you surround yourself with... A sick body emits an unpleasant odor, does it not? A strong perfume can mask insecurities or one's true beliefs, does it not? The greatest of all detectives use all of their senses to strip men and women of their inner thoughts. An emperor should do the same should he not want to end like the last Tiarmat Emperors."

If defeat could be drawn as a facial expression, Ralens the Younger's visage would be the living embodiment of such a word. Mouth agape. Eyes wide with incomprehension. Hands on the head. Nix suppressed a laugh. She had made similar faces the first time Claradore had tutored her.

“Oh and the Excubitores hung some criminals tonight. One of them came from Miroconium, your city, Nix,” said Ralens the Younger.

If Nix was a dog, her ears would have sprung up. Maybe. Maybe it was him.

“Was he a priest? A Faithful?” said Nix.

“I don’t think so. It was a father who ran away from the town. They said he had killed his wife.”

Nix cursed in her head. She had never stopped dreaming about seeing the Man in White’s head mounted on a spike. One of these days. She will find him. She had promised Baba that much.

“Father also told me we are expecting a new Cardinal by the end of the month, a man by the name of Boniface.”

“I will be delighted to meet this newcomer. It is a shame Cardinal Innocentus had to leave this world so soon,” said Claradore.

*Hopefully, the new Cardinal won’t be as nosy as Innocentus.*

Sending Cardinals and Men of the Crucible to early retirement had become a pastime for Claradore. These kinds of men could never be allowed to know the truth. Magi and the Faith could not walk the same plane of existence. By condemning the Sunken Continent, she had ensured that only one of them could dominate the Known World.

“The hour is getting late, my dear student. Nix, please escort our lord back to the palace,” said Claradore.

Claradore was right. She had a long day ahead of her tomorrow with Serena.

“I’ll clean your room while I am at it. Did Mr. Mittens shit on the bed again?” said Nix.

# Chapter 9

“Guess who it is?” said a cheerful voice in the Imperial Tongue as they ambushed Nix, putting their warm hands over her eyes.

“The useless Goddess?” said Nix.

“Why would you say that, Phoenix?”

“My vision vanished suddenly like she did a millennium ago.”

The girl with tousled curls removed her hands off Nix’ face. Brown eyes brightened a smirk Nix all too well. Serena leapfrogged over her, proudly displaying the new men’s tunic Nix had bought for her. A phantom these clothes allowed her to become, letting her hands pursue this habit that caused them to roam free in the treasure troves that were her victims’ pockets. How many times Nix had to trip Vigiles who were inclined to put wrenches in the cogs of Serena’s antics.

“It’s my hands Nix! I cannot stop them!” had pleaded Serena before Nix’ accusatory gaze. They had played the game of judge and bandit countless times as children with Nix sinking the vast armada of Serena’s ludicrous excuses and alibis every time.

“May I remind you that the hands are connected to the brain.”

“Do not bring biology in this, Phoenix. We are talking about Medean law.”

Hopeless. The day someone would bring Serena to a proper court, she would boil faster than eggs in the oppressive summer. Thankfully for Nix, Serena had promised to pay her five years worth of her salary should she accept to be her lawyer.

*But I am not a lawyer.*

“It does not matter! We promised remember? We face the toughest trials in unity.”

“I remember.”

That promise she had made when she first came to Thanatopolis eight years ago. Both of them had been eleven summers then. Baba would have never let her play with someone who carried a hidden dagger such as Serena. Someone who revolved around distrust could not be trusted. At least, that was what Serena had disproved. Who knew Baba could be wrong at times?

The sea caressed Nix' feet. Seagulls and waves sang their usual symphony. Sunrise glimmered in the horizon, a destination for this adventure she was going to undertake.

"What did you want to show me, Phoenix?" said Serena, sunlight magnifying her visage lit by curiosity. It was not the bloody harpoons. Nix had demonstrated that aptitude to the point of boredom. No, today was the day she would make Serena's eyeballs somersault out of their sockets.

Nix breathed. She closed her eyes. A net of red descended over her eyelids, allowing morning's cool air through her searing lungs. Her spine tingled as the sensation she had been building demanded to be let free. Clavicles and scapulas cracked. Nix heard her own heartbeat, that domesticated beast that all magicians had to assert their control over should they ever want to succeed. It beat in an odd rhythm, this bowstring pattern that vibrated that sometimes both flirted and rammed her ribcage. Blood was redirected to her back, expanding and expanding. Her imagination was the will bending the crimson substance as it created layers of feathers. Condensation touched every feather, Nix feeling the detail of the water's salty complexion. Her blood coursed through those feathers, coalescing them into eight panaches.

The sound of frenzied applause caused her to open her eyes. Nix swore she could see tears on Serena's face. Her spectator wasted no time in rewarding her with a hug. Nix shrieked. Her panaches could be ripped by such sheer force.

"Amazement is an understatement for what you have just showed me, Phoenix."

Nix blushed. Baba would have drawn a painting of her on the spot. The first time one used a spell of such magnitude was a moment to be cherished. If the hug was not enough, Serena's fingers had started a pernicious assault on the feathers, sending waves after waves of tickling infantrymen through Nix' veins. Nix cursed. The panaches did not come with titanic defenses such as the Marroan Walls. She faltered as her single audience buried her hands and faces within her back, lauding the softness of Nix's work of art.

“Stop it! Stop it! Th-Th-That tickles!”

“Being short-tempered already, are we? No, no, no, you don’t get to snap at me with this delightful duvet. One can make a bed out of this!”

“My magic is not for sale!”

“How did you get Claradore to teach you this?”

Claradore. Even eight years later, Nix had yet to rival his mastery of the magical arts. For Claradore’s feathers were formed by precise octagonal patterns. While hers were brittle, his could withstand the most lethal of fires. He chose to amass his feathers in the manner of a lost peafowl, one who had strayed away from its homeland, one which yearned for the colors it had never encountered and for the colors it would never see again. When one looked at Claradore’s panache, one could only bend the knee before his dazzling plumage, its iridescence accentuated by shades of dark violet, fuchsia and scarlet.

*Do not get me started on how he flies...*

“Do you want to fly?” asked Nix.

Serena’s eyes and mouth betrayed disbelief and anticipation. “Am I dreaming? I should be waking up.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Always. I will always trust this Phoenix.”

Nix leapt into the air. Her wings flapped. Her blood assimilated every gust. Toes dangled in midair. Hair danced, conducted by wind currents. She giggled, rolling a 360 rotation on both her longitudinal and lateral axes. Fly. If only Baba could have seen her at this very instant. She could have flown with Nix too. Quadruple somersaults, nosedives towards Serena, Nix showcased everything. Her favorite maneuver was this half of a loop that would bring her completely inverted. She would then roll to the upright position resulting in her flying in the opposite direction at a higher altitude. Claradore had told her that dragons had been trained to perform this maneuver flawlessly during the Age of Magic.

“You should be generous when having fun!” screamed Serena from the ground. Life as a non-Magi must be uninteresting, for ordinary humans would never be liberated from the shackles of gravity.

Of course, Nix had forgotten. She had to go somewhere today. Her feet tingled before melting. Their blood gushed, reforming themselves into talons. Nix felt her new claws, weapons that could dig into ripe flesh should she wish. Weapons that sacrificed balance for precision. A bird of prey she had become, one that could finally challenge the Faith’s dove.

“Someone likes Phoenixs,” said Serena. It was true. With her crimson plumage, one could have mistaken her for the Medean emblem.

Nix swooped in, grabbing Serena by the waist. She flew. A chorus of laughter accompanied their flight as they tested the limits of human acrobatics in the air. Serena extended her air, looking back at Nix with this radiant smile. They soared amidst the seagulls, the pigeons, joining flocks of migrating birds. They tasted the acrid water of clouds as they traversed them, Serena pretending to swim across the masses of water vapor, comically flailing her arms and legs. When they wished, they nosedived into the sea, both of them trying to seize a fish with their mouths. If pelicans could it, why could they not? Of course, Baba would have told Nix that birds were created specifically to catch prey by their mouth. Humans had other tools at their disposal. This was such an injustice imposed by the Goddess. Who never wished they could become a bird and fly to escape the confines of life on land. Nix and Serena made their best imitations of howling eagles as they plunged into the waters. They would tire themselves of the taste of raw shrimps and algae. They jumped from water to air, from air to water akin to flying fish, letting the streams of cold and torrid fluid flow over their unworried bodies.

“We should do this every day,” said Serena.

“You said the same thing with the blood harpoons,” said Nix.

“Do you think we can see the Goddess’ Domain if we keep climbing, Phoenix?”

“Why would you submit yourself to such an ordeal?”

“I dunno, she might know who the Man in White is, where he lives, where he shits, how he fucks...”



To which, Claradore would have answered. "All that draws breath is wrought for the grave. We are bound since the end of Age of Magic to this wheel of flesh and blood, of birth and passage through the Gates of the Underworld. Is this the Goddess' curse upon us? I often wonder of the deity who gladly gave us this riddle... and whether my mortal hands might one day rise to eviscerate her."

The corpse hung from the Hollow Tree. Untouched after all those eight years. Tattered remnants of cloth covered a severed rib cage. A sign had been atrociously placed around the neck: WITCH. Nix' blood boiled as she surveyed the lilacs, amaranths, orchids, hyacinths and plumerias that made their peace with the charred grounds they had grown from.

"Nix...You have not said a word in a hour...What are we doing near Miroconium?"

Miroconium. A flood had ended the town's ignoble life two years after her and Claradore had started their extended hiking trip. The Empire's archives stopped there. No mentions of the bishops who served. No mentions of witches that had been slain. The Man in White had under any reasonable assumptions fled.

"Bring me wood, any kind," said Nix dryly.

Serena's face brimmed with joy as she piled branches, logs and dead roots beneath the hanged body. Back in what used to be a house, Nix' memory struggled to reconstitute a place she had lived in for eleven summers. The staircase with the uneven step should have been of the left side of the first floor. Had the kitchen always been so minuscule? A shimmer of light caught her eye. It rested deep within a spider's nest or rather, it was the spider's nest. Broodlings escaped the keyhole she had not seen in years. The female tarantula sat upon the Elysian griffon carved into silver as if it wanted to protect the jewelry from unfit claimants. Her mother's medallion. This was intentional. Thieves would have long looted the premises.

*Why now?*

Behind her, Serena had brought the corpse down. The most beautiful fire Nix had ever made was lit. Fireflies flew around the brazier. Serena held her hand unquestionably. When Nix imagined tears on her own face, she was met with a hug. Silphium. It all smelled of silphium.

"You noticed did you not? The skull..."

The skull was absent. Saw marks had been introduced on the spine. Nix collected the ashes in an urn. She denied crying throughout the entire journey back to Thanatopolis.

# Chapter 10

“Seek the Emperor who Never Was in the Studion and the medallion will be opened,” had said Claradore.

It had been easy to say from the throne, this seat Claradore had gotten accustomed to. For the Empire’s decrees, proclamations and edicts were funneled into his desk. The elderly phoenix ailed, sulking in its deathbed. The chicks were not of age. Nix knew Claradore would need her to be his ears against the vultures that wanted to pilfer the phoenix’ nest and seize its treasures for themselves.

“Do you think Claradore will do it?” asked Serena as they walked in the colonnaded street carving the Studion in two. Merchants tempted Nix’ nose with those lobster and shrimp dumplings she had gotten addicted to. Children enjoyed their innocence underneath Charov’s Aqueduct. Adults bickered over the racers who competed at the Hippodrome. Nix and Serena floated in this sea of mules, carts, oxen and people who called Thanatopolis their home.

“Only the purple born may claim it.”

“Or someone commanding the army.”

“The Medean Empire would never elevate a half Molochian such as Ordogan on the throne no matter how many titles they heap on him.”

“There is no other choice, pumpkin face.”

“The Prince can be raised under the spider’s web.”

“Then why don’t you tell Claradore’s ass to stop warming the throne?”

They reached the portico of Zhapur’s Clinic where Serena parted ways with Nix. She removed her sandals at entrance before lounging in the living room, contemplating the Elysian tapestries and their elaborate fire motifs. A broiled lamb was being rotated above the fireplace, Nix having to stop Spartak from heading to that room. The last thing she wanted was her dog’s jaws ravaging someone’s else dinner.

The Elysian Tongue could make ordering food look like a passionate argument. At least that was what Nix thought when Zhapur's wife, Leila, asked him to prepare the vegetables for their supper.

"You have brought the silphium?" asked Zhapur. He bore this long grey beard that all Elysian men of his age adored. Nix smiled at him as he was dressed in the plain brown tunic sewn with flame embroidery that she and Claradore had made for him.

"Of course, Spartak!"

Her dog came to her, dangling two baskets full of silphium for Zhapur to collect. Outside in the garden, women who had consumed silphium laid on mats, Zhapur's vast collection of painted marble statues keeping them company. Nix never understood how having Emperor Marro stare at them with his fierce eyes could relieve them of pain. One of the first things that Nix had learned when she first came to the imperial capital was that there were actually doctors dedicated to what Baba once did. How could anyone treat more than one patient at once was beyond her.

"The Firstborn's Flame be strong, you and Claradore are have acted as our saviors again," said Zhapur.

"The pleasure is mine, doctor. How fares your daughter?"

If there was one person who was more knowledgeable than Claradore in medicine, it would be Zhapur. It seemed the man had managed to cram his brain with hundred books on human anatomy and on diseases. The quantities to make potions for infections had been memorized to the closest droplet. Zhapur could also smell sickness with clinical accuracy, something neither Baba nor Claradore could do. *Elysians*... Perhaps Nix should not indulge in such stereotypes.

"She has almost mastered the Classical Tongue. Unfortunately, mathematics are not her strong suit," said Zhapur.

"Something she inherited from her poor, poor, poor father," chimed Leila, entering from the garden. Nix smelled her jasmine-infused dried fruits, this caravan of myrrh and cinnamon that constituted the typical Elysian fragrance.

"My love! You had promised to not embarrass me in front of the guests!"

Leila kissed him on the cheeks before sitting down herself.

“Claradore told me you are planning to leave for Noein next year?” said Nix.

“My husband prefers a more temperate climate. You should have seen him at the first snowfall, glued to the fire while our daughter made her first snowball,” said Leila.

“Thanatopolis will miss you two. There isn’t anyone in the streets that does not know about Zhapur’s Clinic and its erotic paintings,” said Nix while pointing to the obscure work of art depicting three men in alluring positions. Claradore had spend at least ten minutes observing the scene the last time he came here.

“Our offer for you still stands. Come with us, Nix. You already know much about herbs. We can always use a helping hand. You will be compensated, and my husband will mentor you.”

Nix blushed. Noein, the province of paradisiac beaches and The Great Library of Sanglish, a land without even a Medean garrison... “I cannot, I have unfinished business here,” Nix said as she laid her mother’s medallion before the couple. Zhapur yelled interjections after interjections.

“This...How...When...” stammered Zhapur when he grabbed the artifact, his eyes frozen in consternation.

“Claradore told me you possessed the means to open it.”

“I would have loved not to disappoint you. This, this medallion. Look at this griffon, it is same as the royal signet’s. It could only have belonged to the fallen Empress of Kings Aishula herself.”

“The Empress of Kings?” *How did something relating to her come into Baba’s possession?*

“Are you confident, my love? Coincidences can lead to faulty conclusions,” whispered Leila as she rushed to close the door.

“As confident as my detection of fevers, my love. Nix, dispose of it. There must have been an error for all of those who had consorted with the rebellious Aishula have had their head and their descendants’ mounted on a pike by Emperor of Kings nineteen summers ago.”

“Why the long face, pumpkin face?” hovered Serena around Nix. She juggled a hefty pouch of gold in her hands. Another nobleman had fallen victim to those scheming hands. Seduction and thievery were after a potent combination.

“The medallion,” said Nix showing the still locked object.

“You will have to go to Persiphon after all at this rate. Did Zhapur say anything else?”

“Nothing of importance.”

*So my head would find its way on a pike if I set foot in Persiphon. The Firstborn could not have honored me better.*

To compensate for this ruinous day, Nix had bought a second eight of those dumplings from the Studion’s merchants. Spartak had already gobbled the first set by his hulking self. Nix and Serena had condemned it to sleep on the cold palace corridor tonight. A cocktail of spices and fried shrimps melted in her tongue while Excubitores chased after hooligans still debating the virtues and merits of their chariot racing teams. Baba had once been an avid supporter of the Rubies. It had seemed her last chariot race had involved a considerable amount of gold that was spoiled on an incompetent rider. In consequence, Nix had been forbidden to spend a single drachma on bets. Such a rule was anathema to the very spirit of Thanatopolis which revolved around the races that Metarexia could no longer host. News from the sport traveled the fastest in The Known World. Even kings from the Barbarian Kingdoms sent presents to their favorite teams.

“Would you like to Persiphon with this ravishing prince? We will find someone who can open this wretched piece,” asked Serena.

“They’ll kill you.”

“What? Who in Persiphon would trouble tw-one Magi?”

“The Emperor of Kings if Zhapur is to be believed. The man who commands the largest army in the Known World. The man who believes himself to the embodiment of a delirious prophecy.”

“The soil belongs to men. The sky belongs to Magi. She who can fly does not need to fear the ground.”

“My wings cannot carry you indefinitely.”

“We can speak of the little details later.”

Serena linked hands with Nix. Her fingers indulged in a myriad of acrobatics around Nix’ own. They explored tendons, phalanges and nerves, each touch playing notes of tenderness on the lute that was Nix’ body. Serena’s thumbs hit octaves of serenity that mellowed any conflicted soul. Through their playful tease, Nix was immersed in the strength of two human beings. The warmth of another could make one forget their vulnerabilities. They had sworn they would face any of the Goddess’ trials in unity.

“What do you say, pumpkin face? You can’t live your entire life under the spider’s thrall.”

It had never occurred to her that Serena’s lips had never been so close to hers. Nix breathed heavily.

It was likely an illusion. Serena smiled, moving her face away from hers. Bells reverberated through the streets. Zastrian’s Cloister unleashed its own mechanical birds, launching their songs of sorrow and mourning. All citizens had stopped moving as if petrified by a gorgon’s stare. Children tugged at their parents’ tunics clamoring for explanations. Then came the Medean horns from the Palace Complex, the lowest frequency in the Known World. The occasion was evident. The Emperor was dead.





# Chapter 11

The princess Livia had departed for her summer residence alongside Domitian. Nix relished such opportunities for she was able to sneak into the purple born's room.

The golden gilded door creaked open. Livia's perfume, made of jasmine and roses caught her nose. An arsenal of dresses, stolas and coats fluttered in the gargantuan wardrobe. Flickering candles shone on the opulent shades of purple, rose, crimson and gold.

Nix walked on the mosaic floor which depicted the Goddess' final departure from the land of the living. Her hands made their way into Livia's army of robes. Her guilty pleasure had been to wear clothes that she could never purchase. Her fingers touched the softest silk, the brightest rose, the warmest feathers. Nix could feel her own face turn green. It was never fair.

She found the object of her desires: this long flowing gown with a mantle of gold binding the neckline. A crimson cape embroidered with the Medean phoenix extended from the back of the outfit. Livia had only worn the attire once during her engagement to Domitian. Why even bother commissioning the dress if you only wore it a single time?

*The purple born and their eccentricities* thought Nix.

She removed her handmaiden clothes and put on the gown, delighting in its tender fabric.

Before her stood a girl who dreamed to become a princess. For this one night, Nix would grant that girl's wishes.

Sitting in front of Livia's mirror, Nix combed her hair in the exact same manner as Livia. The princess' armada of perfume bottles tempted her. Yet the fragrance that interested her was the ornate bottle shaped like a dragon. Only one woman in the Known World could possess that scent, one that commanded authority. Foreign dignitaries would be in awe of smelling such a perfume that seemed to transcend human senses. Nix would put two droplets on her neck.

And at last came the princess' crown, this diadem encrusted with the now exiled empress Thessaly's jewels. Nix knew the rubies adorning the crown would suit her head. Her hands deposited the ornament on herself.

*Why can't it all be mine?* thought Nix.

She rotated around the room, contemplating how the attire magnified her elegance. Nix smiled. Perhaps, she could borrow the gown indefinitely. The purple born did not understand the privilege the Goddess bestowed them upon birth.

A cough came from under the princess' bed. Nix yelped.

"Wh-Wh-Who is there?" said Nix.

A man or rather a boy of her age crawled from under his hiding spot. He was Majorian, a cousin of prince Ralens. Interestingly enough, he shared something in common with her. For he too indulged in borrowing Livia's clothes. His face reddened under Livia's purple stola.

Unlike Nix, the Faith would crucify him if they ever caught him wearing that. Had Majorian been a higher ranking official, Nix could have extracted much concessions from him. But this purple born was just a boy, a Scholae Palatinae. The Red Guild had no uses for another spy.

*What to do with you?* thought Nix.

"I-I mean no harm," said Majorian in the Classical Tongue.

"Quite the original attire you are wearing."

"Please...Please...Do not tell the princess. I'll do anything!"

"The Emperor is fair play then?"

Color drained from Majorian's face. Nix laughed.

"I was teasing you, it seems we both hold secrets. It would be troublesome if you revealed mine," said Nix.

"I will not denounce you! I swear upon the Goddess' name!"

Nix noticed that his eyes strayed away from hers. His brown curls were more ravishing than prince Ralens'. Livia's purple stola espoused his build, layering femininity upon masculinity.

"What do you think about my gown?" asked Nix.

Majorian's face was petrified. To him, Nix must have appeared like an Elysian princess. They said that the Emperor of Kings Nosrau's line descended from the Firstborn's celestial domain. They were angels that brought salvation to the Elysian populace, liberating them from the Goddess' tyranny. Any mortal would be in awe before these angelic beings.

"St-Stunning, my Lady." said Majorian.

My Lady. Two words that sent tremors of pleasure down Nix's spine. Yes, that was what she aspired to be named. If only everyone could refer to her by those two words. Nix was destined for royalty. All bones and flesh within her very being clamored for the divine right to rule.

"You are clever one. Words don't sway me so easily. How long have you entertained this...habit of yours?" said Nix.

"Ever since my eleventh's summer, my Lady."

"Let me venture a guess, you began with your mother's clothes first. She did not take kindly to it, did she?"

"My mother never understood my nature."

"And your father? The Magister Militum Narcissus?"

"He would murder me himself if he knew."

"The Known World will never understand us. It is sad."

Majorian's eyes peered at the crown Nix was wearing.

"My Lady fancies a throne?"

Nix blushed. What would he want as an answer? The answer was obvious to her.

"An Elysian on the Medean throne? You speak about fairy tales," said Nix.

"Fairy tales can come to pass. You have heard the prophecy."

*An Elysian will rule the Known World* thought Nix, a fantasy all Elysian monarchs believed in for the past three centuries. It poisoned their bloodline, causing them to wage war against the Medean Empire. All imagined themselves to be the one who would seize Thanatopolis.

"They are fairy tales because reality is a cruel mistress," said Nix.

"A mistress everyone weds."

"Clever poetry. Would it please you to recite some for me?"

The sound of boots clattering in the corridor alerted her. Nix scoured the room. Majorian gasped as her hands dragged him under Livia's bed. His breath was pressed against her left hand. She smelled one of Livia's pomegranate fragrances on him. His tastes were arguably poorer than hers.

Two sets of boots entered the tiled floor. Nix deduced they were Excurbitores by the weight of their footsteps.

"I swore someone yelped here," said one Excurbitore with a thick Clovian accent.

"Must have been rats," said a second Excurbitore with a Rauthengardian accent.

"Inform the emperor that rat catchers will be needed."

"We may need more than rat catchers. Two of our own have not returned in days."

"Deserters. They left their gold in their quarters. We may seize it."

The Excurbitores circled the room. "No, they were exploring the palace's underground. There is something lurking there, I tell you. We must scour the place."

"Your imagination runs wild. The turncloaks have left the city."

"No, no, no, it is a monster. I can hear it slithering within the walls. It speaks to us. It whispers names."

Their boots left the room. Nix and Majorian laid for minutes under the bed, hearing their tense breathing. They only extirpated themselves out of their hiding place once no sound could be heard from the corridor.

“Our lives could have been forfeited,” said Majorian.

That was an exaggeration. She could have always used magic to wiggle herself out of peril.

“There is beauty in danger,” said Nix.

“What?”

“You are a soldier, are you not? Do not lie to me. The thrill of danger arouses you.”

“Only the craven seeks violence.”

“Do not bore me with morality.”

His lips stood inches away from hers. Nix touched his warm hand. Sweat ran from his forehead. Was today the day an Elysian handmaiden conquered a Medean prince? The Elysian poets would dissect this story until the end of times.

“Are you sure?” he said as colors rose in his face.

“Only if you can keep a secret.”

“I am a Scholae Palatinae. Keeping secrets is my vocation.”

Her lips closed the distance. Nix tasted his sweetness, rivaling the finest wine. His hands grabbed her waist. Nix snuffed the candle on Livia’s desk as she sauntered into Livia’s bed.



# Chapter 12

She found Ralens throwing rocks atop the walls of Thanatopolis. Winds howled. Majorian stood guard. Both Scholae Palatinae and Empire wore plain tunics. A red moon shone over the North Sea. Dromons and quinqueremes sailed through the night towards the capital's lighthouse. Their numbers had more than doubled since last year.

Behind them, clamors rose from the Hippodrome. The Emeralds and the Sapphires were practicing for the next chariot races. Once Nix was done walking Spartak, she would join the audience. Like Baba before her, she had fallen to the trap of wagering her salary on her favorite team. Mathematically, placing a bet on a team defied all laws of probability. However, no feeling surpassing quadrupling one's bet once the horses crossed the finish line.

"I made Livia co-Empress," said Ralens as he threw a rock towards the starless night.

Nix grimaced. It was obvious the princess would not let the phoenix sit alone in the spider's web.

"You do not trust Claradore after all those years?" said Nix, feigning ignorance.

"No, it was Claradore's idea. I have seen how she and Domitian looked at the crown. Enemies should be kept close."

"So they can press their daggers against your throat? Heed my advice: send Domitian to the East. The man craves blood."

He shook his head. His right hand picked up another pebble. He launched it towards the North Sea. It ricocheted twenty times in the water. Nix did the same. With magic, she could make it bounce forty-eight times. And similar to anything related to magic, Claradore would find a way to showcase his innate talent. The man could form a slingshot out of his arms. When rocks were thrown by him, Nix believed they could reach the Rauthengardian shores.

"Domitian will get his chance. War will come," said Ralens, his voice trembling.

“When it does, will you truly want Livia next to you? Enemies on the inside are always the most dangerous.”

“Not if you are willing to be my ears.”

*An interesting proposition*, thought Nix. In the art of negotiation, the first person to give a price was defeated. Here, she was his senior by seven years. Surely, she could swipe a great deal out of his proposition.

“Standing in Livia’s presence is a cumbersome task,” said Nix.

Ralens made a mischievous smile. “Are you sure? I know you fancy borrowing her clothes.”

Nix blushed. She glared at Majorian. The Scholae Palatinae turned his eyes away.

“I-I-I swore an oath to the Emperor!” said Majorian.

“Rest assured, I do not mind your eccentricities. In fact, your proximity to Livia will be of great use. All of Livia’s thoughts and actions must be reported to me,” said Ralens.

“I trust I will be well compensated for this,” said Nix.

“Of course, I will create a title for you, the Magister Sacra Vestis.”

A title for herself only. Baba would be proud of her and so would Serena.

“May Serena join in?”

“The Magister Sacra Vestis may enlist others as they see fit.”

Spartak barked ferociously. She saw too late the tentacle emerge from the well. It grabbed the Emperor. Ralens yelled. Majorian let out profanities. The tentacle dragged its captive towards the hole. The Scholae Palatinae dropped his shield and lance. His hands seized the monster’s appendage. In an instant, his body barreled down the darkness.