

Lacryma

Skyshader

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Prologue

Her eyes opened themselves. Her body boiled. Toes, fingers, tendons, shoulders, everything ached and burned. Livia had never felt this sensation. Empty air escaped her mouth. *What is going on?*. Help. She had to call a handmaiden. None of her muscles responded. Outside, the moon shone, casting a malefic light on her still body. Livia did not understand. Why couldn't she move?

Blood. This smell overwhelmed her nose. *Is someone hurt? Am I bleeding?* Yet it was not just blood in the air. An unpalpable, almost undetectable fragrance. Ancient and pernicious through its elusiveness. All of her senses were trying to identify this scent which they should know.

Her back raised itself. Something like a whip lashed at it. She did not give that order. Her fingers cracked themselves. It felt they had doubled in weight. In fact, her entire body seemed to drag this unseen mass or boulder behind it. *What in the Goddess' name is happening?* Her body brought her hands before her eyes. Her right hand touched her left hand's palm. A foreign tingling shook her entire being as if it was the first time her body had touched that area. *Stop!* Akin to a petulant child, her hands went to her waist, her shoulders and then her cheeks, pressing their palms against her skin. A tidal wave of unknown sensitivity struck Livia's nerves. Never had she imagined her own body to be this reactive to her own touch. It did not make any sense.

It was only now that she noticed it. Two. She could hear two heartbeats within her body. One beating faster than Medean war drums and the other...The other followed this unsettling beat, one that had no cadence. One whose frequency would madden the calmest of men. A beat that could only be achieved through unnatural means. Magic? Again, her lungs denied her the opportunity to scream.

Blood. She could taste it. A bulge within her skin coursing through her veins. This mass of red liquid crawling through the second heart, forcing every orifice of her body to accommodate it. The way it moved within her. It had legs. Eight of them. Akin to a termite colony, it could splinter into dozens if not hundreds of broodlings. Legions of them hatched from discarded shells. They scrambled to her lungs, her stomach, her eyes, her heart and her nose. Blood. Blood and a sour black substance poisoned her tongue. She felt them swarm all over. Crawling in every interstice of her organ,

foraging for flesh. They seized everything forcing her to do their bidding. If only she could vomit at the thought of that. When they wished, the broodlings could aggregate again into one fell abomination before slithering to her head, her lungs, her legs, petrifying all of her organs.

“It worked...” said Livia’s voice. Livia screeched to no avail, her voice clawing at this invisible barrier.

Her body sauntered out of the bed. It jumped with glee, causing the blood bulge to traverse all of her organs at a nightmarish speed. Her stomach churned . Mucus ran from her nose. Her body nonchalantly wiped it with a finger. Livia wished she could faint right now. *Stop it! Goddess save me from this!*

“It really worked! I...I can’t believe it! Oh! Baba! If only you could see this!”

Her body moved towards the mirror. Dishevelled black hair and a sweat soaked body greeted her red eyes. Red eyes...Red as the Medean phoenix. This could not be... Her eyes were blue. Liva saw her agony within those crimson eyes. Eyes which could peer at the depth of someone’s soul. Eyes which brimmed with fanatical determination through their lust for violence. The Brood Mother. *Goddess help me!*

“Salutations citizens, my name is Livia and I’m as the Goddess’ cunt!” said her voice as her face extended its tongue in a childish manner. The expressions her visage made...They should not be possible. From mischievous grins to devilish laughs, faces both her mother and father would have scolded her for when she was younger. *Please don’t watch this Goddess! I can’t! I don’t know what is going on!*

Screams, attempts to raise her fists. Nothing worked as her own body cackled by itself, deriding her. This had to be dream. Livia had to wake up. Yes, she should be in Domitian’s arms at this moment. This was just some wicked enchantment conjured by pagans such as those Elysians or Molochians merchants. It had to be.

Whatever her body wanted..It gravitated towards her wardrobe. Her eyes were now fixated on that purple cloak that the late Empress Eudoxia once wore during her balls. It was still emblazoned with the Tiarmat hydra. Her fingers ran through the delicate fox hide that comprised the collar of the attire.

“I have always wanted this one,” said her voice as her hands scurried to put on the cloak.

Turning to the mirror, her face snickered.

“See it does look better on me.”

Goddess save me! A demon resides within me! What have I done to deserve this?

The night could not worsen further. Something cawed. A crow with a bald human head appeared on her window. A creature descending straight from beyond the Gates of the Underworld. It sneered at her. Were those teeth even human? Livia did not dare to ask. Impossible. How this monster could exist was beyond the Goddess’ pantheon. The Goddess had ensured mankind that magic was annihilated. Regnant’s entire army purged the Known World of the villainous Magi and their human sacrifices. Nothing made sense in this feverish nightmare. *Domitian will think I am insane for imagining this!*

“You truly have done it, my dear. How long can you hold?” said the monstrosity.

“You doubt me?” said Livia’s voice.

“That is not the point. There is a reason the Magi had crucified all the people who attempted this... I have seen it myself...The last execution of this kind of miscreant...”

“What are dead men’s rules to the living?”

“The blood mingles with one another, my dear...You should never lose sight of yourself.”

“Always with the riddles...Has Baba ever told you how predictable you were?”

Who is this Baba? Magi? The Goddess liberated this world of the Magi a thousand years ago!

The bird-thing bit an apple with its human lips. “My dear, even Baba could not possibly envision what you have just done. What are you going to do next?”

Her body placed a finger on her mouth. “Shhh. I just noticed. She can still hear us.”

“My my, so the spell has not been perfected yet. What a shame.”

“She saw you.”

The bird-thing fed flies to cobblewebs on the corner of the window. “Rest assured, my dear. No one will believe her, not even the Emperor himself.”

“I’ll exit this, then. We have accomplished what we wanted.”

Livia felt her body convulse. She crumbled to the ground, shaking with increasing folly. She screamed, this time sound erupting from her vocal chords. *Free! I am free!* Her eyes teared up as a grotesque bulge was forming on her throat. It began as small as a pear. A searing pain consumed her neck as more and more blood flowed towards the horrible protrusion, swelling it to the size of a melon. *I can’t breathe.*

In a single instant, she retched a putrid mass of blood. For ten long agonizing seconds, Livia expelled liters if not gallons of foul liquid from herself. The taste. It felt she tasted every member of the human body concentrated in a vile juice. Never had she gagged as much as she did. Her eyes fluttered. The last thing they saw was the bird-thing departing from her window. Her world went black.

“My Lady is all right? I heard screaming,” asked the Elysian dancer at her door.

Livia shot up from her bed, frantically reaching for anything she could use as a weapon. Her body was drenched in urine and sweat. She could hear her own frenzied breathing.

What? Was this all a dream?

The Elysian. Livia has always found that attire ridiculous. Fully clothed in thick red tunic from head to shoes, a full demonstration of Claradore’s eccentricities. How that girl was supposed to endure the summer heat was beyond Livia’s comprehension. The girl’s eyes though...While Elysian women all looked the same, this one...There was something about her.

The Elysians...They had strayed away from The Faith, the worst decision someone could have made. The inability to cross the Gates of Hel...Stranded on the other side, unable to join in your loved ones the afterlife...Oh, if only she could save them...

Elysians. The gryphons of the desert. Our country’s sworn rival. Why did it have to be this way?

Livia asked for a bath to be prepared. Somehow, the Elysian dancer already anticipated her request. It was then that Livia recognized her face. She was that puppeteer

from earlier and her brother's tutor. She must have fornicated with Claradore to attain this position. There is no other way. Her name could have been Bix...Rix...Tix...Nix... Pix...probably Mix.

"I have had the worst nightmare to date. Let the Magister Herbarum know about it," said Livia.

"Princess, I am again sorry such vile omens plague you, I shall fetch Claradore," said Mix.

"Tell me before you go...Does magic still exist in the Elysian Empire?"

Mix raised an eyebrow. "I do not understand the question, Princess. Everyone knows magic has been extinct for more than a thousand years."

"That cannot be true...My dreams...You cannot comprehend what I have dreamed of."

Mix placed her hand over Livia's. Glacial. How the Elysian's touch could be colder than snow? The human body could not be that frigid. "Princess, you should rest easy. Know that should magic truly return, the Faith, the Barbarian Kingdoms, Elysian and Medean Empires, no the Known World, would be in a torrent of unadulterated pain."

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 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 savory. 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 Sarvitaorian 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 Sarvitarian 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 Vyrnogothians. *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 Vyrnogothian banded together with the Tiarmat and Medean Empires, clashing with the invaders during the Battle of the Megidollaean 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.

"Oooooh, 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 Megidollaean 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 syllabes.

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 had 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' eyesight. Her speed amazed her, being four to fives 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 harbingers 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 its pillars, her mouth agape. A single 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 Vitiatus 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 almagalm 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 hortse 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."

"Pfffft, 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 quinqueremes 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 Vitiatus' 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.

"Ooooooooooooh!" 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 Vitiatus 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 Sarvitarians 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 Sarvitanian 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 Sarvitanian 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.

"...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 Vitiatus, 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 Herboram 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 Herborau 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. 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

The day has yet to come. A phrase she has repeated to herself every night for the past eight years. It symbolized both disappointment and relief. Nix's sleeping form was always a delight to dig one eyes' into. In all the years Serena had spent wandering across the Known World, she never imagined life would find a novel way to test her. Why did the Gatekeeper grant Nix that voice, that smile, those brown eyes that had pained her, that laugh? Another mystery the enigma that was life wanted Serena to solve.

Beyond the windows of the Palace Complex, children ruled the Known World, a constant she had to adapt to. Older kids would rip apart other children's families, sending the youngest to war to die for another child's toy. They would marry each other before tiring of their spouses akin to worn playthings. They would denigrate their parents, children nonetheless, before wallowing in regret at their own mistakes. Such was the state of this world that had become a garden for newborn to centenarian infants.

In the garden of humanity, the Magi had bloomed the brightest, their vigorous roots absorbing with astonishing efficiency any nutrients the Forgotten Gods sprinkled on the ground. To the non-Magi that injustice was something that had riled Serena throughout her life. With magic, the Magi's flowers flaunted their petals which espoused all colors of the rainbows. Their anthuriums, celosias, birds of paradise had illuminated the world with their celestial beauty indescribable to any modern human. For the floating libraries found in the Sunken Continent ensured supremacy. The tulips, lotuses and lilies of the non-Magi had long been accustomed to yielding water and food to the more ravishing plants whose use of dragons asserted a near unquestioned dominance. It was under these circumstances that Serena had uprooted the anthuriums, celosias, birds of paradise, the prestige and pride of a bygone time, the zenith of human opportunism. The Known World today was forged under the auspices of fairness and equity. Or so what she thought when she met Nix.

Nix whose plumage could be unmatched in its beauty and danger. Nix who had been the first Magi to have been born in a millennium. The first flower to have survived the manmade extinction. To have someone who shared a similar upbringing, someone who felt the intricacies that magic did to one's body, the sensations that can make one

reach a heightened plane, one above the rest of the children's existence. To break the monotony of humanity. Yes, she missed that shareable sentiment.

"Do you find sword fights enjoyable?" had asked Nix the other night.

Her ability to withhold the truth had been challenged a staggering amount of times with Nix and Claradore. They would find the strength to forgive her or so she hoped. How difficult it was to restrain one from shedding tears when the last two Magi had crossed blood in the imperial gardens away from privy eyes. How onerous it was to stay silent on their flawed techniques. Flawed but tantalizing. Magi had poured their essence and survival into this sculpture of the body. The blood was both the chisel and the stone. Her son had been right. Depriving humanity of the most grandiose of all art forms was reprehensible.

"What do you expect out of mastering that skill? Vengeance?" Serena had asked in the Elysian Tongue. Her voice had slipped. It gave off this aristocratic accent, a trace of her mother tongue. Claradore's eyes had held a glimmer of doubt. Had she spoken in the Forgotten Tongue, this feverish dream would have collapsed akin to a house of cards. That was out of the question.

"Pumpkin face! Do you want to duel good old me and my dagger next!" Serena had corrected herself in the Imperial Tongue with the Rauthengardian accent Nix and Claradore were accustomed to hearing. Claradore had blinked. With enough luck, this would be seen as a figment of his imagination.

"I never imagined you to adore suffering," had Nix.

And so she had dueled Nix on that day, remembering how a blood blade can shatter steel with ease. Yet she had done well for someone who had not had the pleasure of fighting a Magi in years. Serena had smiled as she had bent down to avoid Nix' thrusts. They had danced, with Nix leading the duo, this puzzle of intentions that she delighted in playing. A duel was a contest of predictions where a split second mistake costed one a limb or a life. Eyes met, the same look at that day. Even the scent had been replicated with cruel accuracy. The tease of Nix' lips creeping closer to Serena's was insufferable as it had been on that day. The Gatekeeper's designs with Nix were shrouded in obscurity. Only through walking Nix' mortal life hand to hand could Serena hope to decipher whatever intentions he had for her. Serena and Nix had spun and spun, their movements interlocked in flurries and parries.

To perpetuate the masquerade, Serena had let herself slip on the grass. Letting a Magi seize victory from the jaws of defeat. Her younger self would have never forgiven her. Nix' blood blade had flirted with her throat.

Claradore had clapped.

"The lady Serena claims she had never trifled with Magi yet you never landed a blow on her, my dear," had said Claradore to Nix.

"The spectator has no right to criticize the choices of the performer from his high seat," had answered Nix. She had pointed her blood blade towards him.

"My dear, I do not take pleasure in defeating girls who have not seen their twentieth summer."

Children. To Serena, Claradore and Nix were but children. Children who did not comprehend the significance of the spider tattoos they had eagerly stamped on their young bodies. Tattoos whose importance had been buried at the end of the Age of Magic. To further complicate matters, there was the question of that medallion. Serena did not have to unlock it. The contents were obvious to herself. It would only serve as a confirmation for the inevitable course of action.

"I would prefer not to harm sir Claradore's shiny pectorals. Pumpkin face here told me a painter would come when the rooster calls."

Nix never missed any chance to berate Claradore's painting sessions. If Nix were to taken at face value, the man's caprices were worthy of derision. For this reformed Red Guild, there existed a doctrine claiming that clothes exerted an unbearable constraint on the human body. While it was true that one should be free of any inner doubts to cast magic, this interpretation of the Magi's philosophy was an experiment. Hence, Serena and Nix had either the pleasure or the horror of watching Claradore grace the Emperor's presence naked. Scantly clothed male and female virgins laid in his arms much to the ire of Princess Livia and the late Cardinal Innocentus.

"I insist," had said Nix.

"What do you offer for this performance, my dear?"

"A performance of my own in front of the Emperor."

“A wise proposition.”

Some bones and organs deep within Serena would have answered the summons to arms. Alas her mind warned her about the pitfalls of confronting a child with the temperament of her past opponents. Would she have the willpower To keep the truth from leaking? It had been ages. The last battlefield she had sleepwalked into never failed to reappear in her dreams. Men in their cuirass swam in rivers of blood seeking her foes. Whenever she went, they had followed with the blinding loyalty of dogs. What started with a glimmer of reconciliation collapsed into a war had eternized. Serena had remembered sitting atop a pile of corpses as she had always did. A lone soldier faced her. One that has always looked magnificent in that sapphire cape and that plumed helmet. One that her words and screams had never reached. One that she could never hold in her arms again. A wily one that had turned the blade that were her imperfections against her. Mother, he had said as he unsheathed his sword. Son, she had said, hearing his heartbeat for the last time.

“I am tired, pumpkin face...Another day?” had said Serena.

Serena had given Nix that disarming gaze, echoing the one puppies such as Spartak used against their owners. Nix had groaned in her characteristic manner: adorable and sisterly.

It was these memories that made Serena relive her distant youth. Life had stagnated without Magi to stir its pot. One had to relish these moments before the memory of their brutal end brought one back to self-pity. Serena opened the windows to hers and Nix’ room. On the bed, Nix snored softly next to Spartak or rather she was being cuddled by the beast’s thirteen greater palms frame. Nix had told Serena that it was a direwolf, a most ludicrous affirmation.

Some things are better learned through hardships.

Serena jumped, head first. Winds buffeted her face. Eight floors beneath her, a constellation of torches navigated the streets of Thanatopolis, ignorant of the struggles and sacrifices of the generations before them. It was better this way Her blood erupted from her spine with the ferocity of an ancient geyser. Snow-white feathers aggregated around two set of wings. She flew, feeling the air trickling over her shoulders and legs akin to a glorious dove.

Chapter 11

“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,” said Nix.

“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, Phoenix Wing.”

“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 spent 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, Phoenix Wing?” 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, Phoenix Wing? 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 12

Alone, Serena unlocked Nix' medallion, confirming its mundane contents. She closed the ornament, tying it up around a dove's neck. *The die is cast.*

"You know what needs to be done," she said to the bird as it departed the windows of her room.

Unwanted toys should be parted with. Another child's dirt was another's gold. That was the advice she had given to that boy on his father's deathbed.

Death of royalty invited melodrama. The purple born were the unwilling participants of a masked ball who hid their faces behind grief. See the prince, Ralens the Younger, his father's crown ill-fitting his head. He wore this mask of tears as he deposited a wreath of violets on the Emperor's body.

This mask of tears was but a transparent veil. The boy would sit on a throne on the morrow and be imprisoned in the loneliest profession in the Known World.

Nix sulked next to Serena. Humor had proven ineffective today. Within a week, Nix would forget about it. A child like her should not have been given that toy.

The site for his masked carnival was the Palace Complex's mausoleum, whose construction failed to mirror the talent of the Magi. The entrance's tympana, lined with lapis lazuli and emerald tiles exposed an octagonal platform where the imperial catafalque stood. No floating lanterns, no obelisks with inscriptions releasing an incandescent glow at night, no dragon bones buried with their rider. All architecture succeeding the Age of Magic continued this trend of over simplicity. It was expected. Children could not hope to match the masterworks of adults. In addition, this simplicity allowed Serena's eyes to focus on the children hosting the masked ball.

"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 always repeated to Nix. It was one of the few times Serena had agreed with him.

Ralens the Younger coiled himself in Nix' arms. His crown slid from his head, ricocheting on the mosaic floor. Serena caught it in her hands. The diadem's rubies reflected the painful fresco adorning the ceiling. It was that day.

Her bloody spear had pierced his breastplate. The lone child did not scream. He collapsed, his eyes as adorable as they had been when she had birthed him. *My baby boy. I am killing my baby boy.* Magic had been but futile when the Gatekeeper called for his soul. Her bloodied hands listened to his fleeting heartbeat, his gargling blood dooming her miserable attempt at parenthood.

Around her, men had roared her name. Her name, which they had usurped. Her name which they had used to shy away from responsibility. Her name which was now synonymous with kinslaying. *Erfan, I...*

With the strength of despair, she had lifted his body, the men rejoicing in the murder of her son. A mistake that could not be undone. Rebel trumpets rang on the battlefield. Her wings sprouted, carrying this toll, this boulder, this leech that would feed at her inner thoughts for the next summers of her childless life. Her men alluded to enemy reinforcements. Serena flew away from the smell of guts and blood. Beneath her, the men she once called traitors swarmed the men she had once called her followers. This war her hands had started was no longer hers. The Gates Hel had awaited her first visit.

Medean horns announced the coming of the princess Livia and her consort Domitian, lovers dancing on a house of dominos chasing after the thrill of perfection. Under the sphinx mask Livia wore laid this green visage every time her impassible face watched her brother's crown. A purple dress embroidered with phoenixes was her choice of attire. Serena glanced at Nix who had the guilty pleasure of borrowing the princess' sumptuous clothes and perfume in her absence. When enrobed in purple, Nix became the pearl in the oyster that was the Known World. Serena's pearl which she had polished after acquiring it from The Nameless Slave.

The Nameless Slave, the one Nix oddly called Baba, had entertained an egregious amount of fallacies when Nix had entered her care. A wonderful dove such as the last Magi was not warranted to be kept in a cage. Birds never thrived in such neglect. But who was Serena to lambast the parenting methods of a Nameless Slave? The elderly child would always remind Serena of her own inadequacies, of Erfan. In the end, both Serena and the Nameless Slave had proven their worthlessness. When the Nameless Slave's house had been razed by the lawless children, Serena had been perched in

a tree, watching as Nix could finally deploy her wings. How many times had Nix and Serena played the prince and the accomplice with Serena rescuing her from the imaginary dragons. In their pretend world, Serena would be the prince who wielded Regnant's legendary sword. Nix, the simple companion, would tend to the horses, sharpen Serena's weapons and cook splendid pastries. Together, they could triumph over any monsters drawn by Nix' imagination. And such were her dreams, dreams that she has never had in years, dreams that she had forgotten to be possible or plausible. To be a prince for Nix.

Another set of Medean horns, followed by a troupe of flutes and lyres heralded Claradore's arrival in the mausoleum. As with his usual appearances, he entered the scene bereft of any cloth on his upper body much to the bloodshot eyes of Domitian. A male and a female bedmates holding his arm saluted all occupants of the mausoleum. This capricious child even maintained that habit during the cold winter months, a folly even for someone of Serena's age.

"My Prince, your father has bestowed me the honor of reading his will."

"Magister Militum. I-I. The crown is a burden that I cannot shoulder."

Ralens the Younger picked the diadem from Serena's arms. He knelt before Claradore, raising the crown in his hands.

"Please, as the man who saved me and my sister from certain demise during the Plague of Anastasian, may you lead this country and may your reign be as long and prosperous as Sarvitar the Great."

A delectable turn of events. Serena scoured the room for the equally succulent reactions. Domitian clenched his fists. Livia bit her nails, blood leaking from her fingers.

Claradore picked up the diadem, this unreadable gaze analyzing the piece he had probably long coveted. Nix held Serena's hands. Serena squeezed hers, holding the illusion that she supported this course of action. Magi who craved for purple were the most dangerous. Through this greed for domination, they had conjured wars, plagues and natural disasters out of thin air. The Age of Magic could only be undone by Magi themselves for only they could sink continents and devour cities in vortexes of flames, hail and darkness. With the Magi extinct, the world had been saved from apocalyptic destruction.

"Magister Herboraum, the empire needs an emperor whose prowess in battle is unmatched. Elysian savages and Rauthengardian barbarians are amassing at the borders...Only I can inspire fear in our enemies," said Domitian. Livia elbowed him.

"Forgive my fiancé, this conundrum is better left to the Goddess. A new Cardinal will be arriving at the capital soon. His guidance would be invaluable to us," said Livia.

"My dear purpleborn, you all forget the principles of kingmaking."

"Kingmaking? You were the Emperor's confidant, milord. It is logical that the crown would belong to you," said Serena.

Claradore shook his head. "The army. Who does it answer to?"

"Does it matter, milord?"

"Ordogan. Someone has not been paying attention," answered Nix.

"Elysian! You dare snicker at me!" said Domitian grabbing the hilt of his ceremonial sword. Livia put her arm in front of his chest.

As if summoned by Nix herself, Ordogan entered the mausoleum. The unruly children in the room shut their mouth as this Molochian child placed a composite bow on the Emperor's body. His body rigidified itself as it made the imperial salute. Serena looked at Nix. When the former was unaware that Ordogan was married, she had this outrageous fantasy of having him as her prince.

Nix stayed silent, fidgeting with her fingers. The girl could not wait to soar the skies above the capital to search for her missing object.

In a moment worthy of Medean history books, Claradore placed the crown back on Ralens the Younger's head. Serena saw that even Livia could not restrain her relief. Ordogan bent the knee.

"Your August Majesty, the crown belongs to those who do not seek it," he said as he bowed before his liege. Nix clapped. All occupants of the mausoleum knelt. Serena caught Claradore's eye. Both smirked at one another. The significance of that was not lost to either. The day would come sooner than expected.

Chapter 13

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

An armada of lotions, herbs and powders was lined up like dromons in the dockyards. They stood on furniture whose legs were carved in the shape of dragons alongside with brushes of all sizes in pots awaiting orders. Medean princesses and empresses commanded the Known World's largest reserve of cosmetics, a treasure they did not hesitate to flaunt in the carnival of masks that was court.

Nix walked on the mosaic floor which depicted the Goddess' final departure from the land of the living, her swan white wings deployed, carrying the corpse of the Firstborn in her arms. Nix's 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: a flowing gown of crimson and black that made one look like they were carved out of obsidian and blood. The finest silk from the Unknown World constituted the delicate fabric. Livia's scent lingered on the cloth, this crown of honey-sweet rose that blessed its wearer with an exotic journey of jasmine, saffron and roses. Only one woman in the Known World could wear this scent: the Medean Empress.

She removed her handmaiden clothes and put on Livia's undergarments. The red and black gown came next. She delighted in its tender fabric, knowing that the cloth conveyed both nobility and peril.

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' legions of cosmetics tempted her. Her hands could not resist. She brushed her face. The princess' visage was meant to be beauty honed into weaponry, a destabilizing force that was meant to ease unmasking its beholders. Nix applied a crimson shadow underneath her eyes. Her lips were painted as red as Vyrnogothian wine.

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. The crown framed her brown eyes. It was all natural as if she had always been destined to rest atop her head.

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 Purpleborn did not understand the privilege the Goddess bestowed them upon birth.

A cough came behind her. Nix yelped.

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

A long haired person of her age stood there, flashing a familiar smile. Like her, they had been cursed with uniqueness for she knew the Goddess has given them both male and female genitalia. In fact, one often had to wonder if this Majorian fellow was a man or a woman. Majorian could pass as both without much effort. To Nix, having being bestowed both male and female components made them the pinnacle of human beauty.

For tonight, Majorian chose to be a man wearing a Scholae Palatinac's dress, a black chiton lined with ruby patterns with the golden neck-torques.

"I hope I am not disturbing anything," said Majorian in the Classical Tongue with a male voice. If Majorian would ever enter the annals of history, it would be through their melodious voice that could conquer any soul with both its range and its power. Through Claradore's patronage, Majorian became the capital's foremost singer, their performance attracting dignitaries, courtiers, merchants, nobles and children alike in the Palace Complex's amphitheater.

Nix jumped into their arms, letting her lips meet theirs.

“How fared your play?” said Nix.

“The children fancied it. Though I tire of playing the Firstborn. Melina has slain me forty-eight times this year as the Goddess.” They inspected the sleeves and fabric of Nix’s dress. “Quite the original attire you are wearing.”

“Tell me I wear it better than that simpering princess.”

“You always burned brighter than the princess. She is but a mere candle to your brazier.”

Nix blushed, planting another kiss on his lips. To Majorian, 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.

“I have heard you and Serena have had no success with the medallion,” said Majorian.

“Zhapur informed me it relates to a certain Elysian empress. Aishula, they called her. There is nothing in the archives. No records. As if she never existed.” said Nix.

“I am to perform at Kornikus’ Villa in a few months. The Elysian patricians will gather there—the Emperor of Kings celebrates his ascension.”

“And why should I bother with an old man’s celebration? The Emperor of Kings is far away.”

“The patricians are old families. Someone will remember an empress the archives forgot.”

“The Goddess knows why my medallion is related to her.”

“Perhaps you’re her long-lost daughter. Wouldn’t that be a tale for a singer such as me?”

Nix glared at them. “This is not a fairy tale.”

Domitian clasped her hands with theirs, gripping her with both a woman's delicateness and a man's strength. "But you would like it to be. Would you prefer me a prince on a white horse?"

"I do not deny it."

Majorian's voice shifted higher, taking on a woman's cadence. "And what if I was a princess instead of a prince? What then?"

"Why do you entertain that thought? You can be anyone you desire."

"I cannot. The Faith will burn me at the stake."

"The witch burns beside the abomination at the pyre. This is why we light candles for Claradore's victory."

"So we can be two princesses?"

"Any throne would buckle under two princesses kissing on it."

"But it is the Emperor who defines the decrees, the rules, the law. We could stop the killing of people of my kind."

"Claradore will remake this world in his image. He has already saved you and gave you a purpose."

"He is but a collector of broken bizarre things. We are all incongruities that he rescued. Let us be realistic. He will ask sacrifices out of us in return."

"That is why we only belong in the Red Guild. Not even our own parents wanted us."

Majorian gave a smile full of melancholy. He sniffed Nix's or rather Livia's sweat and perfume that still clung to the dress. "May I call you my Lady while you are wearing Livia's clothes?"

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.

Nix cleared her throat. “You are clever one. Words don’t sway me so easily.” said Nix in the Classical Tongue with a flawless imitation of Livia’s voice.

“Livia, I am but a simple soldier. Do not use such vocabulary with me,” answered Majorian as Domitian.

“Your colossal stupidity is why I chose you.”

Majorian puffed their cheeks, posturing their shoulders to accentuate their muscles in the same manner as Domitian. “Livia, please! I am the Magister Militum, the highest ranking military man in the Empire! You must show me the respect I deserve!”

“You did not attain it by merit but by woos. My father chose you over Ordogan after I begged him day and night.”

Both Nix and Majorian burst into uncontrollable laughter. The absence of Livia and her fiancee was a golden opportunity to practice their skills in the theater. Pretending to be a Purpleborn was a hobby as addictive as magic mushroom. Everything was simpler when one could throw denarii at any problem.

“The Known World will never understand us. It is sad,” said Majorian.

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

“My Lady fancies a throne?”

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

“An Elysian on the Medean throne? You still 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 the one who would seize Thanatopolis.

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

“A mistress everyone forcibly weds.”

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

Before he could soothe with songs, 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.

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 in the Imperial Tongue 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 Exiles’ Island. 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 must be a monster. The rumors are rampant about this place. People can hear monsters slithering within the walls.”

Their boots left the room. Nix and Majorian laid for minutes under the bed, hearing their tense breathing. They only extripated 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 this 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.”

Majorian’s nose stood inches away from hers. His clove scented breath made her heart palpitate. Nix touched his warm hand. Sweat ran from his forehead. They slowly tip toed towards the door, locking it.

“Do you wish to continue our little play?” Nix said.

“Only if I get to be Livia this time?” said Majorian with their female voice.

“Calamitous! There cannot be two of me!” said Nix as Livia.

“Fool! Don’t you see? The Goddess has granted me the ability to perfect my self-adulation!”

“If I am so enamored with myself, why shouldn’t I bed myself?”

“What a brilliant observation, other Livia! Shall we?”

Nix snickered. Her lips closed the distance. Nix tasted Majorian’s sweetness, rivaling the finest wine. Their hands grabbed her waist. She felt their breath on her neck. Nix snuffed the candle on Livia’s desk as they sauntered into the bed.

Chapter 14

“Do you have candy?” asked the boy who must have been twelve summers at most.

Serena handed him the treat. The boy and two other accomplices had snuck into the dromon which prow she sat on. The dockyards overflowed with these unfinished warships. Claradore’s new decree had doubled the expenditures for the Medean army.

Today was supposed to be Nix’ birthday, yet Serena’s friend had been preoccupied by trivial matters, leaving Serena alone to throw rocks at the North Sea on this moonless evening. When Nix joined her, they would indulge in this contest to determine who would cook dinner for the night. Yesterday, Nix had decided to not conform to the rules, transforming her hand into this slingshot that could launch pebbles up to one imperial mile away.

“Didn’t you agree not to use magic for this, Phoenix Wing?”

“It is not magic, it is a special alteration of my arm.”

“Who are you now? A professor of the Classical Tongue? Magic is magic.”

“I am who I desire to be,” said Nix. In response, Serena had pulled Nix’ cheeks with such force that Nix might have liquified on the spot. Once they had resolved their discussion on terminology, Nix had begrudgingly roasted the mutton Claradore had hunted for them, resulting in skewers with orange peppers and olives. Serena had to celebrate these victories while they were still easy to come. The day has yet to come.

The sound of water splashing made her turn her head towards someone whose hands were thrashing in the North Sea. The boy. His gremlin friends yelled. Predictable. The older she became, the more she noticed the predictability children’s of personalities no matter the age. As watching over humans was identical to gardening, some children’s defining traits fell into mosses, others into ferns, flowering plants or non-flowering plants. Then, by observing their inner nature, they could fall into one of the multiple species Serena had cultivated. Never had Serena failed to associate a child by its plant. Surprise was missing from her long existence. That was until Nix and Claradore had come.

The boy in the North Sea strayed further and further away from Serena's vision. One of his fellow accomplices kept his finger on his friend's location while the other yelled in the deserted dockyards.

"Goddess! Goddess! Help him!" screamed the gremlin. Serena stood up on the dromon's prow. She felt her blood converge towards her back. Perhaps she would feel generous today.

Children of all ages would always underestimate the current. One wrong move in the sea, and it would devour you as it did with the Sunken Continent. Another case of parental failure and of the child not heeding his parents' advice.

With her wings she could have done it. The two accomplices who had followed the boy screamed frantically, hoping an Excubitore or a heroic passerby would undo this preventable tragedy. Alas, life was never a fairy tale and this was what rendered life the most gorgeous and the most monotonous creation the Forgotten Gods had ever bestowed on this world. Better a lesson learned through blood than to receive a token of ingratitude.

When all that remained was the sea' murderous calmness, the two accomplices sobbed the same way Nix had when she had lost the Nameless Slave. Serena yawned.

Was it all a mistake? What was done could never be undone. Serena had resented herself for overestimating men. They would use the Goddess' name to hide behind their evil. They would babble about the Gospel to tame the masses the Goddess had freed. They would abhor change in the name of idiotic traditions. They could ignite wars without magic. For the Goddess became the magic of the Age of Man. Yet with magic, men could fly. Men could see the sun while resting their necks on clouds. Who had never wished they could fall asleep on a nimbus, their misty surface being the perfect bed. With magic, water could be solidified when touched by one's blood allowing men run on water, feeling their feet bounce on the surface of lakes and seas. Nix and Claradore had reminded Serena of how much the Goddess had taken away from the world.

I have been a fool, haven't I, Erfan?

"We were all fools," had said the Nameless Slave nineteen summers ago in her house built atop mushrooms. Serena had never thought she had it in her, to retire to a secluded location away from men who now waged war on themselves without magic.

“Better fools than helots,” had answered Serena in the Forgotten Tongue. She had been invited to savor one of the Nameless Slave’ new recipes involving a catfish roasted with ginger, thymes and black pepper.

“Are we not still helots? Trapped in this prison of immortality that you have built for both of us.”

“You can always fall on your sword, Slave.”

“The Nameless Slave might have done so, but she no longer exists. I have been known as Baba for three centuries now.”

“Baba? How intriguing. Is that it will address you, this Magi that you are hiding from me? What is its name?”

“Nix,” said the Nameless Slave, her voice cracked, her face whitening under the pressure of Serena’s words. The Nameless Slave has grown attached to a Magi. Absurd. Change had not been a feature of their design. Nix. That name. Why had that name been chosen? The newborn Magi was unaware that her life had already been decided when she had first crossed Serena’s path.

“Bring her to me,”

“Will I have to build a small coffin if I do?”

“A command is a command, Slave.”

Serena had surprised herself by leaving the house with clean hands. Growing senile had made her teeter towards irrationality.

The night before, Nix had sought her medallion which had mysteriously disappeared. From the ground below, Serena had the honor of witnessing the finesse of Nix’ flight. Moonlight had shimmered on the girl’s crimson wings as they flapped under the starry night. An astray phoenix she was looking for a nest she never had, a flock long extinct. If Nix had known the truth, would she blame Serena? No, she would understand. Serena had no choice. The Gatekeeper had created Nix in the image of that woman, one whose legs had enlaced with Serena’s, one whose lush lips tasted like wine, one whose eyes burned with resentment on that terrible day.

Serena had put the coruscating lance she had found for Nix’ birthday on the bed.

“Happy birthday, Phoenix Wing,” she whispered quietly to the empty bed.

Nix’ encyclopedias and archives could never do the weapon justice for it was Regnant the Dragonslayer’s weapon, the same he had used to slay the Last Dragon. Serena would tell Nix that it was an eerily accurate replica, her friend being none the wiser. Acquiring it had required Serena to fly through a phantasmagoria of nostalgia and sorrow for Serena’s white wings had carried her to the lands of crags and sequoias. Now known as part of the Unknown world for the present civilizations, this nature preserve used to teem with fallen kingdoms. During her second childhood with Nix, they had spoken about the tales never told in the past. Tales they were not to Serena. Her blood and tears had forged the words the scribes had scrambled to write on parchments as they had followed her trail of glory. The Nameless Slave had been there, chronicling each deed and so-called miracle before Serena had made the mistake of emancipating her.

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The Nameless Slave’s question about the tiny coffin had lingered in Serena’s mind for the past eight years. Centuries ago, that question would have been valid. The first Magi born in a millennium. Somehow, Serena found herself envious. It was true. Life without Magi had worn her.

Chapter 15

In the history books, it would have taken climbing a mountain of skulls to achieve this. The ability to tame fate had been reserved exclusively to the Goddess and the purple born. To them, it was the Heavens' mandate to forge a better world for their denizens. Elysians, Rauthengardians, Cachalots, Medeans, clergymen, courtiers with their varied costumes assembled beneath the imperial throne centered around four fire pots used to clean its dried phoenix feathers. Servants held the plumes with pincers over the brazier, the phoenix' remains glittering above the flames. *The phoenix shall always resurrect.*

Frescoes detailing the Empire's past victories against the Donians unwinded before any visitor. Nix had once touched the painted marble, letting her mind travel through time. From Emperor Marro reuniting the Tiarmat and Medean Empires one last time to the desperate struggle against Molochian hordes, the memories of the elders resurfaced through art. They had always succeeded in rocking Nix within her present hammock, singing songs of bravery and treason.

The first man entered the titanic bronze gates, rows of Excubidores struck the pristine floor, announcing his coming. Mechanical birds sang. Some were as small as a fist. Others were as large as a melon. When one pulled a string on their back, they would emit the exact same noise as a real life bird. Most of the time, they would be found on the tree of gilt bronze in front of the Emperor's throne. Another invention used to wow the barbarian emissaries that would waddle in court. Today, Nix asked her pupil to display one that showed a house standing on mushrooms with an old lady in front of it. A young girl was running away from a bear next to the home while carrying what appeared to be a fish in her hands.

The father and the mother, ragged farmers from the capital's outskirts, came before the Emperor with their son. The child toddled in awe of the grandiose architecture before stopping in front of her elevated throne illuminated by the building's oculus. He charmed the ranks of noblewomen eyeing him with affection. The little one's pupils loitered around the coffered concrete dome. Above, constellations were mapped via glintstones on the ceiling.

"I too was impressed like you, little one, by these. Have you seen our collection of statues? Emperor Tiarmat wrestling a bull can also help foster your imagination." Nix mused. "How may the crown guide you today, my dear?"

The man lunged forward, shoving his child aside. "Milord, this whore cheated on me for a low life scoundrel. I am divorcing her; the boy belongs to me by right. He is old enough to work on my fields," said the man, his bloodshot eyes darting his bruised wife.

"Your August Majesty, please, I had no choice: I needed money. He spent it all on alcohol and prostitutes."

"Wench! See milord, the whore lies in front of you! You have all the evidence of her debauchery. The boy must be mine!"

"I see the matter relates to the custody of your son. As the divine representative of the Goddess on the mortal plane, I will provide guidance for you. Do you swear by the Goddess you shall respect my decision?" said Ralens in the Classical Tongue. *Flawless discourse.* The fruits of laborious nights spent rehearsing this type of answer grew from the throne. Nix picked one, savoring its sour taste.

Both parents acquiesced his words. Ralens turned to Nix.

"Then let's proceed. You two have proven unable to safeguard your son. The crown shall buy the boy from you to relieve you from this burden. He will work in the palace's gardens, a starting place for a prosperous career at court, no? Four sheep and two cows for the boy!" Nix announced to the surprised court. She found Serena hiding behind an Excubitore's purple cloak. Her friend put a finger on her mouth. Mischief would run rampant as her hands wandered around the deep pockets she had access to.

"No, please! He is my child!" begged the mother.

"Seven sheep and five cows," said the father. *Let's play.*

"Five sheep and three cows."

"Stop! Please! You can't do this! My baby is not for sale!"

"Six sheep and four cows," continued the man.

"Six sheep and four cows for the boy it is!" she proclaimed much to the delight of the father. At the sight of the mother's utter dismay and the boy's incomprehension, she beamed a radiant smile none associated with deceit. "You will not fetch this sum. The crown has decided that the boy belongs to his mother. He who sells his children to another is unworthy of parenthood."

A serenade of gasps crossed the court. The farmer's despair was one she would cherish for the rest of her years.

"Thank you! Thank you! May the True Goddess reward your kindness Your August Majesty!" bowed the woman. Jubilant noblewomen hailed the decision. Serena joined the applause, yelling Nix' name. "Victory! Victory! Victory! Victory!" they clamored in unison.

Serena smacked Nix' hands in the restroom. "I have never thought you had an affinity for this, Phoenix Wing!"

"It is all Claradore's wisdom."

Serena snatched her hands, pulling her closer to her. Vanilla, heavy with notes of lavender, rosemary and thyme. In fact, Nix knew who this perfume belonged to. Only one woman in the Known World could wear it: the Medean Empress. Serena's boldness fascinated her. "Modesty won't save you from me. Don't you wish for it too? Sitting in the Emperor's seat?" said Serena.

What was the answer Serena had hoped to acquire? What would Nix tell her? That she had locked herself in a deserted exhibition room with Spartak, one she knew all too well. Then, she had also surrendered to her own habit: borrowing Livia's clothes which littered the floor of the princess' room, her jewels glistening against moonlight intruding from the window. Carnation, fuchsia, purple, rose, cyan, turquoise, teal, white. When opening the princess' closet, Nix could swear all colors constituting a rainbow were paraded in front of her eyes. The worst slight of it all was that most if not all of these dresses and tunics would only see the day of light once.

She had been enamored with exhibition room since the first time Claradore had brought her here. In the middle stood the object of her desires, the oak leaves crown with a ruby diadem laying on top of a dragon's skull. Zenobia's crown, untouched for over two centuries. Phoenix feathers were glued to the leaves. A magnet she could not refuse. It compelled her, summoning her to a dreamscape in which she saw herself

with it atop her head. In her mind, courtiers, senators and Excubitores would bow before her while she sat where the Emperor would usually sit. Was it how Vitiatus felt when The Goddess had offered it to him? Such a delight to even hold it in one's hands, to touch it, to imagine being in the throne room with everyone's else fixated on the person wearing it.

Nix had stripped of her plain tunic. Livia's underwear had fitted her. Next came the purple dress, still imbued with Livia's perfume, a dose of vanilla assailing her nose. Touching it, she felt the quality of the tissue, phoenix were sewn on the collar and on the sleeves. Even Baba's craftsmanship could not hope to match this. *Drachmas always win don't they?* thought Nix.

The mirror was used to apply the touches she had often enhanced Livia with. Black eyeliner derived from snails fished in the North Sea, lipstick made from crushed cochineals, lead, powdered ash and saffron for face powder. They had suited her face more than Livia's.

Once she had been done, she had seen an Elysian princess looking back at her. Nix had bowed in front of the mirror like Livia would have in front of foreign dignitaries. She had spun around, admiring the authority and elegance this outfit bestowed her with. In the stories of old, there was this one tale of a prince finding out he was the long-lost heir of the Regnassian Empire. While it was impossible in her case, that did not stop her from pondering on that possibility. One became royalty either through steel or by blood. And if Claradore taught her anything was that steel was more reliable than blood.

One of her favorite ornaments was a pendant with an amethyst cameo of the Emperor Sarvitar mounted in a gold openwork mount. Her beloved emperor was shown facing in three quarters relief wearing a cuirass. It complemented perfectly her attire. She wore him on her neck, exuding in the false hope that she could be a distant relative of the imperial family.

Spartak had sniffed her, initially upset by Livia's scent. She had grabbed its body, bringing it closer to her. It had licked her again. Nix had shown it its favorite ball. *Want to play outside?* Its eyes had lit up with childish amazement. Spartak had sprinted to the vestibule's door at lightning speed. It emitted high-pitched barks, hitting the door with its paws.

"Hold on! I need to try something!"

Am I worthy of it like this? Impatience flowed from the crown next to her. It had called her, this magnet pulling her into its sphere of influence. Were all humans like this, drawn by this desire to see themselves with this ornament? Nix had yanked it from its stand, placing it over her head. Princess now empress stood in front of the mirror. Her mother who abandoned her. Would she approve? Or would she wallow in jealousy in her early grave? Nix had wondered. So many questions that could only be answered once she returned to the Gates of the Underworld. The Grimoire of Red said that one who stood before them would reunite with the person that cared the most about them. When she was a child, she had always hoped that her mother would await her then. Now, the most likely candidate was Baba...

Her favorite painting, this panorama with Empress Zenobia raising her battleaxe over High Cardinal Pius' head greeted her overhead. Nix had breathed, imagining herself wielding the same weapon, only her arms were not as muscular as Zenobia's. Magic used another set of muscles after all. She had swung her imaginary axe. Again and again. Cardinal Pius who had enslaved Zenobia and her mother. Pius who started Zenobia's lifelong quest for justice. Pius whose infamous pleading for his life had been transcribed over and over by Zenobia's sages. Pius who was responsible for the sacking of the Holy City under the imperial army. One day, Nix would be courageous and paint the Man in White's face over Pius' in that painting.

She had disappointed herself when she had placed the crown back to its original location.

"It would look good on me. The crown belongs to those who do not seek it," Nix simply said to Serena.

"Your father would have been proud of you," said Serena.

What is that supposed to mean?

The colossal bronze gates vaulted open, bringing Nix back to realm of reality. Columns of Men of the Crucible marched in discord. While military marches followed a strict and discernable tempo, this one was inclined in exhibiting a chaotic choir that would have made any general claw their own eyeballs out of their sockets. Armor that resisted the rules of conformity, beards ridden with bread crumbs and banners that had been degraded by sunlight. Their performance might be risible but their numbers were anything but a laughing matter. For this new Cardinal thought it pertinent to bring an escort of two hundred Men of the Crucible.

The old Cardinal had been nosy, suffice to say. She never understood the point between being a man of The Faith and putting one's entire slug head in other people's gardens. It had seemed all those old men did in their spare time was pray or spy on the ordinary of men, plucking petals out of flowers grown by others. Only when the last Cardinal got close to the truth that Claradore asked had tasked her to put him in early retirement.

Today they were introducing to court his new replacement. Someone handpicked by High Cardinal Benedictus and blessed by the Goddess herself. A man by the name of Boniface. Nix wished that boredom defined his character.

It was only when two white cloaked men vaulted into the throne room in unison that she realized that Metarexia sent two not one Cardinals to the imperial capital. But why two? The Faith has always needed only one of them at Thanatopolis.

The taller Cardinal hastened his pace. He was an aberration of a human being. At ten imperial feet, even the Excubitores felt like dwarves compared to a man of his stature. He glared at the throne with his tired eyes, eyes that have seen the world wither around them. He was dressed an ill-fitting cloak patterned in silver thread and sewn with singing doves and prancing bulls.

His hands could easily fit a man's head within their grasp. His arms were as thick as the trunk of small trees. He held a scepter, the handle having being sculpted in the form of a dove, in his left hand.

A Giant? thought Nix. But it could not be. Like their compatriots, the dragons and the Magi, Giants belonged in the Age of Magic. It was Giants who contributed to the Magi's cyclopean structures from upside-down floating pyramids to the opulent libraries of old. Yet none of the court seemed phased by this hulking man.

Nix watched Claradore's face make a brief grimace at the sight of this man. She quizzed him with a glance, wanting to ascertain that this individual was a Giant. The Magister Herboraeum quickly reverted to his usual stoical demeanor.

"Your August Majesty," said the Cardinal as he prostrated himself before Ralens the Younger. His voice was akin to stone rupturing.

"Cardinal Alexander, the Empire welcomes your presence in these trying times," said the Emperor.

The shorter Cardinal moved through the hallways, the surrounding air seemed to condense into ice pellets. His gaze, this predatory seeker riveting anyone from this imaginary seat which he had elevated next to the throne. A vulture in dove's clothing, peering at the phony confessions it could extract from the average citizen.

"Your Grace," said a voice Nix recognized. Her heart raced. Poison coated in eloquence. Raspy, emitting drawn-out hissing sounds disguised as politeness. Immutable after all those years. She had remembered its exact intonation, its exact pronunciation of these fateful words. An eloquence that masked its venom, a charisma conjoined with unrivaled zealotry, an intonation that unnerved her right hand which reached for her concealed dagger.

He had aged, wrinkles now covering his forehead yet that self-righteousness, this despicable zealousness, that confidence, all remained intact. She had never forgotten. White cloak on which were richly drawn resplendent gold doves ripped straight from one of her old encyclopedias. He always hid with the populace, a leech feeding on his own lies. Yet there he stood now in front of her after all those years. Nix wanted to laugh, for the Man in White had returned.

Chapter 16

“Do you have candy?” asked the boy who must have been twelve summers at most.

Serena handed him the treat. The boy and two other accomplices had snuck into the dromon which prow she sat on. The dockyards overflowed with these unfinished warships. Claradore’s new decree had doubled the expenditures for the Medean army.

Today was supposed to be Nix’ birthday, yet Serena’s friend had been preoccupied by trivial matters, leaving Serena alone to throw rocks at the North Sea on this moonless evening. When Nix joined her, they would indulge in this contest to determine who would cook dinner for the night. Yesterday, Nix had decided to not conform to the rules, transforming her hand into this slingshot that could launch pebbles up to one imperial mile away.

“Didn’t you agree not to use magic for this, Phoenix Wing?”

“It is not magic, it is a special alteration of my arm.”

“Who are you now? A professor of the Classical Tongue? Magic is magic.”

“I am who I desire to be,” said Nix. In response, Serena had pulled Nix’ cheeks with such force that Nix might have liquified on the spot. Once they had resolved their discussion on terminology, Nix had begrudgingly roasted the mutton Claradore had hunted for them, resulting in skewers with orange peppers and olives. Serena had to celebrate these victories while they were still easy to come. The day has yet to come.

The sound of water splashing made her turn her head towards someone whose hands were thrashing in the North Sea. The boy. His gremlin friends yelled. Predictable. The older she became, the more she noticed the predictability children’s of personalities no matter the age. As watching over humans was identical to gardening, some children’s defining traits fell into mosses, others into ferns, flowering plants or non-flowering plants. Then, by observing their inner nature, they could fall into one of the multiple species Serena had cultivated. Never had Serena failed to associate a child by its plant. Surprise was missing from her long existence. That was until Nix and Claradore had come.

The boy in the North Sea strayed further and further away from Serena's vision. One of his fellow accomplices kept his finger on his friend's location while the other yelled in the deserted dockyards.

"Goddess! Goddess! Help him!" screamed the gremlin. Serena stood up on the dromon's prow. She felt her blood converge towards her back. Perhaps she would feel generous today.

Children of all ages would always underestimate the current. One wrong move in the sea, and it would devour you as it did with the Sunken Continent. Another case of parental failure and of the child not heeding his parents' advice.

With her wings she could have done it. The two accomplices who had followed the boy screamed frantically, hoping an Excubitore or a heroic passerby would undo this preventable tragedy. Alas, life was never a fairy tale and this was what rendered life the most gorgeous and the most monotonous creation the Forgotten Gods had ever bestowed on this world. Better a lesson learned through blood than to receive a token of ingratitude.

When all that remained was the sea' murderous calmness, the two accomplices sobbed the same way Nix had when she had lost the Nameless Slave. Serena yawned.

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“You can always fall on your sword, Slave.”

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“Baba? How intriguing. Is that it will address you, this Magi that you are hiding from me? What is its name?”

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Chapter 17

Her favorite hosts were cats. Nimble, quiet and small. Perfect for this kind of operation. Save of course Mr Mittens whose fat body would not even fit within the Hippodrome's gates.

Spartak and her swam beneath the sea of humanity that were the streets of the imperial capital. While as a human she would have to force her way through the crowd, tolerating the usual evening scents of armpits and alcohol, as a cat, there were close to no obstacles underneath people's legs. However, Nix was not sure that humans outnumbered cats seeing the large amount of her compatriots idling around or querying men and women for free food. It was both scary and impressive how humans looked as animals. From a cat's point of view, one could understand why men were feared. Their hands, gigantic and flexible. Shields, swords and lances held by the patrolling Scholae Palatinae or the Vigiles, all looked sharper and deadlier as a cat. Being a feline had taught her to be wary of any sudden move. From a dog staring at her with vicious intent to the children racing to grab her. All of these experiences had made her faster as a human. Thanatopolis never slept. Her whiskers tingled every time that they came into contact with the smell of those shrimp or lobster dumplings, a delicacy she could not afford right now as an animal. *Shame*. Ignoring the children who would stop to pat her, she went into the deserted Hippodrome which from her perspective was even more colossal. It seemed the marble statues of Zenobia, Regnant, Vitiatus, Zastrian and Charov were these Giants of the Age of Magic. Sand. Nix loathed how it felt on her paws. Yet this sensation was nothing compared to the pleasure she had of chasing Spartak around the racetrack. Hide and seek used to be her favorite pastime here. To any onlooker, it would seem that a cat was meowing excessively at a much larger canine. It might even look bizarre to see a dog cuddle a cat so affectionately. Both of their furs sharing their warmth. An utter bliss. Indescribable, this feeling that no other human in this current time could experience. Nix was lucky.

She would often climb to the last row of the stands. Even then, the Marroan Walls looked majestic. Her cat instincts knew they were unclimbable, the only limitation of this body. Then, she would look at the stars above, making innocent wishes or contemplating her dream alongside with Spartak. They would cuddle each other, watching the lighthouses illuminate the quinqueremes and dromons docking. There were now thrice as many warships than last year. Nix could only speculate about their

intended destination. Below then, the sea of torches that was Thanatopolis breathed. It moved, contained by the walls every night, animated by harps and drums who tried to match its tempo. It was here that she had realized how small her own existence was. Nix was but an insignificant dot in the annals of human history, condemned to be forgotten once she faded away like the wide majority of humans. *Moments like this never last* She looked at her paw the same way she did with that fox on that day. Claws. Yes, very useful for tearing apart the mice. Yet it was not mice she wanted to hunt on this moonless night.

“Come, Spartak. There will be more opportunities to play once we are done,” Nix said. She never understood if Spartak could comprehend the cat’s tongue. It followed her though.

She and Spartak arrived at the doors of the Church of Holy Sacrimony whose walls Nix had so often scaled as a child. Her cat ears heard the Faith’s hymns and lies emanating from the choir. Dilapidated stained-glass, streaks of grime ran on the once shiny bronze doors. A fresh pig’s head even laid at the entrance, probably courtesy of one of those people who had lost a loved one during the Plague of Anastasian. Nix knew Claradore wanted to demolish this rotten building to build an even greater church in honor of the True Goddess. Yes, the True Goddess, the one that had been turned into a spider by her own twin. A most brainless story. The Goddess, her twin and Regnant the Dragonslayer. Claradore never minced his words when speaking about the truth, the truth that the Faith had wanted to eclipse for a millennium. The Age of Magic. It all ended because of one girl’s jealousy. An entire continent, sunken by envy.

Someone stepped on her tail. Spartak barked cheerfully, treacherously wagging his tail at Serena who shone with exuberance tonight. *So much from man’s best friend.*

“Apologies, Phoenix Wing, I did not mean to startle you,” said Serena as she looked at the vial of gray liquid carried by Nix. Nix meowed angrily. She and Claradore had spent the better part of the afternoon brewing this inodorous concoction from ingredients which names had long changed from the days of the Grimoire of Red.

“And where do you think you are going with that?”

Boniface, they called the Man in White Boniface. The first inch of progress she had made in eight summers. If this Boniface proved as gentle as his name would have her believe, what kind of creature would Cardinal Shitface be? Probably the most docile

and compassionate man Nix would ever meet. The Goddess was truly cruel in her humor.

It had surprised Nix how little of the Boniface's time was spent outside the church. Having two hundred Men of the Crucible at your command was indeed an incentive to never leave the confines of your self-made palace. As a human, Nix had been turned away by the most rude of Men of the White whose breath had reeked of wine and cavities. It was then that she had noticed that the Men of the Crucible would invite a few stray animals into the building for refreshments. Animals, the guilty weakness of all humanity. Had the Goddess granted them superior intelligence, dogs and cats could have been made into the ideal assassination devices. None of course would ever suspect Mr. Mittens of plotting its owner's demise.

Serena grabbed Nix' body, patting its fur. The hypnotic massage made Nix' eyes flutter. Each stroke of her spine sent waves of repose. Her muscles wanted to melt in a sea of calmness. After all, the plan she had hoped to realize necessitated such level headness.

Nix slipped out of Serena's arms, starting a catwalk towards the Church of Sacrimony. Serena and Spartak followed under the trustful eye of the Man of the Crucible that had scorned her before.

In the nave, eunuchs sat in the seats praying at the discolored statue of the Goddess. A figure cloaked in purple stood at the altar conversing with the Man in White.

What is she doing here?

"I'll take care of this for you, Phoenix Wing," whispered Serena as she took the vial from Nix' neck. Nix purred. Separation of concerns had been the hallmark of her friendship with Serena. Her friend had guessed that the vial should be poured into the church's fountain, the one that collected water from Charov's Aqueduct. When one was faced with a fortress, one had to convince the defenders of abandoning their stronghold. Such was the doctrine the great Sarvitar had followed during his conquests of the modern day Clovian Domain. The Commentaries, his illustrious self biography, found their way on the bookshelves of all libraries of the Medean Empire.

Nix raised her paw. Serena tapped it with her dominant hand before leaving the trio, Spartak and Nix battled the other stray animals for the leftover chicken breast the Men of the Crucible fed them.

Behind them, Livia prostrated herself before the statue of the Goddess, kissing its hands and feet.

"You seem afraid, my child," said the Man in White. His hands fiddled with this skull encrusted with diamonds as if trying to solve an imaginary puzzle.

"Spiders. They haunt me, Father Boniface. I see them everywhere, in my dreams, within me," said Livia.

"Spiders? The Goddess has many ways to communicate with the Faithful, my child. We all know she works in mysterious ways. Even the most illustrious of humans cannot hope to grasp her brightness."

Are all men of the Faith garrulous?

"The Goddess cannot be at cause here, Father. No one believes me. I have felt them. Crawling under my skin. Using my own body, my own voice against me... Do you have any idea of the horror I was forced to witness? Demons, Father. They exist."

"A demon within you? Are you certain? Are you sure you are not being blessed by The Goddess' most precious gift, that of life: life in the womb."

Livia glared at him.

"My apologies, your Grace...Throughout my career, I have seen examples of blatant disregard to the dignity of human life from conception to natural death."

"I am telling the truth, Father. There was a demon inhabiting me the other night."

Demon? Magic has nothing to do with demons you spoiled brat!

"An enemy striking from within. Intriguing. There are cases you might be interested in, your Grace. Your brother has granted us access to Cardinal Innocentus' body, child... Our physicians have come up with disturbing conclusions."

"You believe he has been murdered. What evidence do you have?"

Nix crept up the altar, ordering Spartak to stay put with her paw. She meowed softly. Both Livia and Boniface smiled at her. *Pick me up, fools!* By an unfortunate turn of events, Nix had to settle for Livia holding her in her arms. She exposed the

cat's belly, taunting the princess to rub it. And so the purple born did. What would have Claradore or Baba called this? A spider in cat's clothing? Or a gold coin in cat's clothing?

"Your Grace...The Goddess knows how, but it seems his veins have imploded..."

"It must be Claradore! He had no love for Innocentus...I have seen what he has done to my father. A once proud king reduced to a husk of a man. How I've wept every time that vile man had whispered into my father's ears..."

"A most grave accusation, your Grace. Yet not unheard of for a man who has strayed from the Goddess' path. Such a man cannot be allowed near the throne."

"Heal, your Grace. We must remedy the disease that is strangling the Empire from within. The Goddess is Nature itself. A firestorm we shall start. Wildfires are started so that nature can heal itself."

"But if the fire is too large, my brother will have to seek the arsonist."

"Very good, your Grace. What we want here is a blaze strong enough to indispose a single man...They say this kind of flame can be borrowed from the Firstborn."

It is always Elysians with the Faith...

"How do we convince the griffons to participate in this?"

Boniface rotated the skull he played with, spinning it in his palm. "The Elysians may be heathens, but they understand the most common language to man: gold."

The man was not wrong. In the most farcical of scenarios, Livia and Boniface would request her to carry out this attempt of Claradore's life. Many had tried. The last assassin had ended his career abruptly, preferring to join the male members of Claradore's harem upon witnessing the perfection of Claradore's physique.

In the nave, Serena waved at Nix empty-handed. It would take a full day to bear witness to the success or failure of Nix' plan.

"I have seen your petition to the Emperor asking for the return of Zastrian's Cloister to the Faith," Livia said. Boniface's eyes brightened. They lit up as much as the gold embroidery on his clean white robes.

"When the Firstborn's flames would have devoured our dear Claradore, would you be interested in reclaiming what is rightfully the Faith's?"

"A calamity that that building was given to that spider loving cult. Oh! The humanity! How far have the mighty fallen!" said Boniface whose hand dropped the skull by inadvertence before a lightning quick reflex picked it up again.

"Your Grace certainly knows how to read minds. Let the heretics fight among themselves. Let a new age of enlightenment usher for the Medean Empire."

Livia and Nix stared at the skull Boniface held. She had never known men of the Faith to be obsessed by human bones. The Cardinal grinned at both of them.

"Oh this, your Grace? Captivating, isn't it? It is a memento of my finest hour."

"A memento?" Nix meowed, wanting to ask the same question.

"You have probably heard about the witch I have brought to justice eight years ago. A most revolting person she was. A killer of unborn babes she was at Miroconium. Can you believe it? One who slaughters the most vulnerable of them all? One who denies women the Goddess' greatest gift: the gift of life in the womb? Justice I have brought to her. I burned her lair and her witch-spawn, cleansing the village of her vile influence." He placed the decorated skull on the altar, its sockets radiating utmost terror. "This, your Grace, are her remains and the evidence that monsters can wear human skin."

Chapter 18

Nix leaned against the balustrade of the imperial balcony. From her vantage point, the North Sea seemed like a plate of crystalline water beneath the sun. She had never seen the sea as calm as it was today.

Behind her, Majorian sang the ballad of the Goddess' War against the nascent Elysian Empire. Serena complemented their voice with a lute. A total of eight emptied amphoraes laid next to Serena's feet. Serena had once boasted to Nix that no living man could match her in a drinking game. Seeing her friend yodelling on the balcony while not missing a single note confirmed the accuracy of the claim.

Back in the rotating table, a most delectable scene unfolded before her eyes. Boniface, Livia and Domitian were clenching their utensils as if they were swords. Their eyes were animated by mutual distrust. It was difficult to maintain the mask of a sphinx under these circumstances.

Nix glared at the princess' golden shawl collar atop the robe in earthly tones. Livia had painstakingly framed her eyes in kohl dark lines. Her lips were as red as the Medean Phoenix. Her painted skin was as white as porcelain from the Unknown World. This was the preparation that conveyed the angelic appearance the purple born wanted to display to anyone they graced their presence with in the throne room. Nix had been one of the handmaidens who spent three hours with the princess to craft that look. The advantage it conferred her was that she could replicate it with Majorian the next time Livia would vacate the capital.

Boniface sulked in his chair, stabbing his lamb and squeezing every last droplet of blood out of it. Dark shadows were traced under his eyes. It was an unfortunate turn of events that he had his slave drink the well's waters the day after Nix used her special concoction. Fifty Men of the Crucible lost their eyesight in a single of day. The Faith looked for culprits to point their daggers towards.

"You have betrayed us," spat Boniface. Never had Nix taken so much pleasure of seeing this vile man riled up. She hid a smile. It was only the beginning of his torment.

"We had nothing to do with the Faith's infighting, High Cardinal."

“Infighting? The Men of the Crucible’s loyalty is not to be questioned, little girl! I have handpicked every one of them!”

Domitian knocked on the round table, his fist almost toppling a sponge cake next to his fiancee.

“Mind your tongue, Cardinal. You will show my fiancee the respect she deserves.”

Livia put two grapes in her mouth. “Who else could have poisoned the well, Cardinal?”

“You people mock me with your condescension. The Underworld will take you all. Making alliances only to flash your daggers during negotiations. Utterly despicable. Even Molochian heathens are more honorable.”

“Have you not considered the most obvious possibility, old man? Claradore. He played you like a harp.”

“No one plays the Faith like a harp.” He turned towards Majorian who was dressed in a Scholae Palatinae’s garb. “And why do you tolerate that freak in your palace? I know that he is an aberration of nature.”

“The man sings well, Cardinal. There is no better singer in the Known World. Let us return to the topic at hand. It is likely a ploy of the Magister Herboraum,” said Livia.

“Hah! You want me to believe a man that abhors clothes is intelligent enough to device this stratagem.”

“He is not to be underestimated.”

Domitian groaned in exasperation. “We squander time here, Livia. The Eastern Army will be grouping here in weeks. Let us use it to smash that half naked man.”

“That is our contingency, my love. We have already sent pigeons with the orders.”

So the army gathers at Thanatopolis.

“It seems there is no more need of conversing here. Pray you do not find yourself in our way,” said Livia.

“The sword calls the axe sharp.”

Domitian snickered. “This is no time for bluffs, Cardinal.”

“You idiotic purpleborn. Your empire’s decadence is visible to all. Look at all the rot that has taken hold in twenty years of Ralens the Elder’s reign. A man exposing his upper body can now waddle in court.” He pointed to Nix. “Heathen Elysians now feed Medeans and unnatural freaks of nature desecrate your holy lands. A storm is coming, one powered by the Goddess’ will itself. Purgatory awaits all of you who will be caught in it.”

“Purgatory you say?” boomed Claradore’s voice.

The terrace’s doors vaulted open. Claradore waltzed in with a nude male and a female virgin in his muscular arms. Livia and Domitian leered at Boniface who was muttering curses. Nix enjoyed every development of this adventure. She sipped a glass of fine wine. Besides her, Serena snored loudly in Majorian’s arms, the latter not willing to move one inch lest he want to invoke Serena’s drunken anger.

“Magister Herboraum, it is a... surprise to see you,” said Livia dryly.

“Your lies are plain, princess. He must be your guest,” said Boniface.

“Sully her name again, and I’ll whip your virgin buttocks,” said Domitian.

“My, my, this is quite the reception you are giving me, my friends,” said Claradore. Nix almost burst out laughing. “What is it I hear through these walls? Talks about coups, about bringing purgatory on this earth. The Emperor has only sat on the throne for a month!”

Behind Claradore, Red Acolytes armed with knives infiltrated the premises. Domitian grabbed the hilt of his ceremonial sword. Livia touched his hand, shaking her head. Boniface’s face drained its colors.

“You have doomed all of us, priest,” said Domitian.

“My dear purpleborn and Cardinal, I believe we are being overdramatic here. It is not my intention to shed blood in the Palace Complex. Forgiveness after all is the greatest virtue the Goddess has taught us, is it not?” Claradore glanced at Boniface who was furiously serrating his lamb.

His audience remained silent. The Red Guild had neutralized both the scheming princess and the Faith without shedding a single drop of blood. Consolidation of power was the most principle that was taught to the purple born. Civil wars were birthed out of the womb of instability. When one ascended to the throne, it was thus imperative to dispose quietly of one's pretenders and rivals.

"For her role in this conspiracy, the princess and her fiancee will take an extended vacation to the city of Marropolis," said Claradore.

Equivalent to exile, thought Nix.

"And the title of Magister of Magister Militum?" asked Nix. Domitian shot her a blood thirsty gaze. She winked at him.

"The Comes Ordogan is to return to the capital for his new title."

"You are handing command of the army to a Molochian half breed!" shouted Domitian.

"You are correct...Comes," said Claradore.

In that instant, Domitian unraveled his sword, pointing it at Claradore. Livia and Boniface shrieked. The Red Acolytes brandished their knives. Nix's dagger spun in her palm. Serena whistled. Majorian hid behind Nix.

"Naked swine, I will end you today!" declared Domitian.

With bullish agility, he charged towards Claradore who let go of the male and female virgins in his arms. The Crimson Spider tilted to the side, letting the sword glide past his broad shoulders. Nix saw her professor grab Domitian's wrist, yanking it upwards. Claradore's hand connected with Domitian's temple. The former Magister Militum slumped downwards. Livia rushed to check his pulse.

"He will live," said Claradore. He gestured to the Red Acolytes to surround the princess. "It seems the princess and her consort pose a threat to our safety, Cardinal. They are thus to depart immediately for Marropolis, never to return to these halls. For your own safety, youl will stay in the Palace Complex from the next week onwards. The handmaiden Nix here will now tend to his every need."

Nix and Majorian had made the right assumption when they deduced Livia's room would be available after the spectacle in the imperial balcony. As expected, in her haste, the princess left the attire she wore mere hours ago on the bed. Nix wasted no second in borrowing it. The unique fragrance composed of jasmine, roses lingered on the exquisite silk.

Nix spun in front Livia's mirror admiring her new self. With the princess having left the capital possibly permanently, this room could be hers. Yet she knew the young Emperor would someday marry and would use it to seize his sister's domain for his wife. But at this very moment, everything in Livia's collection was Nix's to borrow.

She felt the gentle touch of Majorian's hands on her hips.

"The Goddess be cursed, we were defeated by an Elysian," said Nix as a parody of Livia's voice.

"My love, my weak muscles were not a match for Claradore's," said Majorian as Domitian. Nix snorted.

Majorian waved his arms in the same manner as Domitian had, even mimicking the manner in which the former Magister Militum stumbled next to Claradore.

Nix cleared her throat. "Hah! My dear, No man can withstand the charm of my biceps," said Nix trying to coil her arms like Claradore would do when sculptors and painters arrived to portray him.

"Mark my words, vengeance will be mine!"

"And now what will happen to that poor poor man Boniface, alone in the Palace with the hyenas?" said Nix switching back to her imitation of Livia's voice.

"Little Nix here will send him into early retirement," said Majorian with their normal voice.

"And after she is done with the Man in White?"

"She will marry this person right here."

Their lips met. A perfect end to this superb evening.

Chapter 19

Nix has finished editing her fifth edict for this mundane day. Next two her, piles of proclamations, edicts, decrees, orders and answers to petitions were neatly sorted on Claradore's desk. She had spent the majority of the day battling the never-ending heaps of papers that had amassed on the study. It was an uphill battle, every foray into the pile yielding undiscovered sheets buried by disorganization.

A musty wooden smell conjoined with a hypnotizing smell of heliotrope from the Magister Herboraum's cologne characterized Claradore's study. Nix had expected a different smell, a more unpleasant one due to the presence of paintings and marble statues depicting Claradore in the full grandiosity of his naked stature.

Sandals gifted by the less fortunate pointed towards the room's exit. Intricate networks of spider webs were found in all corners. Roaches, flies and ladybugs were trapped while spiders traveled in their domain undisturbed. The Grimoire of Red stood at the center of the room, the thousand pages tome beckoning a Magi to wield it once more.

Instead of performing his duties, Claradore juggled three fire balls in his palms, leaving her to fight the beast that was his paperwork.

"You wish to kill Boniface," said Claradore.

The Red Guild always studied their prey for weeks or even months before striking. The prey must wander into the web before springing the spider's talons. Care had to be taken so that fingers could not be pointed at the Red Guild easily.

"You do not oppose it," said Nix.

"My approval is conditional," said Claradore.

Nix frowned. What ludicrous request he would ask her this time? The last favor he had spoken of required her to reserve the entirety of the Baths of Karakallus for his entourage or rather his imposing harem of male and female lovers. The patrician made a comical expression when Nix made the request, struggling to keep a calm and composed face herself.

Claradore smiled at her reaction. “There are two favors I wish of you, my dear. The first consists of attending the Elysian ball at Artazata. Foreign dignitaries will be there. I need you to gauge our neighbor’s intentions.”

Nix groaned. Of course, she had lost her medallion. Anyone who could open it would surely be there. However, Zhapur and Leila had assured her that her life could be in peril should anyone realize her mother’s medallion was related to the late Empress Aishula. On another hand, it may be adequate to use the ball to acquire information on this Aishula person. Information was power and the Red Guild encouraged all of its members to gather whispers and rumors and bring them to the nest.

Nix already thought of the dress she would bring to the occasion. There was this fitted purple corset with tapered sleeves and cuffs adorned by filigree that the princess had commissionned but never bothered to wear. It sat sadly deep within Livia’s wardrobe, hidden from plain sight.

“What about the second task?” asked Nix.

“I have concerns. The man called Alexander should be feared.”

“Is some manner of Giant?”

“You will have to confirm that, my dear.”

“And how would you have me do that? You do not suppose he would simply identify himself.”

“The same way you have spied on Boniface, by taking another’s flesh as your own.”

“Simple enough.”

“There is an additional complexity. The skin I ask you to wear is... of a different sort.”

“You cannot mean...”

“Of course, my dear. Humans are also animals.”

“But the Magi...”

“The Magi are all dead.”

Nix placed her two hands over her cheeks. Beasts never resisted her powers. Their minds were guided by primal urges such as hunger, thirst and survival. Simplicity was easy to manipulate. Humans on the other hand were uncharted territory for her invasion. But there was pleasure in the unknown. Magis seldom if not never dared to break their ancient rules. To be the first Magi in a millennium to venture into another human being's body was an adventure she could not refuse. How did it feel to glide into another's skin? Could she listen to their thoughts and fears? Could she utilize all of that newly gained information? Beneath the skin, there were no masks. All was visible to an intruder. Nix smiled. This could get interesting.

"Who am I to enter?" asked Nix.

"Is the princess not asleep at this hour?" said Claradore.

"You jest. I am to work my craft on the princess?"

"My dear. That is no different from you borrowing her clothes."

She scowled. "You have been spying on me!"

"Watching? No. Only bearing witness to the part the True Goddess has written for you. The Crown, my dear. You crave it still, do you not?"

Last time, Serena had asked that question and now Claradore. What did he expect as an answer? Who did not desire to wear the most resplendent clothing in the Known World? Anyone else would have answered positively. Alas, there were only two methods to sit on the throne of phoenix feathers. The first was to be a purple born. The other was to command an army and seize it through steel. Nix was unlucky to have neither of these.

Nix did not remember answering Claradore's question. She found herself standing before Livia's room. There were no Excubidores patrolling the premise at this specific minute. By gifting the locksmith a generous amount of gold, she has acquired a spare key to her favorite location in the entire palace. Her hands shook as she opened the door.

The princess was sleeping on her bed. Nix melted her entire body. She let herself flow towards the bed, cascading on Livia's thighs, torso and neck. Nix found the nose and the mouth.

Amber glowed in her field of vision. She felt herself go through veins, arteries, a heart. Memories that were not hers passed through her head. They zipped through her consciousness as fast as a shooting star, not giving her any moment to capture them. She witnessed dreams that were not hers, dreams about a marriage, about a baby boy, about world peace. Soon, toes wiggled at her command. Nix could lift fingers and arms. She ordered Livia's eyes to open.

"It worked..." Nix said using Livia's voice.

She touched the waist, the arms, the legs, a wave of foreign sensitivity shaking her. Incredible. The combined touch of two humans was an experience to behold. She was a child again, rediscovering how touching an object felt. Nix licked her lips, tasting the faint traces of ochre left on the princess' face.

She sauntered out of the bed, jumping with glee. Mucus ran from her or rather Livia's nose. She wiped it with a finger.

"It really worked! I...I can't believe it! Oh! Baba! If only you could see this!"

She moved towards the mirror. Dishevelled black hair and a sweat soaked body greeted her red eyes. Red eyes. Red as the Medean phoenix. The complimented well her borrowed body.

"Salutations citizens, my name is Livia and I'm as the Goddess' cunt!" said Nix. She ordered Livia's face to extend its tongue in a childish manner. From mischievous grins to devilish laughs, Livia's face made faces the real princess would have never thought of producing.

Nix gravitated towards Livia's wardrobe and its garish gowns. Her eyes were now fixated on that hooded purple cloak that the late Empress Eudoxia once wore during her balls. It was still emblazoned with the Tiarmat hydra. Her fingers ran through the delicate fox hide that comprised the collar of the attire.

"I have always wanted this one," said Nix as her hands scurried to put on the cloak.

Turning to the mirror, her face snickered. The fabric clung close to her form, woven from deep, lustrous cloth that drinks the light like midnight silk. Fine embroidery, threads of gold and crimson shaped, traced the hems and bodice in diamond patterns.

If she could decorate Livia's face with the copious amount of makeup the princess usually wore, Nix could probably make a goddess out of Livia. Foreign ambassadors often spoke of the purple born as if they were angels descending from the Heavens. When you smelled the purple born's unique fragrance brewed with such delicateness and you saw the Emperor march down the throne's stairs, you would have believed it too. The purple born radiated this intimidating aura that was designed to disable one's ability to utter cogent arguments and words. The Empire had to demonstrate that its power derived from an otherworldly source when in truth, denarii always prevailed.

"See it does look better on me," said Nix as she swiveled around in Livia's purple cloak. Perhaps she would borrow this coat during winter.

"You truly have done it, my dear. How long can you hold?" said the Artifice.

"You doubt me?" said Nix.

"That is not the point. There is a reason the Magi had crucified all the people who attempted this... I have seen it myself...The last execution of this kind of miscreant..."

"What are dead men's rules to the living?"

"The blood mingles with one another, my dear...You should never lose sight of yourself."

"Always with the riddles...Has Baba ever told you how predictable you were?"

The Artifice bit an apple with its human lips. "My dear, even Baba could not possibly envision what you have just done. What are you going to do next?"

What was she going to achieve next? The task at hand would be to analyze the daily life of this Alexander. But that would require another skin, one that she would have to pick carefully. Nix has never realized how warm a human body could be. No vessel was equal in this world despite all them being composed of bones, muscles, blood and other liquids. The one carrying Livia's soul commanded blind loyalty and was endowed with all the dresses, stolas, coats and togas Nix could dream of. Men feared it. More importantly, Livia was hers to use. This opened an endless amount of possibilities. Perhaps. Perhaps she could also borrow this body for an extended period of time.

"Why have we delayed in this matter?" asked Nix. "We might have bent even the Emperor to our will."

"My dear, unlike you, I am fond of my current form," said Claradore.

Nix heard a skin-pimpling screech inside hers no Livia's head. A migraine ravaged her inner thoughts. It was as if someone pounded at her skull's inner cavities. This vessel. It was aware that two souls now inhabited it. What a nuisance.

She placed a finger on her mouth. "Shhh. I just noticed. She can still hear us."

"My, my, so the spell has not been perfected yet. What a shame."

"She saw you."

A silence fell, heavy as an axe. The Artifice fed flies to cobwebs on the corner of the window. "Rest assured, my dear. No one will believe her, not even the Emperor himself."

"I'll exit this, then. We have accomplished what we wanted."

Nix closed Livia's eyes. She felt her entire being flow away from the princess' inner organs. Soon, the sensations accompanying Livia's toes and fingers disappeared. Her blood regrouped at the princess' throat. She heard Livia wail in agony. *So that is how humans feel when Magi enter them* thought Nix. She shot herself from the princess' throat, her liquid flow streaming out of her former vessel's mouth.

What was this sadness that clung to her skin once the last droplet of blood had evacuated Livia's body? Has she grown fond of the warmth of being encased in this vessel? Nix sneered. There was after all a third way to sit on the Throne of Phoenix Feathers.

Chapter 20

Nix sashayed through the Elysians that had gathered at Kornicus' Palace. For tonight, she chose to pleasure Majorian with Livia's dress, delighting in Livia's musk and perfume which still clung to the attire. To complement her noblewoman disguise, she borrowed purple diamonds from the princess' collection and braided her locks in the same manner as Medean royalty. The Elysians had to see her as a patrician. Power rested where people believed it to be. For this one night, she would receive the adulation of a lifetime.

While cloaked in purple, all of the attendants greeted her with bows as she made her way through the arches and colonnaded corridors. Handmaidens and slaves queried her for citrus drinks and exquisite wine from the Vyrnogothian Kingdom.

The late Emperor Kornicus chose this residence to retire. He was one of the few Sarvitarian Emperors to have died in his sleep. How someone decided to live the rest of his life cultivating onions and cabbage instead of sitting on a throne was beyond Nix' comprehension. His Palace was as immense as a small town, even at some point possessing its own garrison.

Sphinxes from Noein met her at the entrance of the peristyle. Elysians chatted about the new Medean Emperor as they walked through the gardens animated by statues of Kornicus and his late wife. In the corners, Nix saw Serena engage four Elysians in what appeared to be a drinking contest. Six flasks of alcohol sat emptied next to Serena's lap. Her competitors were groaning on the floor. Nix slowly advanced towards her friend, avoiding men who wanted to start a conversation on politics and religious affairs.

"Nobody has ever defeated the great Serena in a battle of liquor," spoke Serena in the Imperial Tongue.

"Serena, what brings you here?" asked Nix.

Serena gestured to the vanquished's purses and wallets. Nix rolled her eyes.

"You cannot blame me, Phoenix Wing. This is the prime opportunity to enrich ourselves. Did you know the princess Zahna will be here?"

“Claradore has told me.”

“They say the Emperor of Kings wishes to wed her to the Medean Emperor.”

The thought of Ralens being married made Nix chuckle. No formal toga nor tunic could hide the Emperor’s boyish cheeks. Any would-be bride would not be able to resist the temptation of squeezing those round and fat cheeks.

“Claradore has the final say on that,” said Nix.

“Really? I would think getting a foothold on the Elysian throne would please him.”

“The Rauthengardian Throne has more value.”

“Interesting, but Princess Amali is already wed to Gildahad.”

“She will bear him a daughter.”

Serena stifled a laugh. “Men...Always ordering brides like at a food stand. What about you, Phoenix Wing? Do you have a prince in mind? What about this Majorian fellow?”

“I am not sure anyone would call them a prince.”

A mellowing voice coursed through the Palace’s hallways. Nix let herself be rocked by the melody which sang poetry in the Classical Tongue. It was Majorian. Their voice guided her through the guests. She found herself in the Vestibule. Guests and reliefs portraying Kornicus’ campaigns against the Rauthengardians surrounded the sunshine of her days. Interestingly enough, Majorian chose to use a woman’s voice for this occasion.

They were endowed in a rose tunic, probably acquired from the Rauthengardian Kingdom. Painted nails and powdered cheeks enhanced the appearance of a refined lady. A kaleidoscope of aphrodisiac vanilla with top notes of lemon and violet leaves swirled around Nix’s nose.

Their fingers played a harp. Vocal octaves glided down the strings, enchanting men and women alike. Nix caught their eye, almost causing them to stop their music. She took the opportunity to rotate her hips and shoulders, flaunting the purple dress.

"Are you to be wed to the Emperor of Kings, my Lady," asked Majorian with their female voice.

"And be relayed to the shadows of his harem? No, thank you," said Nix.

"Careful with your tongue, the princess Zahna lurks around. You should see her turquoise robe. The silk must come from the Unknown World."

Butterflies flew in Nix's stomach. She had to resist the temptation of kissing Majorian on the lips. She settled instead for their cheeks. The Elysians abhorred behaviors they deemed to be unnatural. Nix did not fancy getting stoned by a mob while wearing the finest purple dress she could get her hands on.

Nix felt a woman's arm on her shoulder. "Look at you two, swans gracing the lake with majesty. How are you not the stars of this galaxy? Come, we need liquor and men to dance with," said Serena in the Imperial Tongue. Her breath stank of wine and pomegranate.

"You are in no position to dance," laughed Nix.

"No, no, no, I sure am not, but I have heard someone here must learn who Empress Aishula was."

"She has been dead these twenty summers. You might as well search for a single grain of sand in the Elysian deserts."

"I would not be so sure, Phoenix Wing"

"What are you insinuating?"

Serena did not answer. Instead, she grabbed Majorian's hand and made a dash for the liquor stand. Nix sighed for she would be carrying Serena's inebriated body back to the tavern. Maybe tonight was reason to celebrate. Her ploy with the Men of the Crucible bore fruit. Around fifty of them fell ill in the aftermath of her pouring her concoction into their drinking water. Nix even assisted Zhapur in nursing a handful of them to good health. The less unfortunate however, were left devoid of their eyesight... permanently.

She did not have to wait for the Man in White's next move. The foolish zealots simply assumed their fountain was cursed. The Emperor granted them a lodge in the

Palace Complex, not knowing his new guests' lives now hung by a thread. Nix would now decide when and how the Man in White's life would be forfeited.

She wandered the halls of the Villa contemplating frescoes of Kornicus hunting wild boars with his sons who ignited bountiful of civil wars after his death. She probed Elysians for the name Aishula only to receive incoherent sentences and drunken japes as answers. It had seemed the memory of the disgraced Empress has either disappeared or did not want to resurface in the modern era. When she tired of querying Elysians, Nix returned to the Vestibule to lounge on a chair. A marble statue depicting Kornicus in a state of intense meditation stood in the corner. Perhaps she was asking the Goddess why she has given him two stupid sons?

"Aishula?" asked a woman's voice.

Nix turned her head. A lady cased in a sapphire tunic with prancing gryphons and surging peacocks had appeared. A purple shawl gilded with dark blue diamonds enveloped her neck. Her tongue was eloquent, even aristocratic. Five Elysian men in plain clothes flanked her. Nix deduced that they were Vodrath Anshar, the personal retinue of the Emperor of Kings and his elite bodyguards. Nix had no doubt that this was the princess Zahna that Majorian spoke about.

"You must have mistaken me for someone else," said Nix in the Elysian Tongue. The Elysian men muffled a laugh upon hearing her accent.

"My apologies. You are but her reflection given flesh," said Zahna.

"I have never been mistaken for royalty, my Lady,"

"Your accent...You were raised among the Medeans, were you not? You must have never seen Persiphon's splendour. What a tragedy."

"Lord Claradore proved an excellent teacher."

"Funny, he speaks with an accent no one in the Known World can produce."

"My lady, her eyes! Her eyes! Don't you see? They are his!" hissed one of the Elysian Vodrath Anshar.

"A mere coincidence it is, Nader." Nix tried to see through the mask that Zahna wore. The Elysian princess' lips were crisped, her green eyes spat bewilderment, the

hallmarks of a lie. Nix was thankful that the Elysians would never break the rules of hospitality.

“But what if is not?” said Nader.

A silence as heavy as a lance fell between them. The Elysian princess scrutinized Nix’s eyes. If Zahna gave any order to her men, Nix would respond with her concealed dagger.

“The Empress Aishula has already paid for her sins against my father. We have both seen her severed head multiple times. Unless you believe this girl is a revenant...” said Zahna.

Nix touched her hands and pinched her skin. “I have never heard of revenants who can pinch their skin, my Lady,” said Nix. Zahna snorted.

“The Outer Provinces tell of basilisks in their midst. A revenant is no greater madness,” said the Vodrath Anshar.

“So we speak about basilisks and revenants now? Those do not exist anymore, my Lady.”

“You are wrong...Forgive my manners, your name still eludes me,” said Zahna.

“People call me Nix.”

“Fascinating. Does the name Roxanna mean anything to you?”

“Roxanna?”

“It is the name of the late Aishula’s daughter.”

“A traitorous girl who escaped death,” said a Vodrath Anshar. Nix gazed at their hidden blades, all bulkier than hers.

“Forgive my men’s bluntness. The scars from twenty years ago still linger in their minds.”

“Forgive my ignorance. I was born and raised in the Medean Empire. What sins did she commit, my Lady?” asked Nix.

"That wretched girl... I remember the wedding all too well. Her own parents had gifted her to my father for gold. At court, she had the misfortune of stirring my late mother's jealousy. My father, the Emperor of Kings, had both Aishula and her babe put to death—but not before the girl cursed him: My child shall mount your head upon a pyre that burns for a hundred years."

"Does that curse still haunt the Emperor of Kings? The babe and the mother are dead."

"The mother, yes but the child...The child was spirited away before she could be sent to the Gates of the Underworld. Some say the child did not live to see her majority. Others do not share that sentiment...Some even think that she stands right before me."

Nix clenched her hidden dagger. The Vodrath Anshar leered at her. Those lunatics! She could not be the child of a dead woman. Claradore would have told her. Claradore would have known. Why did her physical resemblance with the Empress Aishula unnerve those Elysians?

Never had she turned away as quickly from a conversation as she did. Her sprinting legs brought her to Majorian and Serena who were enjoying Elysian juice in the peristyle.

"We leave now," said Nix.

Both of her allies were dumbfounded.

"Is something the matter?" asked Majorian. Nix's eyes gave them the answer they needed. They scurried down the colonnaded hallways past the marble statues of Kornicus and his heirs. They walked slowly not disturbing the chatter of the Elysians. Nix was aware that from the moment the rules of hospitality would no longer apply, the Vodrath Anshar will be stalking her like a gryphon hunts larks in the sky.

They found themselves on the road. Rain drizzled on the old Sarvitarian concrete ridden with potholes.

"Have you angered an Elysian princess by chance, Phoenix Wing?" asked Serena.

"Worse. She believes me to be Aishula's daughter, the subject of an absurd prophecy."

"The Elysians wage war over prophecies. I have sung a few of their epics. The quality of their poetry is unmatched," said Majorian.

"This is no time to be praising our would-be assassins!" said Nix.

"Hoh! So she even intends to murder you, now. Your list of admirers grows larger by the day."

"This is no laughing matter. We must inform Claradore. The Princess of Kings wants me dead."

"Phoenix Wing, as much as I find your story amusing, nobility has little time to decide the fate of one commoner. Surely she was exchanging pleasantries."

"The Vodrath Anshar disagree with you, Serena. They will be upon us."

"Will you use magic?"

Nix grinned. "Why else would we be alone at this very moment?"

An earthquake of hooves echoed through the pouring rain. Nix looked behind her. Hooded riders rode to meet them, their lances and swords glistening under the growling thunder. Nix was no desperate fool. There was no outrunning horses. Moreover, it was she who the Elysians wanted. Having Majorian in her proximity would leave her adversaries the possibility of using them as a hostage.

"Run!" Nix said to her two allies. "I will be joining you two soon."

Serena and Majorian ran for the tavern four imperial miles from their current location.

A strident shriek peeled through the storm. The horses neighed violently, almost expelling their riders from the saddle as they stopped. No animal in the Known World could produce that sound. Nix's blood froze. Pairs of wings emerged from the night. The things that were headed her way were a cross between a bat and a lizard. No, every one of them was a perfidious mockery of the animal kingdom as if a wizard has chosen to randomize every animal parts into a single vessel. Yet their arms were distinctly human. Scythes, lances and pitchforks gleaned alongside their teeth.

Nix did not know which event was more implausible: the fact that she could have a claim to the Elysian throne or that Margrub Dogas, the chimeras of the past, had returned. The dire news in all of this was that the Red Guild did not possess the capability to produce Margrub Dogas. Claradore had told her they needed another three years to be able to create those weapons from human bodies.

A skin-pimpling chill ran down Nix's spine. Then who in the Known World could create Margrub Dogas if not the Red Guild. She was curious. Were the creatures as ferocious and craven as the legends portrayed them?

Her Elysians lacked her curiosity. Her pursuers wasted no minute and turned their tail. The Magrub Dogas nosedived towards the men, impaling horse and man with their talons and claws. Elysians flailed their lances and swords to no avail. Guts were spilled, arms and heads were ripped apart with bestial savagery.

Nix melted her right arm into a blood blade. If the monsters were not the Red Guild's then surely she would have to face them. She glanced at Livia's tattered dress. *All good things must come to an end*, thought Nix.

The Margrub Dogas did not consume their victims, confirming that it was indeed humans who gave birth to them. The chimeras circled above her. They howled. There were four beasts.

The first monster fell from the sky, bearing down its claws. She parried it. Nix recognized the nauseating scent of the Underworld, this mix of sulfur and urine. Her left arm seized its throat, her nails and fingers digging into its scaled flesh. The texture was akin to a crocodile's skin. The thing roared in agony as her fingers found its arteries. Shaping them into scissors, she snipped and snipped. Blood gushed from the creature as it collapsed on the paved road, disintegrating into a puddle of black ashes.

Those things were once human, thought Nix.

The second and third creatures seemed to have been blessed with a brain for they attacked simultaneously. Nix did not care. She closed her eyes. Wings sprouted from her back, further tearing her once beautiful attire. Rain cascaded down her arms and legs as she jumped to avoid their coordinated assault. She took a deep breath. Her entire torso liquified, followed by her head, shedding Livia's dress. Her liquid form rushed towards the second monster, seeping through its ears, jaws and nose. She soon felt its once human arms, its heavy wings and its teeth as sharp as a shark. Its strength

and agility were hers to command. Yet, there was unease in this body. It was the same sensation that she had encountered when entering Livia's flesh. *No, it cannot be,* thought Nix.

She did not have the ponder to ponder on the Margrub Dogas' origins. Her third opponent visibly did not care about the well-being of its ally as it lunged at her with its serrated teeth. With her new claws, she slashed, cleaving her enemy's rib cage. The chimera roared in pain. One by one, her borrowed assets picked rib after rib out of the opposing Margrub Doga until no life was left in its beastly eyes. Her blood then accumulated within the second Margrub Doga's head. She felt herself burst out of its skull, reconstituting herself under the storm.

The last chimera leered at her with anticipation. Nix motioned for it to try its chance against her with her index finger.

Instead, the fourth creature chose the wisest and the most dangerous option. It flew overhead making a beeline for Serena and Majorian. Nix uttered a litany of profanities. More inhuman howls erupted through the night. They organized themselves into an insidious orchestra as if heralding her impending doom. Dozens more monsters entertained the concert in the sky above. *What in the Underworld is happening?* thought Nix. Was the world about to end? There has never been so many fell beasts since the Age of Magic. She deduced that someone had a Forge to create them. And only a Magi could operate the contraption.

So there is another Magi aside me and Claradore, thought Nix.

Nix bolted under the torrential rain. Why were these creatures targeting her? The likely answer was that they knew she was a Magi. Yet only Serena, Majorian and Claradore were aware of that fact. A traitor? She would have to ascertain that after she has dealt with the chimeras. But were it to be true, her life may already been forfeited.

Her feet ached as she stepped on mud and rock. The cold sharpened around her, grating her skin. Endless darkness paraded in front of her, eternalizing the distance between her and her allies. Even if she could reach them, how will she fend off the horde of fiends that this new enemy has conjured? Only now did she realize her first victims used her as their plaything. She was an idiot. Nix had let them gauge her, a terrible mistake.

A shrill scream rang through the frosty air. Serena's voice. Nix hurried, now feeling her lungs sear in pain. She no longer felt her legs. *Please be safe*, thought Nix. It was a naive thought she admitted. What could Serena and Majorian do against that army? Nix's eyes swelled with tears. She had failed Baba and let herself be weak. If she got beaten again, Claradore would never look at her in the eye again.

Claradore's words resonated in her head. *Baba had let herself be weak and the weak... The weak get beaten*

Nix saw Serena's tunic hang from a torn fence post. Finally, she was close. Her skin shivered. The fabric was soaked in blood. The trail led to Serena who was reclining against an uprooted tree. A creature's severed talon was embedded in her right leg.

"Phoenix...Wing...I'm sorry..." said Serena. Nix did not like that statement.

"Where...Where is Majorian?" said Nix.

"There...are...too...many...Alexander...Need...to...kill..."

"I do not understand. Where is Majorian?"

Serena pointed to the black sky. A drop of blood landed on Nix's forehead. Then another. Nix screeched. She forced her eyes to look up. A ring of fiends flew above forming a procession straight from the Gates of the Underworld. They circled around four of their own. The beasts chanted monstrous cantos by using a parody of human speech. Majorian's legless body was carried by the four Magrubs Dogas.

Chapter 21

Serena sat atop the sea. Waves caressed her feet. Fog obstructed her vision. She sang a lullaby in the Forgotten tongue, her voice hitting high-pitched and low-pitched notes with clinical perfection. Her sorrow for her lost son guided her melody through decrescendos and crescendos. Tears flowed from her old eyes as she remembered his first steps, his first words, his first hunt, his first love to the day she struck a spear through his breastplate. For a millennium, she had ceased to exist, wandering around the Known World to sing her song of remorse. It was only when the Gatekeeper refused her pleas to undo her actions that she realized that the powerful could become powerless.

Serena took one step feeling her toes touch the quiet waters. She rotated around a single foot, pouring her tears into her voice. There was once a time when Magi could use rivers and oceans as walkways, constellations serving as guiding lights. Ships were but primitive constructs by the non-Magi who were desperate to mimic their masters. Before the Magi tamed and bred dragons, wars were even fought on bodies of water. Serena had been too young to live these simpler times.

A shadow was plowing through the mist. A small silhouette. It was a man's. He had been courteous enough to accept her invitation. This had to be done out of reach of Nix's ears. The poor Phoenix Wing's heart would be sundered in two should she know what would be transpiring here mere miles away from the shores of Thanatopolis.

More chess pieces had converged at the imperial capital. With the miscreant that was Alexander prowling the streets, Serena did not know if she could keep the facade of being a pawn on the board. The Red Guild and the Faith would soon unsheathe their steel, and she had to decide whether she would reveal herself to the queen.

And so she sang to mourn the last eight years she had spent as Nix's friend. When the man would reach her position, he most certainly would for a dance. Serena did not doubt that she could lead the dance.

"You have come, Dorian," said Serena.

"You have eluded me for so long, Goddess," said Claradore.

“I was not hiding. I have granted you eight years.”

“You believe yourself to be giver of gits, now? Is death the gift you offered my people?”

“I do not deny it.”

Claradore weaved his blood filaments into a sword. “Then, you know why I have come,”

Serena pointed to a set of eight doves soaring above them. “Your strength is wasted here, Dorian. The Giant is watching us,”

“Then I hope he will love seeing your limbs scattered across the sea.”

“You will let him play your strings as if you were a harp? The arbiter is the one who prevails when two gladiators fight to the death.”

“Do not insult my intelligence, you are the one who pulls the strings.”

“That was then. Alexander is no friend of mine any longer.”

“A pathetic lie.”

“Is it?”

Serena knew he would be as stubborn as a raging bull. She discarded her hooded cloak. Her heartbeat slowed. Feet tingled as they liquefied. She closed her eyes, murmuring chants she had long learned by heart. Hidden tattoos glowed on her back. Bones cracked. Blood swirled. Strands of silver hair fell from her forehead. Wrinkles appeared on her arms, legs.

Once she reopened her eyes, the water showed the visage of an elderly woman, one whose eyes had seen the world wither without magic.

“I see immortality has taken its toll on you. How did it feel to see friends, lovers and children die before you?” said Claradore.

“A mild sacrifice for peace and stability.”

Claradore laughed. "Do not play me for a fool. Even you do not swallow your own lies."

"Come, strike me," said Serena.

Claradore raised his blood blade. His peafowl wings surged from his back. For this day, he had chosen turquoise and emerald for his panaches. Radiant eye-spots illuminated his surroundings, dissipating the thick fog.

Serena unwinded her arms. She did not even conjure a weapon of her own in response.

"What sort of trick is this, Goddess?" spat Goddess.

"There is no trick, Dorian. It is not my intent to fight you."

"You make a mockery of my volition!"

"I have walked the path that you have chosen. It will leave you a hollow shell of a man."

"The slayer of millions speaks of morality. How amusing."

A shrill scream pierced their arena. Serena saw colors drain from Claradore's face. She could not judge him as she too was at a loss for words. Every component of her body turned to her distant memories. What could produce such a vile sound? Her mind provided the answer but Serena queried it again for another and another. There was only an infinitesimal probability that Margrub Dogas had returned to the Known World. She had destroyed all of the Magis' Forges.

More ghastly cries tore through the sky. The outline of flyers was visible in the firmament. Five, no ten, no twenty of them approached her location. Seeing one Magrub Doga after a millennium was already an unpleasant experience. An army of them indicated a world destabilizing problem.

As the fiends slowly descended towards them, Serena saw their inhumanly gorgeous faces, mixing animal eyes with human skin. The smell of rotten peaches and apples soon inundated the air. Nightmarish cackling resonated above them. Similar to the Magis' armies of the Age of Ancient, the Magrub Dogas were equipped with

blades made from human bones and with shields plastered with a shrunken miserable human face.

"They are not your allies I presume," said Claradore.

"I do not operate a Forge for my own leisure."

"Then, that only leaves one suspect, my dear. How do you think he acquired a Forge?"

This was a question she too wanted an answer. The Magruba Dogas were unlikely to be interrogated despite them being once human. Her new enemy did not have Claradore's patience. They swooped from the clouds, brandishing their fell weapons. Serena recited the chants of the Primordial Men. Her luminescent tattoos shone. With mere words, water weltered around her, accelerating their currents. Revolving flows formed maelstroms, espousing the shape of serpentine dragons. Her soul roared as ferociously as the water snakes. One by one the Magruba Dogas came, their blades challenging her summons. With each word, each breath, she sent her aquatic dragons crashing down the creatures. The screams of the drowning abominations percolated through the air.

Serena danced, bringing forth dark clouds. The Margruba Dogas showed glimpses of intelligence as they showered her with arrows, their tips made of human teeth. Some projectiles nicked her arms and legs. It mattered not. With waving hands, lightning erupted from the black clouds, striking the airborne enemy. Dismembered torsos, heads and limbs fell into the sea.

She took a brief respite to glance at Claradore's situation. Bloated corpses floated next to the Red Guild's leader. A Magruba Doga's spear had found its way through his groin.

"How many have we slain?" he panted.

She rushed to his side. Light emanated from her palm. Had she been younger, this warmth would have meant death for a Magi such as him. "Above fifty," said Serena.

"A Forge can birth fifty creatures in a year's turning."

"The enemy must have accumulated more. This must be a fraction of their strength."

"All the reason why we must destroy their Forge, and soon."

"The Goddess suggesting joining hands with the Red Guild? The Old Gods be merciful, the Apocalypse must draw near."

Serena extracted the spear from his body. Claradore groaned in pain. Her hands hurried to scald the gaping wound. She sensed venom within his blood. Her eyes betrayed her realization. He nodded. Venom and flames spelled disaster for the art of blood magic. This was how her armies had obliterated the Magi. Her fingers drew lemniscates. Her lips sang incantations. There was once a time when magic was used to heal and not usher indiscriminate destruction. The Magis had all forgotten the cushions of peace by the time of Serena's birth. It was this avidity for violence that caused her to end the magical kingdoms of old and their slave armies.

Greenish fluids escaped Claradore's body. Color faded from his visage. He struggled to stand above the sea. His eyes turned crimson. She saw his eyelids fluttering. He vomited on her brown tunic.

"Saved by the Goddess...How embarrassing..." Claradore rasped, limping above the waves.

"A simple thank you would have sufficed."

His health proved to be unconvincing. Claradore's eyes closed. His head arched backwards. His feet sank underneath the sea. Serena cursed in the Forgotten Tongue. She grabbed his hands but could not establish a firm grip. The master of the Red Guild fell into the ocean. As much as Serena desired his disappearance, she reckoned her own need for allies.

Diving into the frigid water, she transformed her lower body into mermaid's tail. She felt her new form plow through currents, each thrust displacing far more water than human feet. It was true that magic allowed one to align their soul with nature. Serena revolved in the sea as if she had always been a seaborne creature.

How long has it been since the last time she had navigated the ocean's floor? Decades? Centuries? Eons? She had forgotten how many bubbles she made as she threaded through the sea. She had forgotten how curious the dolphins, swordfishes and sharks were as they zipped past her nautical form. Beneath her, Claradore sank even lower as she twirled and span, touching coral and fish alike.

Is it truly the optimal choice to save this man? thought Serena.

Without this child, the canary that was Nix would be free from the spider's cage. The Red Guild had reserved a cruel mission for the one she wanted to kiss the most, the one who chose to copulate with that person called Majorian instead. Without Claradore, Nix could be swayed to leave Thanatopolis, to relinquish her foolish fantasy of wearing a princess' garments. Serena had once prided herself in belonging to a higher plane of existence than the common of mortals. Who was she to save a drowning child?

She lingered in the waters, toying with sea urchins and baiting moray eels out of their dens. The abyss was the sole location that had not known the terror of human violence. When she had been a child, Serena often asked the Forgotten Gods why she had not been reincarnated as a simple fish, beings whose only contact with humanity was the wreckage of triremes and dromons.

It was the thought of Nix crying at Claradore's funeral that perturbed her the most. There were to be more weeping in the coming hours and days as whoever had unleashed those Margruba Dogas would inevitably create more of those creatures. Grief must be delayed in consequence.

Serena swam as fast as a swordfish. Her hands found Claradore's. All fragments of her vigor pulled upwards, her tail propelling her away from the depths. As she ascended, she wondered to herself why she had saved a Magi twice not once on this day. While she did not expect gratitude from this Magi, she hoped he would understand the situation the Gatekeeper has locked them in. It was inevitable that Nix would be entangled by this problem as well. The Margruba Dogas had sensed and identified the Magi with surgical accuracy.

Please be alive, Phoenix Wing, thought Serena as her head burst through the surface. The day had come.

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

She borrowed a deer's form and ran after the Magruba Dogas. The fell creatures seemed to ignore her as they flew in the direction of the imperial capital, still carrying Majorian's moaning body. His languish echoed through the night, guiding her towards what Nix assumed was the fiends' lair.

Under normal circumstances, Nix should have tried to summon Claradore's Artifice. The situation would have demanded the Crimson Spider's immediate attention. But only silence answered her summoning cants. What else could preoccupy Claradore at this hour? Her thoughts touched the vast amount of gold and manpower required to man a Forge. The engine had to be extracted from the depths of the Underworld. Fresh corpses had been brought. There were few entities in the Known World who had access to a reliable supply of bodies. Moreover, under the reign of Ralens the Elder, the Known World has known twenty years of peace. Hence, only a state could operate the Forge. It could be the Medean Empire as Claradore would have known of it. Who else then? The Elysians? Why reveal such a weapon in a piecemeal manner? Any rational adversary would have used the monsters to flood the border forts. No, this enemy pinpointed her, a Magi and Nix had to learn how they identified her.

Nonetheless, Claradore would understand. No plan survived contact with the enemy's shield wall. Nix would venture in the beasts' den.

Her deer legs sprinted across the dark grass. By contrast running as a human now felt like walking. Rain clouds dissipated above leaving a full moon. The old Sarvitarian road zig zagged across fields of orchids and vineyards. Nix soared among plains and concrete, feeling as if her hooves shot out lightning bolts. This speed. She could have reached the far edges of the Known World in mere days had she wanted to. The outline of Charov's Aqueduct soon unraveled behind hills. The lights of the Palace Complex glittered across the Strait of Cyclonius. The Magruba Dogas banked towards the Exiles' Island, a prison in all but name for the purpleborn who had fallen out of favor with the Emperor. The fiends made turns around the island. One by one they landed, swallowed by the island's ominousness.

Nix vacated the deer's body. She unveiled her crimson wings, launching herself towards the creatures' lair.

The smell of decomposed flesh permeated the air. Whatever malefic aura leaked from the Forge desecrated anything from bricks, marble and glass. Black ooze stained the walls. Nix did not dare to touch the substance. She could hear its breath. She could smell its mere presence that indicated the living rejected it.

Down the stairs, the snarl of creatures could have maddened anyone. Cries of rage, sorrow and betrayal. Nix wondered if the fiends' human soul still clung to their corrupted vessel. That was a futile thought. One better left believing they were empty husks that needed deliverance.

The steps led her to a hallway of cells. Half of them were filled with Magrub Dogas whose teeth were salivating as they stared at her. Nix braced for an imminent scream, a wail or any signal that would cause whatever guards there were to swarm her location. Instead, the Magrub Dogas' eyes continued to follow her behind their bars. She found vestiges of their lost humanity within their gaze, a mix of curiosity, indifference and fear. *At least they won't alarm any guards* thought Nix.

"Where is my friend?" asked Nix. She waited. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Blue eyed, red eyed, green eyed stares. No answer. She was an idiot. It was obvious these creatures were incapable of speech.

The unpleasant news were that these ruins had become a labyrinth. Majorian's legs had been severed. Nix had to cauterize the wound at least. *Where are you, Majorian?* thought Nix.

A man's voice rung through the hall. Boniface's voice. Nix muffled a laugh. Of course. Why had she not thought of it? The Faith had been responsible for this. The Faith who had rid the Known World of Magic now resorted to a Forge for the Goddess knew what.

"There were three Magi to dispose of. None of our objectives were met," said Alexander's voice. Nix almost lost her balance. The Giant added another degree to her polynomial equation. She had just carved a bloody path through four Magrub Dogas hours earlier. Having to deal with another surprise was undesirable

"Then we forge more. The Magi are bound to crack under sheer numbers," said Boniface's voice.

"And where do you suggest we fetch corpses? Our Inquisitors can only do so much."

"The Elysian and Medean Empires stand at the brink of war. The boy king is respected by none."

"You assume we have the luxury of time, Disciple. The Magi know of the Forge's existence. They will come."

"Then I trust you will be able to shield us, Excellency."

"There is one more thing. The Creatures brought a live specimen for us this time."

Nix ran for the voices' position.

"What shall we do with it?"

"Mercy..." croaked Majorian's voice.

Stay with me! Stay with me! thought Nix.

"The Forge accepts living ingredients. Throw him in," said Alexander.

"No, no, no, no, no!" screamed Nix as she barreled her way through the stone corridors and the hordes of imprisoned monsters.

Alexander's command ignited the sound of gears spinning and bellcranks grinding metal. A loud hiss reverberated through the ruins. Nix cursed, turning left, turning right. She had to save Majorian.

Parabolas of blinding light flashed in the corridor. Majorian's pleas thundered though the dungeon. She stumbled into more and more black ooze, her bare feet landing into the viscous substance. Every step she took revolted her skin.

She arrived in a place of architectural deterioration, covered in discording marble assembled from all empires that had lived. It displayed the crude inelegance of the Faith at every turn from the bronze wear around the porticos to the lines of fungi that traced every arch. It was the nerve of the radial network that was the dungeon.

Men of the Crucible lined up before a cyclopean structure resembling a metallic gate. Black steam emanated from the door. Metalwork not from the living world manufactured the sprawling complex of gears, bell cranks, pistons and pumps that fueled the Forge.

Majorian was placed on a tray. Men of the Crucible held it inches away from the Forge's opening. Dry air escaped Nix's lips as she tried to scream for his name. Alexander and Boniface stood before the contraption, the latter's eyes glowing with a child's sense of wonder. Alexander clapped his hands. The Men of the Crucible threw the wailing Majorian into the Forge.

A vertiginous silence ran. Nix fell on her knees. There was no asymptotes to the Faith's cruelty. They would deny Majorian an honorable demise.

You would never abandon me, wouldn't you? rung Majorian's voice in her ears for what appeared to be an eternity.

And yet she did abandon him to that Forge. Certain doom awaited them. If she had known that the night spent in the Livia's room would be their last, she would have savored it to the last minute. She would have planted one more kiss on their lips. She would have cooked one more of their favorite carrot porridge. She stood there motionless letting her betrayal of their vow assail her heart and bones. The Men of the Crucibles' chants and prayers added insult to injury.

She would kill them all.

Her Majorian and her Baba, stolen by these vile men. Right when she finally acquired the strength to not fear them anymore. It was not fair. It never was. One by one, she would tear their rib cages and pry out their still beating hearts and send their remains through the Forge. Yes that was a sound plan.

Alas, the Forge would not let her enact it. It hissed anew, emitting orange steam. Metallic screeching tore through the ceiling. The Forge's inner lights flickered between crimson, white and gold. Wide smiles were drawn on Boniface and Alexander's faces.

A tall shadow emerged from the Forge. Two still human arms were permanently attached to their visage, now sheathed in antler's horns. Its torso stood on four equine legs. And these eyes, as red as rubies, seemed to be in constant mourning. Phoenix wings sprouted from its back.

Majorian? thought Nix.

"Welcome back to the world of the living," said Alexander.

The thing called Majorian sang with a voice as elegant as it was frightening. This time, there was a duality of female and male voices in its vocal cords. Its intonation spoke of confusion and loss. Such was the beauty in the melody that Nix could have wept on the spot. That creature was an unholy miracle, capable of emulating all instruments in the Known World from water organs to harps.

"How unique...What to do with this one, your Excellency," asked Boniface.

"The Faith has no use for this mockery of a bard."

"Then let the alchemists and inquisitors toy with him. Perhaps something can be gained from dissecting it."

The thing called Majorian made an expression synonymous with terror at the mention of that word. Nix must have imagined it. Magruba Dogas did not have emotions.

Alexander made a sudden turn of his head. Nix had no time to react. Their eyes met.

"So the Magi comes for their friend. Come little girl, do not be afraid."

Nix was old enough to know not to trust anything that came out of a Faithful's dirty mouth. She coiled her arm, melting it into a blood blade. Boniface yelled. Men of the Crucible surged towards her position.

She leapt in the air, liquefying her entire body. *Chariot*, thought Nix. Every drop of her blood gyrated, congregating into a spiked wheel. She danced in rhythm with the thing called Majorian's melody. She spun and spun, feeling the surrounding air gaining velocity. Her spikes slashed through air. She thrusted forward. The Men of the Crucible screamed. She felled them, tearing through their flesh like a hot blade through butter. Their lives did not matter to her. Boniface who was covering behind his colleague was her objective.

Disgusting, she thought.

She advanced slowly, pulverizing any Men of the Crucible who had not soiled themselves. It smelled of blood and defecation. This was a chance to rectify the humiliation they had put her and Baba through eight years ago.

“Do something!” screamed Boniface to the Giant. To her surprise, Alexander grabbed the Cardinal by the collar and sent him towards Nix’s wheel of carnage.

“Finish what you have started,” simply said Alexander.

She did not bother reflecting on the significance of that action. Her blades cut through Boniface’s flesh. The Man in White was no more.

She discarded her liquefied form in front of the thing called Majorian. It stopped singing. Its red eyes gave her such a sorrowful gaze, it could make her believe it retained its humanity.

“Forgive me, Majorian,” Nix said.

“Nnnniiiiiixxxxxxxxx,” croaked the creature.

It was lying, She knew it. It could not know her name anymore. She molded her left arm into a blood blade.

“I promise you this will not hurt,” she said, feeling tears run from her eyes.

The creature’s eyes contorted into pure horror. It appeared to cry out her name over and over again. She raised her blade as she moved towards it. The thing took a step backwards and then another.

“Please, you need to return to the Underworld...”

The thing called Majorian darted to the other side of the room. *It knows fear?* thought Nix. It was implausible, but reality often disappointed her. She had failed to shield them, and now she would be denied the opportunity to relieve them of their suffering.

“Come back...Please...I am here to help,” croaked Nix.

“Liiiiiiiiivvvvvvveeeeeeee,” said the creature.

“Stop. You cannot possibly speak my tongue.”

“IIIIII aaaaaaaaaammmmmmm Maaaaajoooooooooriaaaaaaaaaan,”

“You lie. You lie.”

“Noooo.”

Deep within her heart, she knew it told the truth. Her brain tried to convince her of the improbability of that thing being capable of intelligence. Yet her heart has witnessed it speaking, it knowing fear. It has yet to strike her even once. *What other proof do I need?* thought Nix.

The thing called Majorian sang an ode in her name. This time, its voice was as natural as the Majorian of old. She remembered how Majorian’s serenades had melted her heart, how every movement of their lips could tame her wildest anger.

“I loooove you,” said the thing called Majorian.

She could prevent herself from weeping uncontrollably. So they lived. Their spirit remained in a body that was a perversion of nature. And so she did the unthinkable, throwing herself into the creature’s human arms.

Its body was stripped of the warmth that once characterized it. Its skin was now rugged like a shark’s. It smelled of death and dried tears.

“Look at you. They have made a monster of you.”

“You are still my witch.”

“The witch and the monster. Wouldn’t that be a good title for a fairy tale?”

“I saw the Gates of the Underworld, Nix.”

“And you have returned...Are you Magi now?”

A shudder passed through her. She felt a humid breath over her neck. Her eyes slowly turned. It was Alexander. His form towered over hers. She was reminded how his palms were as large as a man’s head, how his tired eyes glared at anyone with utmost condescension. There was not a single scratch on his body. Not even his clothes had seen harm. What were his intentions? Were Cardinals not allies? Why had he not helped his compatriot?

She did not take any chances. She struck him with the blood blade. His fist connected with her jaw first. She ate dirt and blood.

The Giant stood still, content with simply witnessing her art. She did not like this. The more her gaze was fixated on him, the more every nerve in her body screamed for her to flee this place at once.

“You have played enough, little Magi,” said Alexander as he cracked his knuckles. Only then did she see the tattoos depicting iconolatry of the Age of Magic. Only then did she realize how irrational it was to come here without Claradore.

Light poured from his tattoos. The earth growled beneath her. Alexander’s mouth uttered cantos of a bygone era in the Forgotten Tongue. Two dragonheads unfolded from thin air. The Elemental Gnosis, the very first of the Magi’s magical tomes, destroyed by the Faith a millennium ago. Threads of flames titled towards her longitudinal axis revolved around the Giant. Nix swore loudly. Her legs did not want to move. The fire redoubled in intensity as it swirled around Alexander’s colossal stature. The Giant looked like a god bathing in the sun.

I cannot prevail over that thought Nix.

The dragonheads exploded forwards. She could only use her arms as a shield. A deafening roar rung through her poor ears. Infernal ringing burst through her head. Her vision swam.

She opened her eyes to see that she still lived. In front of her stood the thing called Majorian. It sang, now faster than it ever did. With the strength of desperation, its calcinated body had absorbed the torrent of fire. Its scared eyes looked at her. *You... you saved me? Why?* thought Nix.

“Run,” it said clearly with Majorian’s female voice.

Nix did not question the order. Her legs took her away from the Forge.

Chapter 24

Nix knew she was being followed in her feline form. The large hooded man behind her towered over the crowd of humans that she tried to hide within. His inhuman eyes were riveted on every of her movements. She had to find a suitable place to return to her human form.

The Cardinal knew. She reared her cat's head, meeting his emotionless stare. His knuckles were larger than her human face. To have unmasked her within seconds. As Claradore said earlier, that man was the embodiment of danger.

With only fingers, the Giant had knocked Majorian unconscious in the underground passageway.

"Run. Do not look back. He will not kill me," had said Majorian with their human voice.

Fight? Every sense, every bone, every organ in her body told her to disregard that idea. Somehow, her primordial urges knew that that man hunted Magi for sport. A Giant. A real Giant. A man whose footsteps made the soil tremble. She did not understand. All Giants perished alongside the Magi at the end of the Age of Magic. There were no tales of Giants living past their hundredth's summer.

How? How is he alive? thought Nix.

She hastened her pace as she passed below the shadow of Charov's Aqueduct. The emptiness of the Exiles' Island provided little cover even for a cat. She jumped on abandoned balustrades, fitting her feline form into cracks and small interstices. Every option, every turn, every shortcut led to seeing that man behind her.

She knew her foe being capable of wielding magic, magic even more advanced than her own. Could he even rival the Goddess herself? This was a question Nix did not desire the answer to. Some Giants were sired by the Magi in the art of magic. None ever managed to perfect their art style. This deficiency was compensated by their raw strength. Their hands could grab a man's skull and crush it as easily as tissue. Combine that with even passable aptitude in the magical arts and Nix was unsure

whether even Claradore would fancy duelling this beast of a man who wielded The Elemental Gnosis.

It was not her intention to allow Alexander to see her human form. The Palace Complex's five domes were visible in the distance.

Nix made a right turn. A dead end. She smiled. It was an advantage. A puzzle of climbable rocks presented itself before her. One by one, she used them to leap over the brick wall. *Finally, I have eluded him*, thought Nix.

She found herself in a cemetery dating from the Plague of Anastasian. Tombstones with inscriptions in both the Classical and the Tongue littered the grounds, swallowed by the Palace Complex's shadow. Nix scoured left and right. There was not a single animal nor man in sight.

The cracking of bricks raised her feline hair. Alexander's hand smashed a hole through the wall. It shredded through the mortar as if it was papyrus. She started running again. Behind her, Alexander's unnatural face reappeared.

"The Heavens be blessed. You are a Magi. They have granted me another opportunity to kill you lot," said Alexander in the Forgotten Tongue.

Nix chose to exit the cat's body. She emerged, watching the Cardinal observe her reconstitute herself with his aged eyes.

"How does a Giant still live in this age?" said Nix.

Alexander cracked his knuckles. His biceps swelled, rupturing his ill-fitting tunic. "I am the one the books refer to as the Betrayer."

The Giant who betrayed his own kind to see the Goddess' Light because he was cursed with a lesser height. Nix was almost honored to set her eyes on his unique specimen.

"You fancy dirtying your hands for the Goddess. Why doesn't she come here herself?" said Nix.

"The Goddess has no time for insects such as you. I will suffice."

"She has time, or unless you mean she has abandoned you."

“Insolent roach! The Goddess loves me!”

Alexander’s body had grown twice as large. Veins and muscles were the highlight of his new form, a grotesque parody of male physiology. Nix was glad that Claradore was not here. He could have been jealous.

So he is prone to sensitive outbursts? Interesting thought Nix.

“Your Goddess’ love is not unconditional. She does not love us Magi. And She does not love you.”

“My life’s work has been in Her name!”

“How sad. Your life’s work makes Her vomit.”

That last jest made Alexander thrust forwards, raising his fists in the air. Nix’s blood weltered, forming a blade from her right arm. She moved sideways allowing his fist to connect with the wall behind her. Bricks and mortar shattered. Stones flew in the air. Nix slashed hoping she could hit his eyes. The Last Giant parried with his left hand. His flesh had the hardness of steel. Her blade refused to sink deeper as if it encountered an immovable fortress.

More blows came. Each of them striking concrete, amphoras or walls. None could harm her. She threw flurry after flurry at his exposed torso. All hit a wall of impenetrable skin. Nix cursed.

“Coward! You fight without honor!” roared Alexander.

“Honor?” She spat the word like arsenic. “You make war upon a child.”

“Silence! Your kind was supposed to be extinct!”

“I can say the same about yours.”

“I am not a Giant. I am a Disciple of the Goddess!”

“Tell me, does your order require its servants to be mad?”

“The Slaver calls the Seeker of Truth delusional. What a mummer’s farce!”

"Slaver?" Her eyes narrowed. "You Faithful have put an entire world in chains!"

"We broke their chains. We freed them from your Magi and your dark arts."

"And stripped them from the Magi's knowledge. Centuries of human progress were wiped you!"

With melee attacks ineffective, Nix turned to incantations. Her foe had not yet established the full extent of her magical capabilities. Spells from the Grimoire of Red could grant her the element of surprise.

She spoke the Cants of Crimson. Bisecting planes of octagons dazzled in the air. Lines and vectors leapt through the colonnaded streets, shearing through stone, bricks and soil. Alexander stood there silent, unfazed. A fatal mistake.

A blinding flash shone through the open terrain. Her chants whipped fiery cyclones that were hurled at the Giant. Her enemy responded with the crack of lightning. Tempest regurgitating bolts of blinding yellow and white collided with her pillars of fire. She conjured dragonheads of her own. They belched fire. Ruins of forgotten villas crumbled. Ghostly forums were torn asunder amidst an arcana of burning ellipses.

Nix did not wish to eternalize this stalemate. She waited for his counterattack, a cataract of hellish thunder. She took a deep breath. Her head, torso, legs and feet melted into a torrent of blood, riding his lightning like a salmon traversing an upwards current. Alexander screamed as she flowed around his arms and chest, feeling his heartbeat pulsating in a hectic manner. Her objective was his mouth and nose. Her liquefied form rushed to obstruct them. His hands trashed over her bloody form, unable to pry her away from his throat.

It was then that she felt his throat bulge. A searing heat was building up, lighting his arteries and veins in a bronze hue. Nix disengaged, letting herself fall on the floor before reforming herself in a solid state. From Alexander's mouth, emerged fire. His breath consumed concrete, plants, vases and glass alike, turning them into a canvass of cinders.

Was this how the Magi of old danced with dragons? Sensing their scalding breath pass near your skin hastened her heartbeat to delirious levels. Nix jumped in the air dodging stream after stream. She molded spears with her arms. Her opponent has shown that he has little to no weaknesses. But he has the unfortunate curse of being

a man. Every man possesses that one weak spot that all women were told to take advantage of when in grave peril.

She thrusted downwards aiming for his genitals. Alexander seemed to have deduced her intentions as he braced his arms, covering his soft spot. *Predictable*, thought Nix. Her bloody spear pressed towards her enemy's visage. She struck one eyeball. Alexander roared in pain. Disengage of press on? She had the advantage and must utilize it to its fullest. The second spear fell down, striking one of his arms. Nix saw too late the scarlet glow emanating from Alexander's throat. A scorching blaze engulfed her abdomen, throat and face. Hair burned. The smell of roasted flesh and blood flooded her senses.

His right hand grabbed her dominant arm, twisting it as if it was doll's. Her elbow cracked. She was bleeding from mouth and eyes. An inferno of flames surrounded her.

Nix yelled, rolling on the cemetary's ground. Baba's tales told the stories of men who preferred to fall on their sword rather than endure the sensation of burning flesh. Her lungs seared. It felt as if there were a million ants clawing and eating at her eyes, skin, lips, ears, arms, fingers and tendons.

Forgive me, Baba, Majorian, Serena and Claradore.

Alexander put his sandal on her throat.

"Wicked wench, you took my eye," rasped the Cardinal.

Your new look suits you well, thought Nix.

His massive hands grabbed her by the hair. She screamed in agony.

"How many Magi are there, witch?" asked Alexander.

She still had the strength to spit at him, her saliva was coated in calcined blood.

"Still defiant, aren't we? We will not be once the Inquisitors arrive. You will be broken like an old toy," said Alexander.

He started dragging her through mud before stopping momentarily. Her captor gazed at the full moon. He swore. A whistling sound perforated the air. A pillar of light crashed down. Alexander released her to evade the attack. A second pillar light

rained down from the Heavens. It slivered the abdomen of a dark cloud. For a few seconds, Nix has forgotten her burning body, her severed arm. She wanted to laugh. The number of known Magi in the Known World has now doubled.

“You now side with Magi? Have you been consumed by madness?” said Alexander to his attacker.

Nix’s savior answered with another pillar of light. It plummeted on Alexander’ spine. The Cardinal shrieked in pain. It was now his turn to feel his flesh being eaten by flames. The pillar of light displaced dust and stones alike. Flying debris buffeted Nix. The ground buckled like the deck of a sinking ship. Slabs of stone were tossed into the firmament. The newcomer sang cants only told in the Book of Primary Genesis, the world around Nix seemed to collapse, coming off live a lover’s clothes.

“You shall depart from this city forthwith, Disciple,” thundered a voice from the heavens.

“You fled from your defeats, and yet fate has delivered you back into my hands,” declared Alexander.

“The failures I have made were induced by you.”

Alexander chortled. “A thousand years of banishment, and still you have learned nothing of consequence.”

“You and I were never meant to rule, Alexander.”

“That is what cowards say. We have been given unlimited responsibility, only for you to discard it like an irresponsible child. Have you no shame?”

“Shame? It is you who used my name to brutalize this world we created.”

A being with white swan wings descended from the sky. An angel? A woman? Her plumage could have made moonlight a second sun. It brightened the starless night, inundating the cemetery in overwhelming light. Nix did not care if she would become blind from witnessing such a miracle. In the history of the Known World, only one being could radiate as majestically as this one.

The figure levitated in the air, slowly losing altitude. Cardinal Alexander uttered a litany of profanities at it. Soon, the entity’s visage would be visible. Nix was curious to

see it, a face that all of the Faithful's paintings and sculptures struggled to recreate. A smile she knew all too well was the first thing that the figure showed her. Nix would have gasped if blisters had not consumed her lips. There were too many questions that this appearance raised.

Was this a dream? thought Nix.

The angel landed, flashing the same cheerful smile again.

"We have much to talk about after this," said the angel. The newcomer whistled. Spartak came. Nix let herself fall on its back. Rest. She needed a long rest.

"Don't you dare deny me my prize," spat Alexander.

"You above all men know the price of defiance."

"You would threaten me?"

"I have already worked my craft upon you. Consider a warning a kindness I need not extend."

Whether this was a dream or not, what she saw could not be erased from her mind. Serena has appeared. The last thing her vision saw was Serena conjuring halos from her palms.

Chapter 25

Nix woke up, flailing in what appeared to a bed. Instead of seeing Serena's face, she was disappointed to be greeted by Claradore's Artifice. Never had she thought its lurid appearance would relieve her. Her arms billowed with burn marks. Phoenix feathers had been placed on the blisters. An throbbing pain dug into her skin.

"So, it seems you will live, my dear," cawed the Artifice.

That was not reassuring. the thing called Serena had hovered in the air, winds had howled around her white wings. The pillar of light had come, its deafening metallic sound still ringing in her ears. At that moment, all of her instincts culminated in one simple decision. Flee.

"Where are we?" Nix rasped. The room had all the attributes of a wine cellar, empty amphoras littering the corners. Paintings of spiders, some unfinished, were stacked in an unorderly pile. A small altar dedicated to the True Goddess stood in front of her bed, the deity having being painted in an amateurish manner.

"The very beginning, my dear. Where I had started my life in this new world," said the Artifice.

"Will he find us?"

"In the long term, yes. In the short term, no."

"He was a Giant."

The Artifice bit a pear with its human teeth. "I am aware of that."

"And you never bothered to inform me?"

"You know the stories. It is hard to believe that one of them still lived, my dear."

"And Serena, the Goddess? You also knew."

"Her intentions had always been a riddle."

There were too many new variables in this mathematical equation. Serena was the one addition that ruined her understanding of the situation. Was it all a lie? Were all those eight years just a test? Nix failed to see what Serena gained from such a deception. The Goddess could have eradicated both her and Claradore by flicking her fingers. Yet she has toyed with them for years pretending to be a child then a young woman. Nothing, nothing made sense in this reality.

“Can you confirm this is not a dream,” asked Nix.

The Artifice pecked her in the forehead. A jolt of pain reminded her that this was truly her new reality.

So I lost, thought Nix.

Throughout history, defeat only lead to two outcomes: annihilation or a reversal of fortunes so spectacular that all historians, poets and philosophers would perform vivisections on the event for the following decades. Nix was unsure which one of these two diverging branches she would find herself in but the likelihood of the first one was higher.

“What is there to be done?” asked Nix. She removed one of the phoenix feathers applied on arms. The skin beneath it had been restored.

Spartak entered the room, carrying a basket filled with dead doves, probably her dinner for the day. Its priorities were well-defined as it jumped on the bed, showering her with affection.

“It had cried quite a lot,” said Claradore.

She felt tears on her wounded face. They mixed with whatever the blisters secreted, its repulsive texture landing on her lips. “I’m sorry Spartak, I will make it up to you. I promise,” said Nix.

They stayed locked in embrace as they had done the first night following Baba’s death. In the makeshift tent Claradore had made for them, Nix had emptied her body of tears and screams. Today, Spartak’s twenty-seven greater palms frame could have easily crushed her smaller body.

Unforgivable. Alexander had made her puppy cry. If only Nix could have shone a light on Serena’s masks sooner. A girl that she could have trusted with her deepest

secrets and desires. A girl that would have undertaken grand adventures with her. A girl that she could display her magic before her amazed eyes, not caring about the Faith and their white robes. It had all been too good to be true. Nix had shown herself to be weak and the weak get beaten.

A droplet of blood fell on the floor. A rat surged out of its hole to drink it. Nix raised her finger, causing the stray blood to force its way into the rat's body. She spun her index, pulling invisible strings on the animal. It gyrated, contorting its spine and tail in impossible ways. By regulating her breaths, Nix could make it fly, and so she did, each of her heartbeats dragging the rat from one corner of the room to next. Spartak chased after her toy avidly. The Artifice snickered. Nix ended the game by crashing the rat's skull into concrete.

This was nothing compared to what she could do with her usual hosts. How many cats had she exhausted to spy on courtiers, nobles and the Emperor's entourage? No reasonable human would ever suspect their feline friends of wearing masks. The bond between an animal and a human was immune to the disease of betrayal. Nix was both intrigued and jealous of that fact.

A cat's face was a near perfect mask.

Chapter 26

Desperate times call for inhabiting a black rat's body. The prey of her favorite hosts. Nix was trammelled by the fact that Serena could identify her while wearing a cat's mask. In ordinary situations, she would have never considered becoming a parasite, this creature that fed on filth. Carriers of disease, rats were more than capable of bringing entire armies to their knees. The Medean Empire had sent both men and cats to eradicate this vermin during the Plague of Anastasian. No matter how many rat skulls were heaped in the streets of Thanatopolis, the rodents outnumbered men by at least a four to one ratio. The ability to absorb these casualties had captivated Nix when she still had access to Baba's encyclopedias. After four years of urban warfare, the Medean Emperor Anastasian capitulated to his whiskery foes. Medean legions retreated from the capital's streets, leaving them to the usual animosity between cats and rats. Through its valor and resilience, a small animal had shown itself capable of surviving the might of humanity's steel. If it could defeat mankind, could it also prevail against a slayer of gods?

Nix climbed the sewage pipe. Her objective laid beyond the faint light at the end of the tunnel. Scents she would usually abhor such as feces, urine and sulfurous food now pleased her. Never had she thought she would delight in swimming in literal shit. Serena would have laughed at the absurdity of the situation. If only she could talk to Serena.

"Look at you, Phoenix Wing! How adorable you must be right now!" echoed Serena's words.

Had Serena been here, she would have picked Nix up and almost crushed the rat's form with her tender hugs. She might have held Nix by her whiskers while lobbing volley after volley of questions. Were rats as intelligent as humans as Zhapur claimed? Was it easier to evade predators?

"You must be careful if you intend to wear another's mask for an indeterminate period of time," had said Claradore.

The Magi had spoken of men who wore wolves' skin. They had eaten, defecated and even fornicated as wolves. Life as an animal offered simplicity and evasion from daggers pointed at your back. One hour, one day, one week turned into a month, a

year. In these acts, the beast's consciousness dominated the human's. No longer could they exit the form they had come to love. No longer could they understand the speech of humans. No longer could they feel disgust when consuming human flesh. No longer could they scream for help when hunters slaughtered their pack.

Yet it was a risk she was willing to take. When one took a high risk, one could only meet two distinct fates: debilitating failure or a crushing success.

Nix emerged from the sink of Livia's bathroom. Ceramic tiles meshed with dove patterns greeted her small eyes. The door laid open, the princess' body lying on her bed. Nix took a deep breath before using the rat's body to make a mad dash for the underside of the bed. No human sounds could be heard. The room smelled of incense and Livia's vanilla perfume.

Alone. She was alone with the princess who was clothed in Nix' favorite dress. Purple silk with golden phoenix motifs enhanced with the amethyst necklace procured by Domitian. Her porcelain skin mocked the scars on Nix's body. The crown sitting on her study gazed at Nix' empty head. Both Livia and Nix had come to bear witness to the Goddess' wrath yet only one had seen their body mutilated. Another reason why Alexander had to disappear.

Not knowing if this was the last time she would do this, the rat's body shook as she left its husk. Her body reformed itself. And so did her injuries that the rat's body had hidden. Her blisters and burn marks assaulted her anew. Multiple blisters exploded. Blood and pus ran from her arms, legs, shoulders. Nix convulsed in agony. It was as if thousands of sharp blades had impaled her at once. She cursed at the person in the mirror.

"You were too impatient," rung Claradore's voice in her head.

Patience will lead to our demise.

"What in the Goddess' name was that?" yelled a handmaiden's voice from the outside.

"Go fetch the key and the Excubitores!" yelled another.

Running footsteps roared in the distance. Nix swore. She could not move. Her breath stank of death. She bit her lip. Concentrate. Her heart raced through its rib cage.

“My gold coin,” said Baba’s voice.

What?

Her eyes flashed. Nix saw herself standing before the Gates of the Underworld.

She somehow knew that there was going to be two pillars. The Gatekeeper, its eyeless and mouthless oval face watching her with interest, spread its black wings as ravishing as a monarch butterfly’s. It was taller than the Palace Complex itself, with a human body that somehow stole the beauty of both male and female physique.

The loud creaking of the gates, every inch of the revealed other side unearthed something deep within her. Her bones trembled. All those who could the read the Forgotten Tongue had seen them once and had come back. Like her, their heads spun while standing before the Gates. A vertigo for gazing at their colossal height. She breathed this sort of miasma, a mixture of unnatural ashes and damp soil which clouded anything else in this dimension, knowing exactly how the air would tickle her nose, how its composition would scratch her lungs.

Few could boast seeing the Gates more than twice. Nix knew how the cyclopedian arches towered above her small form, how the Hellhounds looked down at her with their teeth as large as a man’s arm, how the planets aligned in the astral void. Standing here and being able to tell the tale. How unreal it must have felt during the Age of Magic when more could see it and return to their plane. Unburdened by senses and the limitations of a physical boundary, the sorcerers of old had it all.

And the smell. Something she could not associate with any object nor animal, a unknown fragrance she had to be familiar with. One which had once inundated her sense, one which could make her forget her worst fears and mend her greatest wounds. When was the first time she has been here? When did the barks of the Hellhounds to the shape of the eroded rocks were engraved in her psyche? Even Claradore did not know.

This time, the gargoyles perched atop took the form of Claradore. All reached out with their open arms at her, providing a tantalizing offer, one she accepted once in her distant remembrance. *Show it to me...The price for attaining magic.* Without hesitation, she accepted like all those born during the Age of Magic.

It started. That song. The song which she had memorized the lyrics for as long as she has lived. That song which she had taught the Goddess herself. This time it was a voice who always sang it from the confines of her memory, a voice which was entwined with that smell. It was soft, gentle yet imbibed in tears and regret, a siren heralding Nix' inevitable fate. *So it is true.* The legends never told in the past spoke of the Gates who mutated before every human who passed between them. Old men would meet their long lost lovers or pets. Younger ones would reunite with the children who had departed too soon. Orphans would leap into the arms of their parents. *You find anything and anyone you have lost at the Gates.* These theories had once amused her, tales the older generations told for millenia only for her to be greeted by an empty reception.

The gates continued their opening, an increasingly blinding light escaped from the other side. The song undulated between high and low pitches in an inhuman frenzy even she could not match. Just who or what was taunting her from the other side? She felt water flowing beneath her feet. Neither cold nor hot. A current of feathers, no of delicate silk caressed her legs. Thousands of blue lights radiated in the stream, zipping in a single file to their final destination. Nix tried to grab one, only to find a luminous ball with a tail in her palm. She never imagined it to be warm. The light wiggled frantically in her hand, aiming for the Gates. Within it, she glimpsed at someone's childhood, their first love, the death of their father, their marriage to the birth of their first daughter, to the sight of a bloodied womb, a monotonous life untouched by desire and constrained by mundane goals. All of that existence contained in a glowing orb. *The absurdity of it all.*

Nix could have stared at the river all day long while holding the ball. Time and space being frozen in this realm. She felt she could fly. Higher and higher. Phoenix, gryons, hydras, dragons, Nix would soar further than any of them could. She laughed at the thought, herself levitating in the boundary of living and dead. Nix could not breathe, yet she lived at her fullest at this moment. It had never occurred to her how not being able to touch nor smell could soothe the human mind. This lost sensation. Humanity had been fools in forgetting it.

She released the orb, causing it to fly towards the gate alongside its compatriots. *Go. Be free. Free from the misery you have endured.* Beyond the gargantuan doors, the castle she saw every night in her dream laid beyond, reality mixing with imagination. Walls made from tears dropped from rainless countries. Laughter, chatter were heard from its never-ending lights. Inside, she dreamt of the grandiose ballrooms and banquet halls where she could house the stray dogs she rescued from shelters. There, she

would water her mouth with durians, mangos, pandan leaves, fruits evoking a distant pleasure in her tongue, one which would see her travel back to hazy hanging gardens found somewhere in the Known World. From within the palace, a figure was taking shape. It became more and more human like as it walked towards Nix, shadows of limbs and arms coalescing before her very eyes. The song. It was the figure's doing. Had Nix brought her dagger, she would have clutched it.

What emerged from the gates was an elderly woman with a blue and green eye. Nix teared up.

"To be able to see you again...You have grown taller than I ever did. Fate has offered us this moment as a curse and as a blessing," said Baba.

"Baba! Baba! BABA!" screamed Nix as she ran towards the one she could never call mother.

"I am sorry to have parted ways with you, my gold coin. It was never my intention to leave you with Claradore and that vile woman. They have made you walk on a nightmarish path."

They had so much to converse about, so many stories she wanted to share. But first there was the touch. A touch that rivaled even the most passionate of kisses, awakening an emotion Nix has not felt in summers. A touch whose kindness would paralyze her from neck to toe.

"Come with me, to the other side, my gold coin. We shall be safe there," said Baba. Baba seemed so far yet so close to her.

"Wait for me, Baba! I'm coming! I'm coming!" said Nix as she ran under the eyeless face of the Gatekeeper.

She wanted that hug. A hug that felt as if thousands of blades struck her heart, bringing elation and despair simultaneously. An earthquake of cries that would shake her very being, the glass castle that was the reality she had built collapsing, its shards hitting her vital organs.

It was not meant to be. The sky tore itself asunder. At that very moment the thing called Alexander glowed from the firmament, descending into the Gates of the Underworld. The Hellhounds barked. The river of souls left its bed, the orbs

vibrating frantically. Her enemy whisked his finger in a haughty manner. Pillars of light collapsed into the structure. Nix ate dust, rolling on the ground. Hellhounds disintegrated. The Gatekeeper remained unfazed. Baba reentered the Gates of the Underworld. The doors closed.

In Livia's room, Nix cursed, allowing her sheer rage to guide her. Her blood flowed upwards, carrying her on the bed frame. A river she had become, undulating between its bed. Yet her stream yearned for a natural flow. It sought its mouth or a sea or an ocean into which it could pour itself. And so she coursed over the surface of human flesh like she had done so on that unique night with Claradore's Artifice.

Had she lived in the Age of Magic, she would have been crucified. Even attempts at this were tantamount to premeditated murder. Yet, even the thing called Serena could not anticipate this action, an action that flouted the rules the Magi had established.

Her river found its mouth or rather Livia's mouth. Nix let herself be swallowed by the princess' tongue. Curtains of red descended on her vision. In an instant, she felt toes dangling beneath bedsheets, fingers touching a duvet, her right cheek resting on a pillow. For the first time in her life, Nix prayed to the Goddess.