

LILY ELLINGTON

Elena

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*For Emma—  
A dream come true.  
Or... Brought to life, at least.*

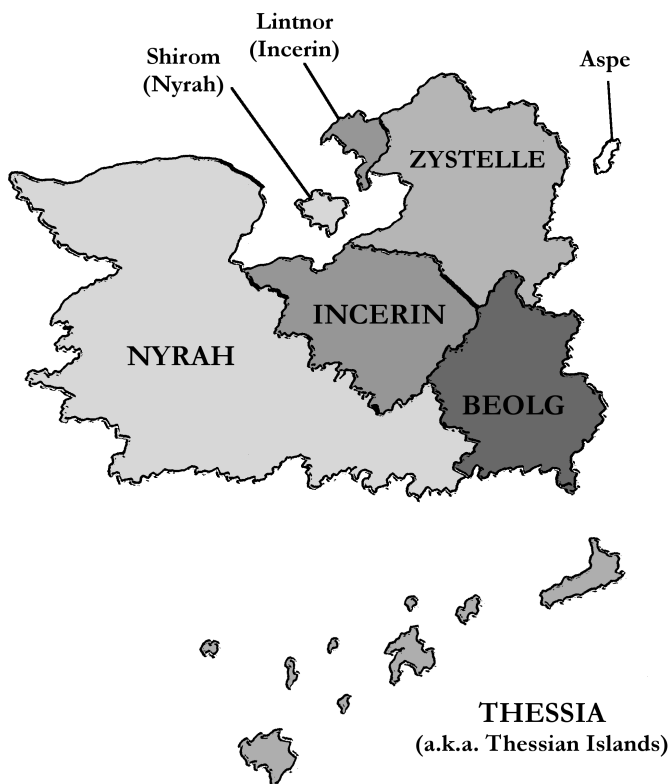


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# Maps

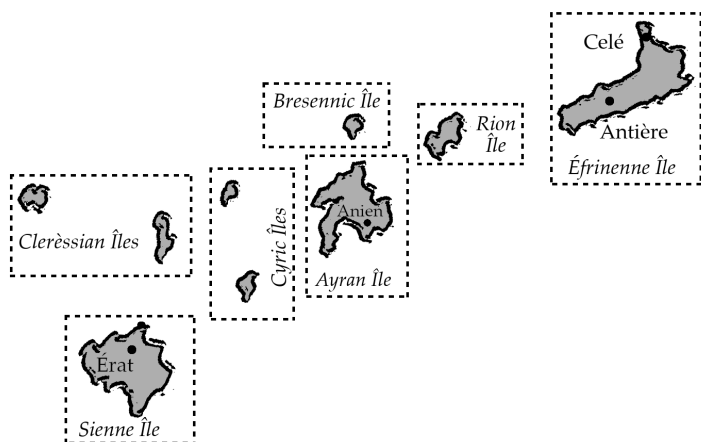


*Map of the World*





*Map of Incerin and her neighboring countries*



*Map of the Thessian Islands*

## The Legend of Estènne

The crowd was chanting her name, its syllables echoing in the small marble chamber. She could be their leader if she wanted, so was she worshipped by the citizens. She was kind-hearted and gentle in her manners, slow to anger, quick to forgive. She was the epitome of the model ætherii, the most powerful of the magic-wielding therii, in this regard. This fame was still unsettling for her. Hailing from a large city on the other side of the world, it was her infamy there that caused her to leave.

But here, in the eyes of these Thessians, she was a true goddess. Physically, she was of slight build, lending to her preference of a bow to a sword. But her primary weapon was her mind, capable of the most powerful magic any living theria had ever seen. She could generate enormous swaths of blue fire, earthquakes that rent the earth, precision-aimed lightning bolts; she created shields that could protect her and her allies from attacks magical or physical, healed near-fatal injuries, intercepted and deflected enemy projectiles, and could even predict near-future events.

Despite her battle skills, she prided herself as a scholar. She traveled around Thessia, studying the stories of their bards,

of their libraries. Investigating these legends, she was able to discover the nature of magical energy and how the therii were able to harness it. She expanded the knowledge of the field a hundred-fold during her lifetime, and many of her discoveries became common knowledge across the islands. Amplification, combination, minute changes in aspect or form. Though some prodigies were able to command several of these advancements in their own magic, only she was able to control them all.

Along her journey across Thessia, she explored a number of ancient ruins and landmarks. At the forest's edge near the ruins of the citadel in the now long-lost city of Antière, she discovered an injured wolf cub, its gray fur mottled with red, its voice a weak, murmuring cry. As she sat down near the wolf and laid her hand upon its side, the latter gave out a cry of surprise and fear and tried to get away, to no avail.

She quickly assessed its wounds and, smiling, spoke, in a gentle tone, "My name is Estènne. I'm here to help you." She cast a healing spell and, nearly instantly, the wolf's injuries were healed, though it would still be sore for a few days. When it seemed the wolf cub had calmed down, she asked, "What happened?"

"My family was attacked," it explained, its animalistic sounds interpretable only to her, "by a rival pack. Mama fought back, but..." Its voice trailed off to a quiet whimper as its body curled up instinctively.

"Are you the only one left?" she asked, in as gentle a voice as she could manage. When the wolf responded with a mere whimper that she interpreted as affirmation, she continued. "Would you like to come with me, then?"

The wolf cub paused momentarily as it perked its head up, considering the offer. As always, Estènne was impressed by the

sophistication of the animals she encountered, but this was the first time she had offered such companionship. She could sense that, beyond this young wolf needing help surviving for a time, the two of them would get along just fine.

“I accept,” the wolf eventually said. “I don’t have anywhere else to go, and I owe you for saving me. I may not be much help now, since I’m small, but I’ll do my best.”

She laughed and replied, “Thank you. I look forward to our time together.” As she stood, the wolf jumped gingerly into her arms, then curled itself around her neck. Petting it, she asked, “Do you have a name, little wolf cub?” The wolf gave a short series of calls that, while intelligible to Estènne, weren’t really pronounceable by humans, nor easily translated. “Hm,” she thought aloud. “What if I call you Béo?” To this, the newly-named Béo gave a quick yelp of approval, and the two of them continued on their journey. As Béo grew, she became an invaluable traveling companion: beyond her skill at hunting, she became quite intelligent with Estènne’s teaching, and the two would often talk late into the night. Béo would quickly become Estènne’s first true friend—the two grew inseparable.

They were thus journeying through Thessia when they encountered a village, Celé, which would soon be under imminent attack from the mainland. An allied force of each constituent nation, the Continental Forces, were attempting to annex the Thessian islands for their host countries. They wanted to harness the magical prowess of the therii. The citizens of the Continent had long been wary and largely distrusting of the Thessians’ magic, and any positive relationships were made out of a need for trade, nothing more. Now, tensions were high in trade renegotiations, and the Continent was not content to leave the issue to diplomacy any longer. The wanted annexation,

subjugation, exploitation.

Estènne and Béo had been staying in Celé a few days before the Continental Forces naval attack. The village elder implored them to help defend the village and all of Thessia, if necessary, from the oncoming fleet. Though hesitant at first, Estènne eventually agreed to lead the defensive effort. And it was to be a defensive effort: Thessian philosophy actively sought peaceful resolutions, even to external violence. But then she saw the fleet's flagship. The Continental Forces were an amalgamation of the different nations' forces, but this entire detachment flew the flag of her homeland.

Two contrasting emotions coursed through her, overpowering all else. One: a hatred and distaste of the nation that she had once held in highest regard, the nation that had once led the continent toward views and policies of acceptance, the nation that she had once called home; two: a deep and newfound determination to protect her new homeland, a not-quite-nation formed by a series of discrete islands that functioned together, a not-quite-nation that fostered her and her curiosity when she had nowhere else to turn, a not-quite-nation that prioritized its citizens and their progeny. She was ashamed to have called that place home. She had once 'lived' under that hellish banner, but it was here that she truly found a home.

And she would defend it.

She walked over to the cliff edge, in view of the fleet. Magically amplifying her voice, she called out to the approaching ships. "Attention, incoming fleet. Identify yourselves and state your intentions." After receiving no response, she repeated her command, more forcefully. Her emotions perhaps getting the better of her, she added, "My name is Estènne Cerveille, originally hailing from your nation of Incerin. I speak now

on behalf of the islands of Thessia. You would do well not to ignore me.”

As she spoke, she began to levitate herself a few meters above the ground, her angelic frame emitting a gentle white light. Behind her, the inhabitants of the village collectively let out sounds of amazement and wonder. In her current state, she appeared otherworldly and spoke a language they did not understand. A true goddess was she.

But they couldn’t see the inside of her head. The gentle, modest Estènne wanted nothing more at the moment than to show off to the nation that had ruined her previous life. Even though these soldiers weren’t the ones who did anything. They fought under the same banner. That was enough.

Her name was infamous among the Incerin citizenry, though it had been a full two decades since her acts of unsolicited magic—or “heresy”, as the case may be. Though she was eventually acquitted, the trials cost her great time and, through negative propaganda spun by the government, her future. After the verdict, the public saw her nearly universally as unjustly acquitted. To be judged not guilty, after all, she must be guilty of not just heresy, but also of perjury and fraud: an image the government was quick to embrace.

As she expected, her name was enough to incite a response, the voice of the commander dripping with hatred. “Attacking an Incerin fleet is unambiguously treason. You will pay for all your crimes, Estènne! Troops, open fire!”

At the commander’s word, each of the ships fired, several dozen cannonballs approaching the village. The villagers shrieked in fear, then let out a sigh of relief when Estènne, with a single motion of her arm, stopped every cannonball in its path and, with another single motion, let them fall to the

ground. "Is that the best you can do?" she taunted, a playfulness in her amplified voice. Wave after wave of projectiles came, and wave after wave of projectiles fell harmlessly to the ground. "I'm disappointed, Incerin. I should never have fled. If this is the power of your country, I had nothing to fear of it."

Without her noticing, one of the Incerin ships had maneuvered behind her, to the other side of the island. Distracted by the commander's response to her taunting, she did not notice when the lone ship fired, embedding its projectile into a large house on the island. The house of the village elder. Her teasing had placated her anger somewhat, but this attack returned it in full force.

Without turning around, she asked in the local Thessian dialect, "Sir, may I engage offensively?" A brief silence ensued, but the village elder eventually gave his permission. A mischievous smile spread across Estènne's face.

The Incerin fleet misjudged her determination. They didn't foresee the amount of devastation they were about to endure. She was to become an angel of death.

Rather than merely intercepting the next volley of cannonballs, she redirected all of them onto the single ship behind her, sinking it instantly. Her gentle white aura quickly faded, replaced by a much darker red—the color of blood. The villagers were stunned, for none of them had seen such an effortless attack, nor did they expect her change in appearance. Some choice words escaped from the commander of the flagship before he ordered, once again, the other ships to attack.

But Estènne had grown bored of intercepting the shots. Letting this wave simply fall, she decided to provide the villagers—and the soldiers—with entertainment. Careful to avoid the flagship, she began her attack, with each ship launched



into the air and simultaneously hit by a lightning bolt from above and a column of fire from below. Those soldiers who survived the initial onslaught and bailed from the ships were caught by a vortex of wind that raised them into the sky to be sandwiched between two additional columns of fire.

The village was silent after this display, as was the flagship commander. Estènne called out to him, saying, "That's your cue to leave. Retreat back to the mainland and order the other forces to do so as well."

"Y-Yes, m-ma'am," the commander stuttered before turning his ship around, returning towards the continent. The villagers exploded into boisterous cheering, confident that the invaders would not attack again. Estènne was relieved as well, though her offensive was a mere fraction of her true power. She had gained her revenge on Incerin, and though this event would only increase her infamy there, it was a price she was willing to pay. She was no longer interested in returning.

She would remain in Thessia, traveling the islands, learning and teaching. Yet her actions terrified many of the residents, causing a division between the islands. On some, she was revered as a goddess; on the others, feared as a demon. Regardless, she would live on in the memories of everyone on the islands and the mainland forever. Those that worshiped her, distraught at her eventual death, would hold an elaborate funeral ceremony fit for someone of her stature. Many therii would endeavor to earn comparable power and continue her legacy. Though none could ever reach her level, they would attain formidable strength themselves. Thessia was safe from outside forces, even without Estènne. Legends remain that, so powerful is her spirit, that it would be reborn anew.

As the Incerin flagship turned around, Estènne heard Béo let

out a questioning squeal. “Do you think they’ll be back?” she had asked.

“Of course not, you silly wolf,” Estènne replied playfully. Her voice amplified again, she advised the flagship captain, the playfulness still in her voice, “You’re never to attack Thessia again. I may not be as gentle next time.”

## Together Alone

As I wake up, I notice the pale, monotone gray hue of the sky outside my window. It's going to be one of those days, isn't it? With a sigh, I pull myself out of bed and reach for some clothes from the bedside table. I have some errands to run today, and pajamas are not errand-appropriate attire—or so I've been told. Still not fully awake, I finish getting dressed and whatever else it is I'm supposed to do in the morning nearly entirely automatically. "Come on, Elena," I tell myself. "Time to wake up." A quick splash of cold water later, I'm feeling a bit more awake.

I head out into the kitchen of the small house where my father and I live. He has already left for work, but his journal is still sitting on the table. It's a soft, leather-bound book, but it definitely shows its age with scratches and a binding that's now being held together by positive thinking alone. The journal is older than I am, many of its entries dating to a few months surrounding my birth. My mother died a few months after I was born, and for a time, my father was like the binding of the journal. He stopped writing in it every day, but he's kept it all

these years as a keepsake of her. I don't really know much about her. My father and I don't talk about her much, and I'm not the type to invade someone's private thoughts by reading their journal, even if those private thoughts are a decade and a half old.

Shaking the journal from my thoughts, I grab my bag from the wooden chair nearest the door and head outside. The city streets are crowded, and I have to push my way through towards the market. As I stand in line, waiting to pay for the food I've picked out, I stop paying attention to the overwhelming noise, instead retreating into the relative quiet of my mind. There, I find a calming garden with a beautiful fountain in the shape of an elaborately twisting plant, the water gently flowing from bell-shaped flowers... It's the scene from my dream last night.

Suddenly, I'm knocked down from behind, and the food in my arms gets thrown onto the ground. I spin around, ready to confront my assailant before I notice that it's a girl with long amber hair covering her face. She isn't looking at me, her eyes glued to the ground, and she's noticeably tense, as if she's expecting me to hit her or, at least, yell at her. Instead, I brush her hair out of her eyes and smile. "Hey, Sonya. It's good to see you."

She glances up and locks eyes with mine. "Elena?" Seeing my face, she relaxes, and I see the beginnings of a wide smile growing on her face. Most people try to ignore her; when they come up to talk to her, it's not all rainbows and compliments. Her father is known as a corrupt aristocrat who didn't earn his money, and Sonya has the same reputation, just by association. She's not like that, though. She's my best friend. "You say that every time, silly."

I laugh. "That's because it's true every time." A wider smile

grows on her face. Seeing it makes me smile as well. Her happiness is so contagious that I will never understand why people go out of their way to avoid it. "More importantly, how are you holding up?"

"Well..." she pauses, just as she always does. Her eyes fall to the ground as her smile fades for a moment. One might optimistically call her home life "rough", and I can tell that she's pulling up some less-than-amazing memories.

I pick up my supplies and we make our way to the front of the line. Once I've paid and put everything in my bag, I place my hand on her shoulder. "How bad was it this time?" I ask, as gently as I can.

Sonya stays quiet. Without saying anything, we start walking towards the tavern, just a few streets away. It's an old building, wooden in a city of mostly stone buildings, and it's dimly lit inside, with just a few lights sparsely populating the rafters. Not that anybody complains. There are other, nicer taverns where people go if they care. I like it here. It's quiet, and you can have a conversation in peace without anybody bothering you.

I order each of us a lemonade from the bar. It's a popular drink for younger people, and though I have completed the coming-of-age ceremony, I still prefer the lemonade. Besides, this way, Sonya doesn't feel left out. I take our drinks to the table, where Sonya is already sitting, her eyes burning a hole into her lap, her hair covering her face again.

"It was my birthday last week, as you remember." With one hand, she pulls the necklace I gave her out of her pocket. It's a relatively simple necklace, with a small, deep blue gem in the inset. She grips it tighter. "I knew what my father's reaction would be if he saw this, so I hid it."

“Not well enough, I’m guessing.” She uses her free hand to pull her hair back for a moment. I let out a gasp as she reveals a dark purple bruise I hadn’t seen earlier on her cheek before she lets her hair cover it again. “Sonya! I mean, I knew it was a risk giving it to you, but—”

“No, Elena.” She squeezes my hand, looking me straight in the eyes. While the rest of her expression is hardened, her unusually green eyes melt my heart with their softness. “It’s not your fault. I knew the risks accepting it. And I would do it over again if I could.” Her voice breaks. “You were just trying to make me happy. Just like you always do. And I appreciate it. Always.

“Anyway, he found the necklace,” she continues. “And you know how he feels about me, about my mother, about my birthday.” Her mother died giving birth to her, hence her father’s perspective on her birthday. “Most people look forward to their birthdays. Their fourteenth in particular.”

“Aramoth.” Our coming-of-age ceremony. “Did you get to perform it?” A rhetorical question if I’ve ever heard one.

It does get a laugh out of her, though, so I’ll count the small victory. “What do you think? I’m pretty sure I’ll never even hear the word in that house.” She lets out a chuckle. “Given the alternatives, I guess I should be grateful for this as a present,” she says, gesturing at her left cheek again.

“That’s a bit dark,” I say, laughing. The situation itself isn’t even remotely funny, but I can always applaud her delivery. “And you deserve far better than that so-called gift.”

“Well, yeah, sure. You and I know that. He seems to forget from time to time.”

“You mean ‘always’?”

“Something like that, yeah. I’m not my mother—rest her

soul—but I make do.”

It’s my turn to hesitate. I decide to change the subject to something a bit more palatable. “But how did you get the necklace back? I can’t imagine that he simply gave it back to you.”

“No,” she confirms. “You’re right. He didn’t.” There’s a twinkle in her eyes now, almost like an evil mastermind’s. But a lot less evil. “But he’s almost as stupid as he is overbearing.” Her choice of “overbearing” is an understatement. Seeing my confusion, she continues. “He just left it on the counter. It was still there when I woke up the next morning. He didn’t mention it again.

“I need to be getting back soon,” she says after a few quiet moments, looking over at the clock in the corner of the tavern. “Would you walk home with me?”

“Of course, Sya. Are you sure? You usually won’t let me.” We’ve known each other for years and we’ve been best friends for almost that whole time. She’s been over to my house a few times. But I’ve never been invited over to hers, even if just to walk her home.

She hesitates, then takes my hand in both of hers. “Yeah. I’d like you to come with me this time.”

“Alright, then. Let’s go.” We walk out of the tavern, hand-in-hand, like two friends should. We each carry a few bags from her earlier errands as Sonya finishes telling me about the last week, how her birthday came and went. She already told me how her father treated her, but her younger siblings weren’t much better. I’m quiet, unsure about what I can say to her. She knows she’s rambling, that her words are barely coherent now, that I don’t mind. She knows that I would do anything to help her if she’d let me. Not that she normally does. I’m just glad

that I'm always allowed to listen.

As we come over the hill near her house, we can see the sunset, the way the colors blend around the edge of the sun near the horizon. I've heard that it's even more beautiful on the ocean, but, from here, I'm having trouble believing it. And, looking at Sonya's face, I can tell she's thinking the same thing.

We walk up to the door, which she unlocks. The slow creaking of the door is all we hear as the rest of the house is silent. A subconscious part of me is panicking and the rest of me hasn't caught up yet and isn't sure why I should be panicking, but I am, and... Sonya puts her hand on my shoulder, and I jump.

"Are you alright, Elena?" she asks, concerned.

I nod, though I'm still not sure. "I think so. I don't know what it is, but it feels like something is wrong here."

"Some weird sixth sense of yours?"

"Maybe? It's probably nothing, though."

"Hmm..." she ponders this for a few seconds. "Either way, thank you for helping me carry this. And for letting me ramble. You know—"

Suddenly, before she can even finish her sentence, an older man, whom I assume must be her father, comes into the doorway. His clothes are tattered, his eyes are bloodshot, and I can smell the booze from here, a few meters away.

"Where were you all day?" he yells, pounding his fist against the door frame. "You have a whole list of things to do, and instead, here you are, wasting all your time with this... girl, and you even brought her here?"

Okay, sure, he doesn't know my name, and I can feel Sya's pain from the rest of the tirade, but the hatred in the word "girl" is pretty potent, too.



Sonya stands up straight and steels her expression and her voice. When she speaks, she does so without the slight quaver I'm used to. "I finished several of the tasks before I left. They are crossed off the list. However, I needed some supplies from town in order to finish the others." She turns to me. "And this 'girl' you mention: Her name is..."

She trails off, and it takes me a moment to realize that she wants me to introduce myself. That part of me never actually stopped panicking: it was just a bit more under control. A calming voice speaks inside my head.

*Don't give your real name, it says.*

*What? Why not?* I ask it, confused.

*Long story. For now: just don't. Okay?*

I turn to Sya's father. "Uh, my name's... Mia. Mia Sameri," I manage to get out.

Sonya stifles a look of surprise at my fake name as her father turns to me, and I feel like he's boring a hole straight through me with his eyes. He must be able to tell that I'm lying. "Well, Miss... Sameri. What are you doing here, then? And don't tell me that this bitch invited you over for a playdate. She knows better than that."

My anger has been rising during this whole conversation, despite myself. I can pretend to be okay with how I'm being treated since he doesn't know me. But Sya is his daughter. He ought to know better than that. "Sir, I met her in town today. I only helped her to carry these bags."

His anger, rising equally with mine, is considerably less contained. He turns his glare onto Sonya. "And you asked her to help you? You know the rules."

The one time I didn't actually offer to help and she did actually ask. She seems to realize this as I do, and her steeled expression

falters momentarily. "I..."

I jump in, continuing the lie. "No, sir. She was carrying the bags herself. It looked to me that she was having a bit of trouble, and I was the one who offered to help."

"And you let her help you, Sonya? What are you? A charity case, needing the help of a little girl to carry your supplies?"

There is no winning here, is there? While I might be a year older than Sya, describing me as a "little girl" isn't entirely unfair, as I have a relatively small physical build. Regardless, he comes over, rips the bags out of my hand, then walks over to Sonya before slapping her. She falls to her knees, hiding her face in her lap.

That's it. I can feel my anger burning through me. It's stronger than anything I've ever felt before in my life.

He will pay for this. He glances over at me once again, and it's my turn to burn a hole through him. But he quickly reels back and hurries into the house without another word. I stand a moment, staring at the door in confusion.

Sonya has stood up and is staring back at me, looking just as confused as I am. Then she breaks into the sweetest smile, though she still seems a bit guarded. "Thanks, El. I mean it."

I let my anger dissipate and I almost collapse, suddenly at a loss for energy, into Sonya's arms as she wraps me in a tight hug. "Of course, Sya," I manage to say. "I can't believe you can put up with that. I didn't even make it five minutes."

"You..." she falters. "You get used to it, I guess."

"We need to talk later. Can you meet me at the tavern again tomorrow afternoon?" I ask, although I'm pretty sure I already know the answer. If her father was this upset with her for going to town to get supplies that she needed, I can only imagine how he'd feel about her leaving just because she wanted to.

But, to my surprise, she accepts the offer. "I should be able to. I'll do my best." She smirks. "You have some explaining to do, after all."

"Huh?"

"How you got my father to back off? That's the first time I've seen that happen. And you looked like... well... We'll talk about it tomorrow. I need to be going."

"A-Alright, Sya. See you tomorrow."

## Legends?

As I walk back to my house, my mind is reeling. I replay the conversation with Sonya's father over and over again, trying to figure out what happened. What did she mean when she said I "have some explaining to do"? Why did her father rush back into the house like he was afraid of me? Somehow I can't imagine that I'm the first person to get mad at him.

When I make it home, my father—basically the opposite of Sonya's—greet me eagerly, concerned. "Everything okay, El? You're home a bit later than usual."

Right. I walked Sya home instead of coming straight here. "Uh, yeah, sorry. Sonya asked me to walk her home." Seeing his confusion, I continue. "Yeah, I was surprised too. It was the first time she'd let me, and I've asked quite a few times before."

He pauses for a moment, looking me up and down. "What else happened to you?"

"What do you mean? I met Sonya at the tavern, we chatted for a bit, and then I walked her home. Her father came out and yelled at us, and then I came back here."

He walks over and pulls on the hem of my shirt, rubbing

it between his fingers. It's only now that I realize that all of my clothes are burnt, and, now that I'm paying attention, I can smell burnt hair. How did this happen? There wasn't even a fire in the fireplace at the tavern. And I must have looked ridiculous walking home, even if there wasn't anyone else on the path.

"I'm not sure how this happened, Father. My clothes were fine earlier, and, well," I laugh. "I think I'd remember catching on fire."

He rubs his chin as he thinks for a few seconds. "Would you tell me the details of your run-in with Mr. Nederai? I might have an idea, but I'd like to hear your story first."

"Okay." I recount the events since I met Sonya in the tavern. Her birthday experience, her ramblings on the way to her house, the confrontation with her father. "He didn't know who I was. Some part of me told me to give him a fake name, so I did, and I told him that I offered to help her carry the bags, rather than her asking me for help. When he asked what I was doing there, he said, 'Don't tell me this bitch invited you over for a playdate.'" My anger rises just reliving the moment. "I couldn't stand how he was treating us. Especially Sya. I started feeling this overwhelming anger, the most powerful thing I've ever felt. He was staring at us, so I returned the stare, and suddenly, he hurried back inside as if he were afraid of me. Sya was relieved, but she gave me a weird look and said that I had some explaining to do. We're planning to meet again at the tavern tomorrow."

"Hmm... It would explain the fire..." he mutters, and I can only just hear it. More loudly, he asks, "Along with the anger, do you remember feeling a large amount of energy running through you and then releasing?"

I think back for a moment. "After Sonya's father went inside and Sonya thanked me, I let go of a lot of the anger and I felt

pretty tired right after that. But nothing before that. Not that I noticed, anyway.”

“Do you remember the stories of the Thessian civilization?”

“Of course,” I respond, confused about the change of topic. “Peoples who live on the south islands and practice magic. Our cultures have been separated for so long that it is no longer clear where the line between truthful history and legend lie. Regardless, there are no known records of magic users on the mainland for centuries.”

“The key word is ‘known’ records,” my father explains. “No publicly available ones, and those who know about the records don’t talk about them. But there have actually been magic users on the continent. Your mother was one, for example.” He pauses for dramatic effect, though I know what he’s about to say. It doesn’t dampen my surprise, however. “And I’m pretty sure that you are, too.”

“Are you serious?” Given the incredulity of the situation, I suppose it isn’t surprising that I don’t have a more composed response. The stories about the Thessians are always presented as legends, not actual history. There were some conflicts between the ruling parties on the continent and the leaders of the island Thessians. The agreement was to stay out of each other’s affairs. There are probably some ambassadors between the nations or something, but Incerin citizens like us aren’t able to travel there. Though legends have to come from somewhere, I guess.

“According to the records, practically any Thessian can practice magic, but people have varying levels of affinity for it. Here on the continent, magic blood has practically vanished. But with your mother being a... proficient spellcaster, it makes sense that you’d have a reasonably high affinity as well.” He

takes a moment to collect his thoughts, then cracks a smile. “Besides, how do you explain your clothes being burnt but you being completely unharmed?”

I answer slowly, piecing together my thoughts as I go. “But did I use magic then? It wasn’t a conscious decision.” I shrug. “Though, spontaneously catching fire would probably explain why Sonya was confused and her father was scared of me.”

“I’m not sure how you could have used the magic. As far as I know, your mother never performed any magic after she and I met, and it’s not something she talked much about. But that was my thought as well. You don’t remember catching fire, and I wasn’t there, so this is just speculation on my part. See if you can get Sonya to describe exactly what she saw without leading her on too much. But don’t tell anyone else. There’s a reason the records aren’t public.”

“Can I tell Sya?” I really hope that my desperation isn’t as obvious in my voice as I think it is. There’s no way I’d be able to keep a secret like this from her. Especially if she’s already seen part of it.

“Of course. She can know the whole story, but the government has kept it a secret for a reason. And as frustrating as the government can be, I have to agree with them on this one.”

“Okay.” I pause for a moment, and when I speak again, my voice is quiet, hesitating. “Is that why you never told me about Mother?”

Now it is his turn to pause. He makes a show of closing his book, fixing his hair, rolling up his sleeves, and doing basically anything to avoid answering the question for as long as possible. “Look, El. I never wanted to hide the truth from you. I always wanted you to know. But, yes, it’s why I didn’t say anything. Magic users—the therii—are obvious targets. The

continental governments don't like having any therii running around. Incerin in particular. They have an interest in keeping Thessians—and therii, by extension—out. They're probably the only ones who could threaten the establishment and start a revolution. You remember Estènne."

Father is a government employee, so it makes sense that he'd have access to this information, even if he is a pretty low-level worker. He's been there long enough to know his way around the system. And if he was married to an illegal theria, it would also explain his strong personal interest in the subject. I remember being told the Thessian legends as bedtime stories. They were my favorite to hear and his favorite to tell.

"I hope you're not too upset that I never told you," he says, quietly. There's an odd mixture of guilt and relief in his face. Relief that he's told me, but regret that he waited this long.

"Not really," I respond. "Mostly just confused. It's a lot to take in." We've never talked much about my mother, so the news about her being a theria is whirling around my head just as strongly as the likely possibility that I may be one as well. "What about you? Can you use magic?"

"No, I can't. Perhaps that's actually a good thing..." he trails off. There's a long pause as neither of us quite knows what to say. "I didn't hide much of the truth about her death," he admits. "We don't really know what happened to her. She was here one day and was gone the next. There's been no trace of her since then," he finishes, with his voice barely a whisper. My father would have been able to find more information about her disappearance than most people, given his position. So if there were anything, it must be incredibly well-hidden.

"What does all of this mean for me now?" I ask.

"Well, it doesn't necessarily have to change anything. You



could live your life here just like you might have otherwise. Hide your powers, and, unless word somehow got out that your mother was a theria, you wouldn't be a target. You'd be safe. Or," he continues with a twinkle in his eye. "Travel to Thessia and hone your skills. Have an adventure and leave this dull town behind. Your call."

I'm stunned, speechless for a few seconds. "You want me to leave?"

He smiles. "Of course, I'd rather have you here. You're my daughter, after all. But I know you: You've wanted to get out of here for so long that I think you may have forgotten. And this is a wonderful opportunity for you to do so. Besides," he continues, a bittersweet smile across his face, "I think it's time you visit your other homeland."

It takes me a moment to process what he's said. "You mean she...?" He nods.

My surprise and disbelief turn to excitement before changing just as quickly to hesitation. Sya. I could never leave her like this. Father seems to be able to read my expression. "If she wants to go, take Sonya with you. She deserves to get out of here as well."

"I know," I whisper. "But she wouldn't let herself leave. She hates her father and her situation, but we won't ever bring herself to abandon her younger siblings, even if they are part of the problem as well." I pause. Our town is actually pretty nice, and our life here is... alright, I guess. But it's definitely not the life I'd choose for myself, nor is Sonya's the one she would choose. We've both desperately wanted to leave for almost our entire lives, dreamed of leaving, of having an adventure. Yet, I can't stop myself from rationalizing us staying put. "Besides, how would we ever get to Thessia? Or anywhere, really? Sonya

never got to perform Aramoth.”

As our coming-of-age ceremony, Aramoth marks the person as an adult, meaning that she has legal free will and can buy and sell goods besides basic necessities at shops, travel outside the local area (designed to prevent children from running away and getting themselves killed), can designate their own marriages, and a handful of other things. But, before the person has completed it, she isn’t considered to have the legal free will to formally request the ceremony, meaning it has to be approved by her parents. Without this approval, she must be sixteen before she can request it herself.

Given that Sya just turned fourteen and her father won’t give her permission, it’s almost certain that she won’t be permitted to perform the ceremony. Without it, Sonya wouldn’t even be allowed out of the city gates without a note from her father. Even though I can, I haven’t really used this freedom much over the past year. Sure, I could travel and do more of what I want, without having to ask my father. Sure, I want to leave town and explore the world, but I don’t want to do it by myself. And while I have the freedom to do things around town, as well as outside it, by myself, I just don’t care that much if it doesn’t amount to anything.

“Well, talk to her tomorrow,” my father advises. “If she doesn’t want to leave, then the question of the logistics is a bit moot. I’ll start looking into some options, though.”

\* \* \*

When I reach the tavern the next day, the sun is high in the sky, making the air unpleasantly warm. Taking refuge inside, I search the tables for Sonya’s lone figure. Her long auburn

hair covering her face as she buries her gaze in her lap, it is a few moments before I find her. As with yesterday, I take a seat opposite her. She glances up, then her expression breaks out into poorly-restrained excitement.

“Elena!” she excitedly whispers. “That was incredible yesterday!”

I remember my father’s words: we need her to prove or disprove our theory. “What did you see, Sonya? All I remember is being really angry about how your father was treating you, and then he suddenly rushed inside, as if he was afraid of me.”

She glances around to make sure no one is listening. She seems to grasp the need for secrecy. When she speaks, it’s in an even softer whisper than before. “You caught fire, Elena. You had a flaming... aura.” She shakes her head. “At first, I didn’t believe what I was seeing. Who would?” A quiet laugh escapes her lips. “But my father was out of sorts all night. He thought he was hallucinating. He kept mumbling, ‘a girl on fire, a girl on fire? I must be seeing things.’ I remembered the therii legends you’d tell me growing up and I realized that must be what happened.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, though I suppose the ‘I’m just a normal girl, none of this ridiculous magic nonsense’ conclusion should have been more relieving. “My father noticed that my clothes were singed from the inside. That’s what he thought had happened as well. To be honest, I don’t know how I did it. It just kind of happened.”

“Either way, it’s really exciting. We always loved the therii legends, and now you get to be part of them? It’s so cool!” Another laugh: this time, closer to a giggle. “Besides, it got my father off my back. He was a bit wary of me, seeing as I’m the one who brought you over.”

That's good news, of course. But any reprieve from her father's machinations against her usually comes at a great price. He'll probably make up for last night over the next few days. So I hesitate before saying anything. As much as I want to travel, to get out of here, I want Sya to come with me, if only for her to avoid her near-torturous life here.

She seems to be able to read my discontent, though not its cause. "There's something on your mind, El. What is it?"

I realize that, in addition to my desires to bring her with me, I haven't told her about my mother. Our whispers have been quiet, unintelligible to anyone who isn't sitting at our table, but I've still been unable to shake the slight unease I've felt having this conversation in the public tavern.

"Walk with me, Sya."

As we walk along the trail into the nearby forest, I realize that we've done this so many times, long ago. When we were little, we'd walk hand-in-hand down this trail, towards our hideout in the forest. My father's interest in the therii legends became mine and, through me, Sonya's. My father would tell me these stories as I lay in bed, and I'd later retell them to Sonya, our eager childhood hearts dreaming of these legends coming true.

Wouldn't it be so cool if we could be therii, too? we'd ask ourselves. Shoot fireballs or fly or heal our injuries or... Travel the world and meet famous people, maybe even save the world? Of course, we grew up and learned to disregard the stories as simply fairy tales, told to children for entertainment. They weren't history. They certainly weren't true. And so, we outgrew our itch for adventure, our wanderlust. We fell into the tedium of normal life, those feelings nearly forgotten.

But not quite.

So ingrained were these stories to us that yesterday's en-

counter reawakened the same childlike wonder in us, casting all these memories to the fore of our minds once again. Our hearts beat faster, and there's an untamed, childlike giggle in our voices that we don't care to hide.

There's a buzzing energy between us, even if we're quiet until we reach our childhood hideout. It's a hole roughly six meters across and ten meters deep, with a large oak tree growing from the center. The bottom of the hole bulges out even further, providing additional cover from the surface. We called the tree—and, by extension, the entire hideout—Estènnia after the heroine in our favorite legend. There was something about her story that resonated with us. Maybe it was the fact that she was also from Incerin. Maybe it was how she cared about those around her. Maybe it was how she academized magic as a whole.

Climbing down Estènnia's branches, we reach the bottom and stretch out along the cool, shaded ground. Sonya turns to me, expectantly. Alright. Here goes. "Sonya, I... My mother was a theria as well. It's why my father wasn't surprised when I told him what happened." Sonya, on the other hand, is quite surprised. Neither of us mentioned our mothers very often. They both died shortly after we were born, and we never learned much about them growing up. In Sonya's case, well, her father's never been forthcoming about anything except punishments and guilt. Sya adopted the maternal roles around the house when she was pretty young. And in my case, it turns out that my mother's identity was—no, still is—a great secret.

"Really?" she asks, to which I nod. "Affinity for magic always seemed to go through families in the legends," she thinks aloud. "So it would make sense for you to have an affinity as well, right?"

I nod again. "My father thought so, too."

"Why now, though?" Sonya looks in my direction, but her eyes—one closed, the other eyebrow raised—appear unfocused as she stares through me, confused. "You're fifteen. Why didn't this ever happen earlier?"

I shake my head. "To be honest, I still don't know how I did it at all. It wasn't really a choice." Pausing, I look Sonya in the eyes. "But, Sya, I'm worried. No one was hurt this time, but if I don't learn how to control it, that might not be the case next time." Plus, you know, being a theria is illegal in Incerin. "I don't want to hide it. I want to leave Incerin, travel to Thessia, learn how to use magic properly." I reach over and take her hand in mine. "And I want you to come with me."

At first, she doesn't say anything. I can sense the wheels in her head turning the problem over, trying to make sense out of my sudden confession, determine whether she could leave her family, figure out how we'd travel given that she hasn't completed Aramoth, and put all these thoughts into words. When she does speak, her voice is a faint whisper. "I'd love to, El. I... I'm just not sure that I can."

It's the answer I expected. As gently as I can, I ask, "Is it leaving your family? Or—"

Her subsequent laugh, a percussive burst of air, cuts through the tension between us. "No, you silly wolf. It's logistics... it's Aramoth... it's being actually able to leave."

That's an epithet she hasn't used in a long time, since we were kids. It's tied to the legend of Estènne, so it's her way of saying that she definitely wants to come along. We just need to figure out how. "My father said he would look into some ideas. Should we go find out what he came up with?"

She nods, and we climb back out of the hideout and start

walking towards my house. Our walk is quiet; only the sounds of the forest surround us until we come near the city. We quickly make our way through the narrow streets until we arrive at my front door. Opening it, I call out to my father, who is sitting at the kitchen table. He hastily stands up, then gives each of us a welcoming hug before we all take a seat.

"I take it that we were right?" he says to me, to which I nod. "And that she told you her plan?" he adds, turning to Sonya, who also nods. "I'll admit that this is a problem I've thought about for a while. After Elena decided to stay here after Aramoth, I knew she wouldn't leave without you, Sonya. And I figured you'd end up in this position, where you wouldn't be able to leave when you turned fourteen." He takes a moment to adjust his glasses. "Plus, I figured that Elena would display some evidence of being a theria, which would exacerbate the problem."

"And you never said anything to me about it," I interject, slightly upset.

He turns to me, his eyes soft. "It was never a guarantee. Not all children of theria are theria themselves, especially when one of the parents cannot use magic. I didn't want to get your hopes up if we were wrong about it."

I lower my head, feeling childish. Of course he wouldn't have said anything. Besides, a child like me, engrossed as I was in therii legends, would have bragged to everyone about being a theria, not seeing the problem with sharing that secret.

"I think I've come up with four possible solutions," my father continues. Sonya perks up with excitement. "Although, you're probably not going to like them."

Her excitement quickly drained, Sonya asks the question we both want to know the answer to, hesitation thick in her voice. "What are they?"

“One: You can ask your father for approval to complete Aramoth.” Everyone around the table shares a glance that shows we all understand how unlikely that is to work. “Two: If your father disowned you, you would become a ward of the state. Given that you’ve already turned fourteen, the state would then sponsor your ceremony, if only to not have to worry about you anymore. Three: You could forge the documents that show you’ve completed Aramoth and have the freedom to travel. It wouldn’t work to leave this town, since the guards would know you didn’t, but it would probably work in other cities. And four: forgo documentation entirely and travel in secret, avoiding the cities. It wouldn’t be an issue in Thessia, since they don’t have a law like this there. Some of the other continental nations don’t either, but they would likely recognize you as Incerin and ask for identification.”

My father was right: while workable, these four options are far from desirable paths. The last two are even illegal. My father and I are looking at Sonya; her eyes are hiding behind her hair as she looks into her lap. Thinking. Her words are slow to come. I’m thinking, too. How we could execute either of the first two: how we could convince her father to either allow her to leave or to... disown her. I shiver just thinking about it.

“Okay,” she finally whispers. “I think forging it is the only one that would work, but...” she trails off. “We have to try convincing my father, first.” She turns to me, eyes pleading even beyond her voice. “Any ideas, El?”

I’m not surprised that she’d want to try convincing her father: it’s the better of the two legal options, as unlikely as it may be. Her acceptance of forging the documents, even though I agree that it’s the most likely to succeed, does seem out of character. Sonya, whom I’ve always seen as an epitome of



goodness, of perseverance throughout trial, of wanting the best in the world... now siding against the law for her own benefit. Not that I blame her: I don't. I can't. She's desperate. It's clear to me now that she reached her breaking point long ago, has done her best to hide it from the world, but she can't hide it from herself anymore. And it pains me to see her broken like this, staring at me, silent tears streaming down her face, frantically searching my face for a hint of an answer to the problem at hand. And it pains me even more to admit that I don't have that answer for her.

*What about this?* I suddenly hear in my head, just as I'm about to open my mouth to answer in the negative.

*Huh?* Immediately, the broad outline of a plan realizes itself in my head, each stroke presenting itself clearly and effortlessly. The persistent lack of detail lends this painting an abstract beauty, the viewer responsible for filling them in for herself. *Wait, this might actually work.*

"Your father doesn't know me: I gave a fake name," I explain excitedly. "What if I came by and told him that I was recruiting young girls for a small business or convent or something up in Lintnor?" A business would pay wages, but a girl entering a convent would be effectively adopted by the convent. The first option would make more sense as a lie, but it's less likely to work—though Sonya's family has a low amount of liquid assets thanks to her father's reckless spending, he inherited a large amount of salable land, so they're actually pretty well-off; plus, working to earn wages would be an embarrassment for him, I'm sure.

"That could work as a general excuse to be traveling," my father replies slowly. "You'll have to sail to Thessia anyway, and Lintnor might be the best place to launch from."

“Convent it is, then,” Sonya adds. “This might actually work.” Her expression softens, and her silent tears are replaced by a small smile. She wraps me in a tight embrace, which I’m all too happy to return. “Thanks, El,” she whispers in my ear.

Together, we turn to my father. “I’ll get working on the documents you’ll need, either way. If you manage to convince Mr. Naderai to accept your little convent plan, then you,” he says, turning towards me, “will need to look like you’re from the convent and are assigned to escort her.” I nod. “If not,” he continues, “then we’re back to Sonya needing a fake Aramoth certificate. In either case, it shouldn’t take long.”

I grab Sonya’s hand. “Okay, Sya,” I tell her. “Finish your errands and head home. I’ll come by later this evening.”

She gives me a warm smile and a tight hug, then hurries outside excitedly.

## An Exercise in Espionage

I need to make a good first impression. Well, second impression, actually. I put on some of my nicer-but-still-comfortable clothes and start walking to Sonya's house. Convincing her father to allow her to travel is going to be difficult. Especially with me, given that I seemed to terrify him yesterday. Although... My magic might actually help. If he sees it as an act of the gods, then it might be enough to convince him that a convent is a good place for his daughter.

With a combination of excitement and apprehension, I reach the door and knock thrice using the metal knocker. A few seconds later, Sonya opens the door. After a quick nod indicating that everything was okay, I speak aloud. "I am terribly sorry to bother you, but I must ask: Is your father home?"

"Yes," she replies, then calls for her father to come to the door. From the noises I can hear, he doesn't seem to be happy about being disturbed—even less when he sees me standing outside. Sonya is forced out the door, so I take a step back to give her space.

"You again," he lets out, the hatred dripping from his voice.

"Yes, sir. I am sorry to bother you, but I would like to speak to you about your daughter." I lower my eyes instinctively before realizing that I've forgotten something. "Uh, if that's alright, of course." I try not to let my fear seep into my voice, but I can't stop myself from being really awkward. It might be slightly better, but 'better than terrible' isn't really much of a compliment.

"Make it quick."

"My name is Mia Sameri, and I have been sent here to Rædes to look for recruits for St. Marie's convent up in Lintnor." I pause to gauge his reaction, but his face hasn't changed at all. "When I met your daughter yesterday, I felt that she would make a fine candidate for our order."

"And...?" he gruffly asks.

I turn to Sonya. "Miss, how old are you?"

"Fourteen, ma'am."

"Lintnor follows many of the same regulations as the home region of Incerin. Have you completed Aramoth?"

"No, ma'am," she says, bowing her head in mock shame.

"Would you be interested in joining us? I believe we mentioned the subject yesterday?"

She perks her head back up. "I would be honored."

"Sir," I ask, turning back toward her father. "Would you allow me to escort her to Lintnor so she may join our order? She would be fully adopted by the sisterhood and providing for her would no longer be a concern."

"Absolutely not!" he yells, pounding his fist on the door. "You think you can come here and dictate what my daughter should do? Hah!" He face turns bright red, his hand shakes, and his words start to slur together. Whether it's in anger or from

alcohol, I'm not sure. Probably both. "She stays. She knows her place here. And I don't want to see you ever again."

"Father—" To my surprise, Sonya speaks up. Her father quickly turns to face her, his arm raised.

I need to step in. "Sir—"

He steps menacingly towards me. I know I shouldn't be afraid of him, but knowing that doesn't really help. "Leave." His tone is blunt, direct, angry. Maybe I should leave.

"Yes, sir. I apologize for wasting your time." I curtsy, then turn around and walk quickly back home. I wish that I could have stood up to him again, I wish that I could have actually gotten a chance to make my point, I wish that I could have succeeded in freeing Sonya.

Sonya. Poor Sonya. She's not going to get off easy tonight. At least we have a back-up plan. We agreed to meet at my house in a few days. My father should have the paperwork done by then, and we'll finally be able to leave the city.

\* \* \*

The next few days are agony. They must be worse for Sonya.

I spend most of my time gathering supplies. We'll be traveling to Lintnor, where we'll try to find a ship to Thessia. Finding that ship will be difficult given the nearly-zero contact between the continent and the islands, but that's a problem we'll deal with when we get there. We're still in Rædes, after all. And the coast is pretty far: on foot, the journey will probably take a few months at best. And that's assuming that we don't stop for any tourism on the way. I know that Sonya is technically running away from home, but this is an adventure, and we're going to have to do some exploring on the way.

The rest of the time, I'm plotting our escape. Even though Sonya will have the documentation she needs to travel, the guards at the gate will recognize her here. One of those advantages of being the daughter of an aristocrat, I guess. We'll make it out of the city through the forest. There's a fence that we'll have to climb, but it isn't very well-guarded. Guards come by on patrol, but it should be simple to avoid them.

The hard part will be carrying our supplies. I've purchased food from a few different merchants around town to avoid suspicion—after all, why do I suddenly need so much bread and meat?—and we'll have to carry it until we get to a new town. By my estimations, that should take a week or so. That means we'll each be carrying around twenty kilograms of food—that should be enough to last a full week without worrying too much about rationing, but if things go wrong, we'll have enough food. It'd be a shame for our adventure to be cut short by starving to death before we even get anywhere.

On the appointed day, I wake up with a mix of excitement, joy, and anxiety. Today's the day. Sonya should be here soon. There's no turning back now. I hurriedly get dressed and double-check our supplies. Food: check; clothes: check; blankets: check; tools: check; weapons: check. My father has Sonya's paperwork.

Even though we're bringing food, it definitely won't be enough to make the full journey, and even though we'll be traveling through cities, being able to hunt for food along the way should make things a bit easier. Cheaper, too. The weapons I've packed are a small hunting knife and a thin wooden bow and arrows that my father made for me for my birthday a few years ago. I'm a deceptively good shot—most people don't know I've even touched a bow in my life, but I've spent quite a few hours

behind our house practicing. I'm not an amazing markswoman, but it should be enough to earn us some food, if nothing else.

I'm so nervously tense that Sonya's quiet knock on the door is enough to catch me off-guard, and I nearly have an arrow knocked before I realize what's happened. I quickly put the bow down on my bed and race to the door, letting Sonya in, and we exchange a tight hug.

"Are you ready, Sya?" I ask, to which she eagerly nods.

"I'm so excited! I got here as quickly as I could." She's slightly out of breath, as if she ran part of the way here.

My father comes into the room, holding a small pouch and a handful of papers. He hands the first to me and the second to Sonya. The pouch releases a metallic clink as I grab it, and I realize that it's full of coins. Looking inside, my hypothesis is confirmed, and it's definitely a substantial amount of money. "Apart from your powers, that's your inheritance from your mother," he says with a sad smile. "I won't be able to help you once you leave, but I can at least give you this now.

"There's your documentation," he adds, turning to Sonya. "As far as anybody is concerned, you're Sofie Ressena, a fourteen-year-old middle-class girl from here in Rædes. You completed Aramoth a few months ago."

"Why do I have to change my name?" Sonya asks, a question that was running through my mind as well.

"It means that anybody doing any digging in the records won't be able to tie you to, well, you." He takes a sip of coffee before continuing. "Besides, your last name is recognizable. Once you leave, your father is probably going to put a bounty out to find you, and having Nederai as your last name would be problematic."

"Okay, that makes sense. It's just going to take some time to

get used to.”

“Sorry, Sofie. You’re just going to have to get used to it,” my father replies with a smile. ~~Sonya~~ Sofie noticeably flinches when she hears the ~~wrong~~ name. It’s strange to me too.

My father suddenly gets up, goes into the next room, and returns with another stack of papers. “Here you go, Mia,” he says, handing them to me. I can see that they’re also a fake identity documentation, this time claiming that I’m named Mia Sameri and from Lintnor. “Just in case you want to use this identity. It’s the one you gave Mr. Nederali. Mia is from Lintnor and a member of St. Marie’s convent there. Being Elena isn’t really a problem, but I thought you might like the option.”

“Thank you, Father,” I say, genuinely. There’s no way we could have pulled this off without him. A government official, specializing in record-keeping, purposely creating false records for us. I hope he doesn’t get in trouble because of this. I also suddenly realize just how difficult this journey will be when we’re on our own. I may be considered an adult (and ~~Sonya~~ Sofie is, too), but there’s a significant difference between our lives here and the suddenly real, harsh world we’re about to go into.

After a long, drawn-out round of goodbyes, Sya and I grab our supplies and head out. Though it’s late spring, the morning air is cool against my skin, and I’m glad that we have supplies to make a warm camp tonight. Our packs are heavy, but they should get lighter as we go, making up for increased exhaustion. It should all balance out.

The forest is west of my house, and we make haste into its cover. It should be a lot harder to find us out here. In order to make it to Lintnor, we’ll travel north to the coast, then take a ship across the sea. Much of the land between here and the coast



is rural farmland, and Catens is the first city we'll come across, about a week's journey from here. The first step, however, is just to make it out of Rædes.

I look at Sofie. Despite the surface-level tiredness from having been hiking for the last hour, she looks really happy. Her usually muted smile is fully visible, and she seems to be radiating some sort of positive energy. "Can you believe we're actually doing this?"

"Nope." She giggles. "Not at all. I'm expecting this to all be a dream and to wake up back at home."

"Me neither," I reply. "It's just so unreal."

We both nearly trip over the same fallen log, one after the other. She laughs again. "And it's all because of your magic. That's what's unreal. You should have seen my father that night."

I'm quiet for a moment and when I do speak, my voice is low. "I'm still not sure how I did it. I'm not even sure if I could do it again."

*Of course you can.* It's that voice again. That part of me that warned me not to give my real name to Mr. Nederali and outlined our planned attempt to convince him. *Your father was right, you know.* I just shake my head.

*Who even are you?*

*You're hearing a voice in your head and you assume it's not just you?* the voice asks with a teasing lilt.

*Well...* That is a good point, actually.

*Follow me.* Suddenly, I feel a force dragging my consciousness through my mind. The force slams my consciousness into a solid wall, and I physically wince from the pain. *Do you feel this wall?*

*Y-Yeah...* When you slam me into it, it's hard not to. Though the wall felt solid, it appears a bright, slightly translucent and

shimmering blue, not nearly as solid as it felt.

*Push against it. Gently.* I do so, and I can sense a power radiating from the either side. After a few seconds, I slide through and can actually feel the power coursing through me. It's similar to the anger I felt the first night I met Mr. Nederaï, but more concentrated and more abstract. It feels like pure, raw energy. *You're right about that: this is your magical energy, your "theresis", as it's called.* There's a pause, as if to make sure I understand. *Now, push through the barrier and concentrate on the word "inar".* Just as suddenly as before, the Voice/Force-thing is gone, and I find myself lying on the ground with Sofie standing over me.

"Elena! You're awake! Are you okay?" Her expression is pained and there's a deep concern in her pale hazel eyes. I've never realized quite how beautiful they are.

I sit up groggily. "Y-Yeah, I'm fine." I put my hand to my head and notice a small gash where I must have fallen. There's a small amount of blood on my fingers as I pull it back. "What happened?"

"We were talking, and then you suddenly fell. You just have a small cut on your forehead, but..." she pauses to take a deep breath. "When you wouldn't respond, I got scared."

"How long was I out?"

"Just a few minutes," she says, no small amount of anxiety in her voice. "But I was shaking your arm, calling your name..."

I reach up and grab her hand. "I'm sorry, Sofie." Standing up, I add, "Should we keep going?"

She looks at me intently for a few seconds before she responds. "Yeah. Let's go."

We continue on, hand-in-hand, for a few more hours, stopping only to break for food and to, uh, relieve ourselves. We

eventually come to the fence signaling the edge of the city. As we expected, it's unguarded, and we quickly climb over it. If they want to stop people from crossing the city border, they should do better than place a two-meter fence that's easy to climb. Once we pass the fence, we keep walking for another hour or so—we can't just camp next to the guard patrol paths, can we?—until we come to a clearing in the forest.

"It's getting dark," I call out to Sofie. "Do you want to set up camp here?" The clearing is a rough circle, about twenty meters across. There's plenty of room for us to make camp.

"Yeah, El. This seems like a great place to camp." With that, we put down our packs and start gathering wood for a fire. A small fire should keep away any animals but not alert anyone to our location. Plus, you know, we can cook our food. When we've finished, Sofia starts digging through her bag, then looks up, concerned. "Uh, Elena? Do we have anything to start a fire with?"

I was sure I had forgotten something. Double- then triple-checking the list can just never be enough, can it? Although... I suddenly remember my conversation with the Voice: *ínar*. Maybe that will help?

I move over to stand by the wood we've arranged in a small circle. I close my eyes and focus on finding my thesis wall, then push through as gently as I can. When I make it through, I once again feel that rush of power, and concentrate on the words. "Ínar! Ínar!" When I open my eyes, nothing has changed, except for Sofia giving me a strange look. "I'll explain in a moment, okay?" She nods, then I close my eyes to try again. Find the wall, push through, focus on the words. "Ínar!"

Even before I open my eyes, I feel some of the energy coursing through me break from its circuit and flow down my arm, into

my hand. Then, the energy turns to heat. Not painful, but a pleasant warmth. Then I hear Sofia squeal in excitement. I open my eyes and notice that the wood has caught fire. Unlike all the fires I've seen, this one glows with a pale bluish light, almost shimmering.

"It worked," I whisper. I cut off my thesis and the flame I've cupped in my hand extinguishes.

My first controlled magic!

## Foreshadowing

Yesterday was a great start to our journey. Sure, there was that incident with the Voice where I fell unconscious for a few minutes and where I forgot to bring a means of starting a fire, but it was also that first one that let us solve the second one, so I think it all balanced out.

Besides, I actually am a theria! I mean, we kind of figured that out the first night I met Mr. Niderai, but it's even better knowing that I can control it now. Of course, all I can use so far is that one fire spell, but it's certainly better than nothing.

When I explained last night to Sofie what had transpired yesterday, her only reaction was to let out an incredulous "Really?" I can't blame her: it's not like any of that happens in the legends. There's telepathic communication, but nothing quite like this. And between giving Mr. Niderai a fake name, using it to create my lie to (fail to, admittedly) convince him to let Sonya go, and yesterday's events, it's strange how the Voice seems to be watching out for me. Despite what it said about me assuming that a voice in my head isn't me... I'm definitely convinced that it's not me. I never noticed it before last week,

and there's no way I could have figured out that magic on my own. I'm not sure who it is, or why it's helping me, but... I'm pretty sure it's not me.

"The Voice seemed to be able to read my thoughts," I tell Sofia as we pack up our supplies and start our hiking for today. "But I couldn't read its thoughts in return, only what it said to me."

She ponders this for a moment, before asking, "Who do you think it is? And why now?" She stops walking, then turns to face me. Her eyes drill into mine, and I can see a mix of stubborn resolve and fragility in her. "And why, do you think, did you fall unconscious yesterday when it spoke to you?" With the abuse she's taken, the fragility doesn't surprise me. What surprises me is how it's manifesting as fear: She's relying on me because she won't be able to make this journey alone. It's a chilling realization.

I sigh, momentarily unable to speak. "I don't know, Sya." I don't even bother to try using her new name. I'm trying to comfort her, but I don't have the answers to her questions, so I'm at least trying to be a bit more intimate about the whole thing. That's what nicknames are for. "I've wondered those things too. Why now? You saw me use magic last night to light the fire, but I didn't do anything intentionally last week when I did the aura-thing. And who knows why I was unconscious? That's not the first time I've heard the Voice, but that didn't happen either of the times before yesterday." So much for calm discussion: my voice has risen and I'm rambling, nearly ranting, as I finish.

"I'm sorry, Sya," I tell her. "I just, uh, got carried away." My eyes fall to the ground away from her as I mumble my excuse. "It's just a lot to take in."

"It's fine, El. You're not the only one." She takes a few

moments to look to the skies, and I follow suit, our views blocked by the thick green foliage in the trees above. The branches form an unintelligible maze of lines, zigzagging across our field of view. It's impossible to tell which branch belongs to each tree. Though there's no noticeable wind, it's still early morning, and the sun has yet to poke through the trees—it's cold, and I'd like to get moving. I finish gathering the rest of our supplies, then Sofie by the hand.

"Come on, Sofie."

She reluctantly takes my hand, and we start traveling once again. Day 2. Having camped in the forest by ourselves last night (something that neither of us had done before), the gravity of our situation has been implanted in our minds. What are we doing? Who are we to think we can do this on our own? Sure, we've already had plenty of help from my father, but we're barely ten kilometers outside the city. Though, so long as we don't get caught, our pacing isn't really an issue. We're on an adventure; this isn't a race.

As we walk, we recall several of the Thessian legends, starting with Estègne's battle at Celé and her meeting with Béo. Getting to relive these stories that I haven't told in years is revitalizing, and I feel considerably more at ease with our situation. However, as internalized as these legends are to me, they aren't enough to fully occupy my attention, and half of my consciousness is spent daydreaming, leaving just enough paying attention to not trip over a rock. Although that does happen a few times, I'll admit.

The most prominent of these daydreams is a vivid imagining of the land of Thessia. From the legends, I know that it's a mountainous region with densely beautiful forests. That's one of the advantages of widespread magic: the citizens can help

the region prosper. There are no large cities, though one of the major villages has a beautiful fountain, its water flowing through bell-shaped flowers entangled in a confusing spiral around a central pillar... I tear my eyes away from the fountain and stare instead at the horizon. Just above a row of trees, an impressive castle stands, its artificial black stonework marking a strong contrast against the natural greens and yellows of the forest between the castle and me. Even from this distance, I feel a shiver run through my spine, though whether it's from trepidation or merely the wind, I'm not sure.

"Look," I suddenly hear, Sofia's voice sharp enough now to pierce my reverie. Coming back to my senses, I notice a small deer about fifty meters in front of us, motionless. It hasn't seen us yet. Without a word so as not to scare it away, I quietly set down my bag, pull my bow off my back, and nock an arrow. Though I'm slightly out of practice, I feel a wave of relaxation as I settle back into this, the way I would spent many afternoons over the last few years. Slowing my breathing, I pull the string back and let the arrow fly... straight into the deer's head, and it falls as gracefully as one might imagine.

I'd only practiced with makeshift targets before.

That was my first kill.

And while I am subconsciously excited to have made the shot... my entire consciousness recoils from the realization of what I've done. I'm suddenly out of breath and feeling nauseous, and I fall to the ground in a considerably less graceful manner than the deer did.

*Everything will die eventually. That is a fact you must get used to. It's the Voice again, here to chastise me, I guess.*

*Yeah, I angrily retaliate, but there's a difference between things dying and me killing them, you know.*



*You are right, of course, to feel sorrow. I will not deny that. There's a pause, as if it were trying to decide how much to tell me. When it speaks, its tone is painfully melancholic and distant. A quick death is a mercy not often enough afforded to those who most need it. You'll see soon enough.*

*What do you mean?*

Another long pause, then a sigh is the only response I get.

Now, it's my turn to pause. The Voice is right: the deer would have died eventually, and I didn't kill it for sport. But... there's something so unsettling about the situation, even if I've eaten the meats of so many animals over the years. I notice that Sofie is standing over me, her hand resting gently on my shoulder. "No, it's alright," I say both aloud and in my head. "I'll be fine."

I stand up, still a little shaken, and Sofie starts skinning the deer with her knife. My stomach growls, but has twisted painfully and I'm unsure if I'll be able to eat. I make a vow never to kill anything without cause and without a second thought. I shiver as I remember the Voice's words: *A quick death is a mercy. You'll see soon enough.*

"... What does that even mean?"

"Huh?" Sofie's voice pulls me out of my thoughts once again. I hadn't realized that I'd spoken out loud. The way her eyes soften as she turns toward me belies her concern. That's when I that this is the second time in as many days that I've collapsed, virtually unconscious. Even if the causes are different—yesterday, because the Voice temporarily took me over; today, because I felt sick after what I'd done—I can't lie and suppose that she isn't right to be concerned.

When I speak again, my voice is a quiet, almost unintelligible whisper. "That was the first time I killed something."

"Oh." Her response just about sums it up, really. Surprise,

shock, unpreparedness. What do you say to that? “You looked so natural that I would never have been able to tell.” We sit in silence for a few seconds as I try to figure out how to put words together. “No, wait! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that...” She continues rambling—a nonsensical combination of “You’re not a monster”, “I didn’t mean it like that”, “You’re the nicest person I’ve ever met”, et cetera—becoming increasingly incoherent until I walk over and give her a hug. She turns quiet, and I can see tears starting to run down her face. I cup her face in my hands and gently brush away her tears with my thumbs before wrapping her in another hug.

“It’s okay, Sofie. Sya. Whatever your name is, you silly wolf,” I whisper playfully in her ear. Just like that, she breaks into a smile and tightens her arms around me. “You’re overreacting?”

We sit like that for a few minutes while we both calm down. Since we’ll need to cook this meat soon, and neither of us want to carry an entire deer on our journey, we decide to call it a day, even though the sun is still quite high in the sky. We still made some decent progress today, and we even managed to find the small landmarks left by other travelers indicating the way. They don’t appear on most maps, but one of the advantages with my father working for the city government is that he was able to pass a confiscated map with these markings along to us. We’ll be able to use them to get to Catens without getting lost walking in circles out here in the forest.

With a quick “ínar”—and surprise at how easily I manage it this time—I start our campfire for the night. “But, to answer your question from earlier,” I tell her. “After I shot the deer, I was talking to the Voice again.”

Sofie’s head perks up. As it does, her hair comes out from its binding slightly, and a bunch of it falls into her face. Despite

the conversation topic, it makes me laugh. "What did it say this time?" she asks.

"That I shouldn't feel bad about killing it. That sometimes a quick death is a good thing. That I'd see soon enough."

"That's... ominous," she says, her tone of voice perfectly matching the feeling I have about it. "Any idea what it meant?"

"No..." I shake my head, part of me trying to recreate her hair mishap for effect. "Though I suppose we'll see soon enough."

We fall again into silence as Sofie finishes skinning the deer. Once it's cooked and we've eaten, we complete the rest of our camp set up. Neither of us knows how to breach the silence, so we each sit there, leaving the other to their own devices. I don't really mind. A peaceful night in a calm spring forest is something you don't often see in the city. It's a nice change of pace. I'll take it.

## Catens

No longer. By week's end, we've made it to Catens, the first real city on our journey, aside from Ræde, obviously. Maybe I've just spent so much of my life in the city that I can't stand to be away from it for long. Given that Thessia is—according to legend, anyway—mostly small villages peppering the mountainous islands, I'm going to have to get used to it.

Sofie and I traveled through the forest for most of the last week, only moving to the roads yesterday. Even though the vast majority of the land between Rædes and Catens is undensely-populated farmland, we didn't want to risk being recognized by anyone who happened to be traveling through.

As we approach the city gate, I'm suddenly anxious, as this will be the first test of Sofie's fake identity. And mine. I glance over to her, and I see the same seemingly-bottomless pool of nervousness emanating from her face. I grab her hand with a tight squeeze, hoping to allay her nervousness, or, perhaps even more so, hoping that she can allay mine. She returns the gesture, replacing her trepidation with an cute and innocent smile, and I can only wish that I were as skilled at acting as she

appears to be.

“Names and documentation, please,” we hear the guards say. They’re covered in thin armor plates across their chest and chain mail along their limbs, but it hardly seems sufficient to stop an attack. Their armor is also quite plain, with only a small emblem as any indication of their loyalties to the city of Catens or the nation of Incerin. From what I’ve read, most soldiers across the country have historically been led by a handful of ensigns—flag bearers—to identify their allegiance, though I can’t see one here at the city entrance.

“Mia Sameri,” I say pleasantly, handing over my falsified documents to the guard on my left. I see Sofie do the same with the guard to her right. Even as I try my best to appear calm, my heart is racing, and I feel like I might start hyperventilating. Though the conscious part of me does realize how suspicious that would look.

“May I ask what you two ladies are up to?” asks the guard as he hands me back my documents. “We don’t often get traveling parties such as yours.” Though his words seem innocent enough, I falter. Luckily, Sofie has our story rehearsed and on the tip of her tongue, apparently.

“We are traveling from Rædes to Essen, in Lintnor,” she explains. When the guard still seems unconvinced, she adds, “Miss Sameri here is escorting me to St. Marie’s convent there.”

“Yes, sir,” I append, with a pang of embarrassment. I’m the one who came up with the idea—well, actually the Voice was—and, as the escort, I probably should have been the one to explain the situation. Regardless, the guards seem pleased with Sofie’s story, and they step aside to let us pass into the city.

As we walk beyond the city wall, Sofie and I get our first close look at the sprawling nature of the city it contains. Though

the wall itself is an orderly square build, it encloses a city that doesn't seem remotely planned from the start. The buildings are arranged along roads, sure, but they are built from so many different materials and in such different styles that it is hard to believe that they could have been built by the same people in the same era. Given the history of Catens, that makes a certain amount of sense:

Several centuries ago—shortly after (and the result of) the banishment of the Incerin forces from Thessia at the hands of Estènne—the continent faced a war on a massive scale. The continent, distrustful of the Thessians and their magical theria, nevertheless relied on a strong trade network with the islands. Incerin faced the brunt of this war from both inside and out, judged by the other nations to be responsible for the unfortunate events: Estènne was once an Incerin subject, and it was the Incerin naval detachment that was ultimately destroyed by her. Many of Incerin's cities, once marvelous structures, were destroyed and slowly, eventually rebuilt from the rubble. Thus, Caten's buildings, a veritable mess of architecture, are an assortment of new and old, and some were built in the old style, some in the new, some in foreign styles as migrants came to capitalize on the rebuilding for their own gains and advancements.

Sofie and I make our way toward the tavern near the center of town after getting directions from a passerby who didn't seem all that pleased to assist us, despite his words to the contrary. When we arrive, we find that the tavern—the Timid Lions, an interesting name—is poorly lit, and there is an overwhelming number of people. We have to physically push our way through the crowd in order to reach the counter. By this point, Sofie is handing onto the hem of my shirt so as not to lose track of me.

“Excuse me, sir!” I call loudly over the din of our surroundings, trying to get the barkeep’s attention. “Excuse me!” A lone woman wearing a surprisingly nice dress given the lower-end quality of this tavern is sitting at a nearby table and giving me weird glances that I can’t quite figure out.

Once the barkeep finally notices us, I place the strange woman out of my mind as he puts on an obviously fake, jovial smile. “Yes, ladies. Welcome to the Timid Lions.” He puts his hands out in a wide, all-encompassing gesture, as if the tavern were truly that impressive. “I’m Fletcher. What can I do for you?”

I move to start explaining, but, to my surprise, Sofie takes the lead once again. It’s almost as if her new identity also came with a new personality that she was able to integrate into her own, pre-existing one. The Sonya I grew up with was shy, generally afraid of talking to people, especially in a busy, loud, overwhelming environment such as this. It’s nice to see her becoming more confident in such a short time since we’ve left.

“We’re traveling through Catens on our way to Lintnor,” she explains. “We were hoping to rent a room for a few days so that we can rest before we carry on with our journey.”

With that, the barkeep’s face fades, his smile replaced by a sad frown as quickly as lightning might flash. Despite this, his voice is still laced with positivity—a true salesman is he, apparently. “Ah, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you there,” he laments. “With the upcoming visit of the Monarchs of the State, along with the annual Festival Citron, I’m afraid we’re fully booked with new arrivals to the city.”

Such great timing on our part, it seems, I think to myself sarcastically. Honestly, I forgot about both of those things. The Incerin rulers, who unabashedly call themselves the Monarchs of the State, do a tour of the major cities every once in a while.

Ostensibly, they travel to discover the true nature and problems of the realm they govern; in reality, they just go around the country, pretending to care while being treated as gods by the cities they visit. Basically, they're just spoiled brats.

On the other hand, the Festival Citron is actually kind of cool. It's a celebration of fruitful abundance in our harvests, of thankfulness toward the gods. It's a time of revel—singing, dancing, eating delicious food. Though I don't have any idea what to do with my body in order to seem even remotely coordinated in dance, I do know how to eat things. And, now that I've been reminded of it, I can't wait. The meals Sofie and I have shared this last week have been quite uniformly boring. Plus, you know, there will be lemonade.

I take a step toward Fletcher and rest my arm on the edge of the bar. I try to hide my desperation as I ask, "Are there any other places in town where we might stay?"

"I reckon not," he says after a pause. "The other taverns in town have been sending people here, you see, because they're overbooked as it is."

Sofie and I exchange disappointed glances before thanking Fletcher for his time. Just as we get through the door and onto the street, I feel a hand grab my shoulder and turn around quickly. It's the same woman who was staring at me from the nearby table. I take a close look at her for the first time. She appears to be only a few years older than me. Her shoulder-length reddish-blond hair neatly frames her face, and saying that she's conventionally attractive is underselling the point.

"Excuse me, miss," she says apologetically as she pulls her hand back. "My name is Akàné Verrader. I'm sorry to intrude, but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with Fletcher." A look of concern colors her face. "You're traveling to Lintnor,



but you're looking for a place to stay here in Catens for a while?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am," I manage to get out as I'm struck by the tone of her voice. It's airy and melodious, but strong and assertive at the same time. It feels like she could command a courtroom meeting while singing a lullaby.

"Well, then I believe I can help you with that," she says with a smile. "If you'd like, you two could stay at my place until the festival, and then we could travel together for a bit." Seeing our confusion, she explains, "I'll be traveling to Steilla after the festival. I believe that means we would be traveling in the same direction."

I'm shocked by her once again: this time, by her generosity. "Are you sure you're okay with that? We certainly wouldn't want to impose."

She laughs, and she loses a great deal of her formality in the process. "You'd hardly be imposing. My brother just moved out, so I've got a room to spare. Besides," she continues with a pained smile, "the house has been pretty lonely since then."

I shoot a quick glance at Sofie to gauge her reaction, and she shrugs a mixture of approval and indifference. We've both realized that, assuming that Fletcher was telling the truth, this is the best offer we're going to get. "Well, if you insist," I tell her. "Thank you, Miss Verrader."

"Akàné, please," she insists. "If we're to be living together, then I'll none of this strange formality." She walks off, turning to make sure we're following. I shrug towards Sofie, and we set off behind her.

As we walk across the city in silence, it occurs to me that Akàné never actually asked our names before offering to house us. Just as I realize this, she clears her throat, then giggles. "I've only just realized I don't know your names."

"Mia. Mia Sameri," I say. "And this is Sofie Ressena," I add, getting up to my companion. "I'm escorting her to St. Marie's convent up in Lintnor."

"Well," she responds with a smile, turning toward us. "It's very nice to meet you."

We continue walking through the narrow streets until we reach the end of a row of identical houses. The last house in the row was different, though. Whereas the majority were wooden, this one was brick. It was also substantially larger, though it remained unassuming and modest. Akàné walks up to it and began unlocking the door. "Here we are," she announced unnecessarily.

Inside, the house maintained its relatively unassuming nature in its decor. It was simply furnished, nothing extravagant. Yet, I was still impressed, and I had to tear my eyes away from a few paintings as Akàné showed us around. "This is our guest room," she says, as she opens the corresponding door. "Claim it as you will for the week," she adds, smiling. "Make yourselves at home, and I'll start making dinner."

I'm still trying to figure out what's going on. My brain hasn't quite caught up with Akàné's hospitality. Nevertheless, Sofie and I manage a quiet "Thank you, Akàné" before turning to each other as she heads toward the kitchen.

Once we're alone, I glance over at Sofie and sigh. "Can you believe what's happening?"

We walk into the guest room, surveying our new living conditions. It's a modest-sized room, with a single bed in the opposite corner from the door, a plain nightstand next to it, and a dresser upon the adjacent wall. Over the bed hangs a painting of a mountainous landscape that I don't quite recognize. Sofie sets her bag down on the floor, then falls onto the bed. Her

voice is quiet when she finally speaks. “No. But this is way better than any inn,” she adds, her face morphing into a smile. I join her on the bed, wrapping my arm around her.

I lean back, allowing myself to rest against the comfort of the bed. “Yeah. I can’t believe Akàné would just let us stay here like this.”

We stay like that for the better part of an hour until Akàné returns to call us to dinner, giggling at our arrangement. When we go downstairs, we find that she’s made an elaborate combination of foods. “Y-You didn’t have to go this far,” I stammer out in response.

“Nonsense,” she says, chuckling. “I wanted to. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to complain,” Sofie acknowledges, shooting me a glance. “Thank you.”

We all sit down and start eating, and Akàné has impressed me once again—with her cooking this time. It’s absolutely delicious. As we eat, we start talking, getting to know each other. At first, I’m hesitant. “If we’re going to be living together,” Akàné points out, “we might as well get along.” Eventually, I concede the point, and the three of us talk effortlessly, as if we’ve known each other for a long time. Akàné is genuinely charming and friendly, and the alcohol we have with dinner isn’t hurting matters, though I’m careful to keep our story straight. By the end of the night, after we’ve eaten and helped Akàné clean up the dishes, I can’t even remember what we talked about, just that it was one of the nicest, most genuine conversations I’ve had with anyone except Sya. But it’s late, and we’re exhausted, so we make a retreat to the guest room, ready for tomorrow.

## Politics

Our timing in arriving in Catens is perfect. Or terrible. Or, possibly, perfectly terrible? Regardless, we spend our first night at Akàné's house; when we wake up to explore the city, we find its narrow streets filled nearly to the brim with people pushing toward the city center. We're powerless but to follow the flowing tide in the same direction. I grab Sofie's hand so we don't get separated. We walk painfully slowly, step by agonizing, claustrophobic step.

When we come to a stop roughly a hundred meters away, we see that a large stage has been set up around the fountain. Several security guards patrol the edge of the stage, trying to maintain order amongst the crowd. "How are you holding up, Sya?"

She looks up at me with a slight smile, tightening her grip on my hand. "I'm alright. You know, just a bit cramped."

"Yeah, you could say that." A moment goes by before I realize what's happening. "This is going to be the speech of the Monarchs, isn't it? That would explain the large attendance."

"Probably." We share a glance that, by itself, conveys our

regret being here. Neither of us wanted to attend the speech, but, at this point, there's nothing we can do to get out of this mess of people pressed basically shoulder to shoulder.

I sigh in annoyance. "I wonder how long it'll be."

"My father made me go to the speech when the Monarchs came to Rædes a few years ago," Sofie explains. "I think it lasted about an hour, maybe a little bit less." When she sees my continued annoyance, she adds, "At any rate, I think it'll start soon, and the sooner it starts, the sooner it'll be over."

Her comment is confirmed as, moments later, several people in elaborately fancy clothes take the stage. A man in a suit picks up a megaphone and addresses the gathered audience: "Attention, everyone! Thank you all for joining us. I, Governor and Formal Overseer of the City of Catens and Her Surrounding Shires, Erwin McKenna, am proud to announce the presence of King and Queen Lance and Riviera Ennets, Monarchs of the State of Incerin!" The crowd erupts into cheering and applause, as expected, but I'm still trying to get over his obnoxiously long title. Politics and formality: never been something I've cared for.

Governor McKenna steps back, handing the megaphone to another gentleman who looks around the crowd for a long time before speaking. "My name," he begins slowly, "is Thomas Hunterford, and it is an honor to speak at the behest of the Monarchs, long may they reign." He appears nervous, as if he's never given a public speech before. "I have served as Lord Chancellor since their coronation nearly a decade ago, and regret not a moment of it." He pauses, possibly for dramatic effect, possibly because he's forgotten his line. "I know that I speak for all of us in the Royal Front when I say that we are proud and honored to come speak to many cities across the

land of Incerin.”

This process repeats itself, with several members of the Royal Front giving introductions and short speeches. However, after Lord Chancellor Hunterford, I’ve stopped paying attention until the King himself comes to the front.

“Good morning, all of you,” the King begins. After a choral ‘good morning’ from the audience, he continues. “Catens is one of our most dear cities, once our capital, ravaged in the Continental War several centuries ago. Yet, it is thriving more than ever.” There’s a murmur in the crowd: some people agree with Lance’s statement while others, namely those who have faced the brunt of hardship here, vocally disagree. Sensing this, he continues once more: “We understand that it is not yet a perfect city of our dreams or of yours.” She smiles, then adds, “Yet it will come to be.”

There’s something subtly suspicious and ominous about his tone in that last sentence, but I’ve stopped paying attention again, my gaze catching on the young girl standing upstage. She appears to be about eleven years old, wearing a cute pink dress, and her blonde hair is held in place by a silver tiara.

*A prophesy of old: “The pink petals stand out of the darkened stems, the yellow pollen swarmed by bees—the only flower left in what used to be a beautiful garden, before darkness invaded the land.”* It’s the Voice, its tone almost sorrowful in my head.

I call out to the Voice in confusion, but I don’t get a response. My interest piqued, I watch the girl throughout the King’s speech. Like the rest of those on the stage, she remains quiet and stationary, staring straight ahead. Despite this, there’s something entrancing about her, and I can’t take my eyes away. After what feels like an eternity, the King is done speaking, and the young girl steps forward once the crowd stops applauding.

"I am Fair Princess Isolde, daughter of the current Monarchs of the State." She sweeps her gaze across the crowd, and she seems to pause when she looks at me. Or maybe I'm just imagining things. "As Father said, the stated goal of the Royal Front is the betterment of our world. It's a process that began long ago. And it will continue long into the future." She smiles and repeats her sweeping gaze, seeming to focus on me once again. "Of that I have no doubt."

There's another uproar in the crowd as Isolde steps back upstage. Governor, etc. McKenna returns to the front and announces the end of the speech. The Royal Front will be set up in the Governor's palace for a few days, and it seems that the crowd is moving that way. I once again grab Sofie's hand and, without a word, we slowly make our way to the edge of the mass of people. When we get out, we find ourselves practically next to the stage, and the members of the Royal Front are long gone. Only a few security officers remain.

I turn to Sofie. "Do you still want to explore, or should we just head back to Akàné's house?"

She gives me a weak, pleading smile. "Can we just go back? I've had enough of crowds for the day."

Squeezing her hand, I nod. "Of course, you silly wolf."

We turn to leave, but I suddenly hear a man's voice behind us. "You girls aren't heading to the palace?"

"Wha—?" I call out in surprise before turning around to face him. He's wearing the same blue uniform as the rest of the security officers, but he seems more at ease than them. "Oh. Uh, no, sir. We were hoping to avoid more of the crowds for the day."

He lets out a genuine smile. "Can't say I blame ya for that. Either way," he continues, reaching into his pocket. "I've been

asked to give this to you.” He pulls out an envelope and hands it to me before saluting. “My mission accomplished, I bid you a good day, ladies.”

Once he leaves, Sofie and I share a confused glance, then stare at the envelope. It’s plain, and there’s no writing to indicate the sender or the intended recipient. With a shrug, I open it and pull out a note:

*Mia, Sofie—*

*We need to talk privately. I would like you to visit me at the Palace tomorrow at 1300 hours. Give the guards the other enclosed letter.*

*—Isolde*

As the note indicates, there’s a second piece of paper that reads:

*~ Miss Mia Sameri & Miss Sofie Ressena ~*

*As will become customary, the Royal Front cordially invites two members of the community attending a speech to spend an afternoon with us. This is in an effort to better connect to the community’s needs by speaking directly to its members, not just its representatives. Accordingly, you have been chosen for this honor. In your own interests, it is best not to make it publicly known.*

*Please come to the Palace of Catens at 13:00 on the day following our speech. This note serves as permission to enter at the aforementioned time. You are to be directed to Conference Room 2A.*

*Respectfully yours,*



*Isolde, Fair Princess of Incerin*

Both notes are handwritten, and the handwriting matches what I'd expect from a young princess: a strange mixture of sloppy and refined. Moreover, the second note contains the royal seal below Isolde's signature.

"It seems genuine," Sofie says after we stand in silence a few moments. "But how does she know our names? We just got here yesterday."

I take a moment before answering. "I'm not sure, but it felt like she was staring at me for part of the ceremony. We get delivered a note that's all cloak-and-dagger..."

"So something's going on, and it's important," she finishes. I nod. "Then I guess we know what we're doing tomorrow," she adds with a slight smile.

"Yeah." I squeeze her hand again. "Come on, Sya. Let's get back."

\* \* \*

We get back to the house to find a note from Akàné indicating that she'll be out for the rest of the day. Sofie and I spend the time investigating different parts of the house in a failed effort to distract ourselves from today's earlier events. Inevitably, we find ourselves discussing the possibilities for tomorrow. Why does Isolde want to meet with us? Does she know that we're operating under aliases? But why would she care instead of her parents? Arguing ourselves in circles isn't helping, but there's nothing we can do but wait.

The next morning, our minds are still racing. Perhaps even more so now. Eager and anxious, we head out to arrive at the

appointed time. Compared to yesterday, the narrow streets are practically empty, making our journey across town significantly faster.

As we approach it, we see that the Palace lives up to its name, standing impressively against the backdrop of Caten's amalgam of buildings. Covering nearly an entire city block, it also comprises several floors, and the black marble pillars contrast the white marble of the building itself. Two guards stand on either end of the gate, watching us carefully. Walking up to them, I pull out the letter from Isolde and hand it to the guard on the left. He reads it, then turns to me with a dark glare.

"I've not been told about this," he says with a gruff voice. "And I'm not inclined to believe it's true."

The other guard walks up to us. "What's the situation here?" The contrast between the two is striking: the second guard seems considerably more casual and carefree, as if he thinks the first is taking his job way too seriously. On closer inspection, I realize it's the same security officer that handed us the note yesterday.

"These two ladies claim," the first guard responds with an incredulous emphasis on the last word, "to have been invited to the Palace by Fair Princess Isolde." He hands the letter to the second guard, who reads it over before returning his gaze to his partner.

"This appears to be the handwriting of the princess, and her seal is marked as well," he replies, dropping into a more serious tone than before. "If you're so concerned about it, Guardsman Folle, then you can inquire of the Fair Princess herself."

Folle considers this for a moment. "Very well, I shall." He glares at his partner before turning and walking into the Palace.

The second guard, who gave us the note yesterday, turns to us. Returning to his more friendly tone, he introduces himself. "I'm Guardsman Brangaine. Folle," he adds, gesturing toward the Palace behind him, "has been a piece of work today. Taking the job way too seriously. I mean," he continues, "Isolde gave me the envelope herself and told me to give it to ya, so I know it'll be fine."

"We appreciate your help, sir," Sofie interjects, stepping up beside me. "I'm not sure we could have convinced him without you."

"Eh," begins the response. "He's new, a member of the city guard who got promoted to guard the Palace while we're here." He sighs. "But when you've been working with the Royal Front for as many years as I have, you realize you don't have to try so hard. I didn't know what was in the envelope," he continues. "Nobody told me to let you two in. But, knowing Fair Princess Isolde, it don't surprise me." He shifts his stance and breaks out into a large smile. "Always playing games, she is."

Sofie and I glance at each other before she takes another step toward Brangaine. "Sounds like you know her pretty well. What can we expect?"

He thinks for a moment. "She ain't like the others. She's not really concerned about politics or anything." He smiles again, adding, "In some ways, you wouldn't even know she was the princess just by looking at her."

Just then, Folle returns, Isolde in tow. Going off her outfit, Brangaine was right. She's wearing a simple salmon-colored shirt and a modest black skirt, looking like almost any other eleven-year-old girl in the city. However, when she speaks, it's with a self-aware authority. "Mia, Sofie," she greets, looking at us in turn. "I apologize for the delay. It seems that the guardsfolk

can be distrusting.” She gives a sideways glance at Folle before turning to Brangaine. “Thank you, Brangaine, for keeping our guests company. If you two would come with me, please.” She motions for us to follow her into the Palace, and the two guards retake their positions at the gate.

Isolde guides us in silence through the front doors of the Palace, which opens into an extremely impressive display of architecture and design, through a few hallways, up a set of stairs, and along another short hallway that ends in a single door. A guard stands just outside. “Leave us,” Isolde orders the guard, who salutes and moves to stand guard at the bottom of the stairs. Isolde motions us again, and the three of us enter the room at the end of the hall.

The room is spacious, outfitted with a large four-post bed in one corner, an elegant writing desk in an adjacent corner, bookshelves lining the walls, and a large window overlooking the courtyard. Isolde takes a seat on the floor and motions for us to follow suit. I glance at Sofie, who shrugs, and we take our places next to the princess and look at her expectantly.

“Elena Vardis. Sonya Naderai.” As she says our real names, she looks us straight in the eyes, and Sonya and I share a panicked glance at each other before Isolde continues. “No, you’re not in any trouble.” She laughs. “I know you, Sonya, are here illegally and that you, Elena, are not a member of a convent as you claim. And you know what? I don’t care. You’re here now, and that’s what’s important.” She pauses, and Sonya and I are more confused than ever. Sensing this, the princess continues. “I trust you are familiar with the mysterious voice in your head, Elena?”

“Y-Yes,” I stammer out. “Her advice has aided us a few times.”

“And you are also a theria.” At this, I hesitate. She seems to

know quite a bit about us, even about the Voice, but Sonya's traveling or my impersonation of a Sister are relatively minor crimes. Harboring a theria is considered treason, and she's a member of the royal family. Before I can make up my mind, she whispers, "Alid," and a small, icy orb appears in her hand. Surprised, I nod and reach into my mind for my thesis. With a quiet "inar", a pale flame appears in mine.

"You see," she explains after a moment. "I am one as well."

"Do your parents know?" I ask quietly, glancing behind me toward the door instinctively.

"No, they don't." She dismisses her ice orb with a flick of her wrist, and I follow suit. "And it's best that way. Same for you." She takes a moment to compose herself. "The Voice has called out to the two of us. There is a prophecy unfolding, and we are at the center of it." She looks over at Sonya with a sly smile. "Don't worry, Sonya. You'll have a part to play as well."

I'm speechless for a moment. There's so much to parse, and she hasn't even really explained anything yet. "The pink petals stand out of the darkened stems, the yellow pollen swarmed by bees—the only flower left in what used to be a beautiful garden, before darkness invaded the land." I pause. "You caught my eye yesterday during your mother's speech, and that's what the Voice said to me."

Isolde nods. "That's the part of the prophecy that refers to me." She seems to retreat inward, and her eyes glass over for a minute. "Yours is: 'Eclipsed though she be, another of equal radiance shall bring again life to the garden.'" She frowns, then shrugs. "I'm not quite sure what to make of it, but that does tend to be the case with prophecies."

"The prophecy seems to imply that there's a darkness, an evil," Sonya interjects. "But it doesn't seem like things are all that bad

at the moment.”

*Here and now, yes. Things are alright. But that won't last.*

*And that's why you're calling on us?* I ask the Voice in confusion.  
*How do you know what's going on? Who are you?*

There's a long pause while the Voice seems to deliberate about how much to explain. *I want to explain it to all of you at the same time. Focus on me and cast "maisu récon", if you would, please.*

Okay...? Tapping into my thesis, I whisper aloud, “maisu récon”. Suddenly, a silver apparition appears beside me in the form of a young woman.

“Hello, everyone,” the Voice says, both in my head and via the apparition. “Yes, this spell enables me to communicate with all of you, using Elena as a medium.” We're all staring in shock, and the Voice chooses her words carefully. “I am whom you call the Voice, but you may know of me by another name: Estègne Cerveille,” she finishes with a smile.

Sonya, Isolde, and I look at each other in surprise before turning back to Estègne. “W-Wait, really?” is all Isolde can get out. “You mean... we've been talking with the Estègne of legend all this time?!”

“I am now merely a shadow of her soul,” Estègne admits sadly. “No one can truly live forever. However,” she continues with a twinkle in her eye. “During my life, I was able to uncover a means of artificially extending the lifetime of my soul, my consciousness. And I am that extension.”

I hear a quiet voice beside me. “Are the legends true, or are they just stories?” Sonya squeaks out in question.

“As someone smarter than me once said, there's nothing ‘just’ about stories,” is the response, a smile on Estègne's face before she falls quiet a moment, eyes falling to the floor. “But yes, little one. Your legends are mostly true. A few are exaggerated.”

There's a touch of sadness and regret in her voice when she continues, turning her head away from us. "I am perhaps ashamed to admit that the Battle of Celé is not one of those."

"Nonsense," I tell her softly. "It's my favorite of the legends."

"Breaking Thessian moral philosophy, isolating Thessia from the continent, causing my homeland's destruction in a continent-wide war..." she trails off. "Surely I should not be proud of these."

"Bah!" Isolde snorts. "I'm even a princess of that homeland you shunned." When Estènne realizes that she's right, she turns away again. "And, honestly, I don't care. You were right." Isolde pauses, as if her next sentence pains her to admit. "Incerin was not kind to you then, and I can see it happening again."

After a moment of silence, Estènne lets out a quiet "Thank you" before clearing her throat and continuing. "Regardless, that does bring us to why we needed to meet.

"You talked of the prophecy earlier," she begins. "Darkness invades a beautiful garden and eclipses the great sun; one flower remains, and one of equal radiance to the sun shall expel the darkness once more." She takes a moment after reciting this third part. "Parsing the metaphors," she explains, "there is a being of Darkness who seeks her own advantage at the cost of the world's suffering. I was the sun, and did battle with this Darkness in my own time. Isolde," she says, turning to her, "you are the flower; Elena," she adds, turning toward me, "you are the one of equal radiance."

Isolde, Sonya, and I are stunned into silence. The Voice being Estènne, the Estènnian legends being true, meeting Estènne herself (kind of, anyway) is all a lot to handle on its own. And on top of that, there's a prophecy that we're sitting in the middle of? And I'm supposed to be the equivalent of Estènne, saving

the world from this Darkness? It's a lot to take in.

Sensing this, Estènne continues once again. "I believe that the prophecy's 'garden' is the continent, possibly Incerin in particular. I was able to put Darkness in slumber, but she has awoken again, and it would be best if we stopped her from causing widespread disaster."

Realization dawns on Isolde's face. "Is the corruption in the Incerin Royal Front part of this?" Seeing the confusion on Sonya's and my face, she elaborates. "The Royal Front has long stood up for the citizens of Incerin and the continent as a whole. However," her face darkens. "Recently, it's been a lot more interested in maintaining its own advantages without regard for the needs of the citizens. These speech tours are actually a response, trying to pretend that the Front cares about the country."

"Is it treason for the Princess to speak ill of the Front like this?" I ask, mostly out of curiosity, partly to lighten the mood. Though I am worried that it'll have the opposite effect.

Fortunately for me, Isolde laughs. "Well, if it is, it's not the only treason I could be charged with. Being a theria and all."

"True," Estènne cuts in. "Regardless, I do believe that this corruption was at least partially caused by Darkness. In my time, she went by the name Corbelle Inoire. However," she admits, "she knew of the same magic that enables my soul's survival across the centuries, and has performed the incarnation ritual to become fully corporeal once more. I don't know her current form, but she has likely also begun recruiting allies to her side."

"So... What should we do now?" Sonya asks, and it's only now that I realize how quiet she's been through all this.

Unsurprisingly, it's Estènne who answers: "You may not be mentioned explicitly in the prophecy, but that does not mean



you won't have a role to play. What it is, precisely, I'm not sure." Addressing the full group, she continues. "Elena, Sonya: Your plan was to reach Thessia. This should still be your goal. My resting place is there, and we should be able to complete the incarnation ritual as Corbelle has."

*What... What will that entail?* I ask Estènne in my head, too terrified of the answer to speak aloud.

*Little discomfort to you, I promise,* she answers. *It'll be much like our relationship now. Our two souls will share your one body, and I'll be able to grant you much of my knowledge and power.*

*So you'll be possessing me?*

"It's more like I would be adding my soul to yours, Elena," she answers aloud, likely for the benefit of explaining to the full group. I'm still a bit anxious about the whole process, if I'm honest. But before I can put up much more of a fight, she continues speaking.

"Isolde: You should join them, eventually. We still need to see if we can learn anything from the Royal Front about Darkness." She pauses, then frowns. "Besides, if they learn the Fair Princess is missing, well, it's not going to be great."

She takes a moment to ponder this. "We'll be up in Vasen, near the coast, in a little over a week. And Allipi, in Lintnor, shortly after that. Brangaine told me about a hidden passageway in the Vasennite cathedral out of the city," she explains slowly, piecing it together as she goes.

Excited, I jump in to finish her idea. "So you could use that to escape, and we could meet up outside the city walls."

"There's still the issue of getting to Thessia," Sonya interjects. "There aren't going to be many sailors in Vasen willing to make that journey."

The four of us are silent for a few minutes, trying to think of

a solution. Suddenly, Isolde jumps up in excitement. "We can commandeer the use of a ship to the island of Aspe, off Zystelle. I am the Fair Princess, after all."

"Would anyone buy the idea that the heiress is traveling to Aspe without the Royal Front, though?" I ask. "If it's just the three of us, it'd probably look like we were kidnapping you."

"Something like 'I'm the Fair Princess, you blundering idiot of a ship captain! You think I would order you to set sail if I were being kidnapped?!' might work." There's something strangely adorable about the blend of pointed exasperation and blatant annoyance in her acted voice, and I suppress a smile.

Sonya pipes up slowly. "Or we could bring Brangaine with us as well, and El and I could dress as handmaids or something." She looks at me, and I nod. "That'd give us the illusion of a bit more credibility."

"Hmph." Isolde crosses her arms and looks away from us. "That's no fun." After a moment, she turns back toward us, lowers her arms, and adds in a much softer tone, "It would probably work though." She's back to her smiling self now, and I giggle at the Fair Princess.

"What's so funny, Elena?" she asks, confused.

"You, Isolde. You're just not what I expected of a princess."

"Well, how many princesses do you know that are eagerly planning their own kidnapping?" she quips.

"Touché." The reality of that sentence finally strikes me. That is what we're doing, isn't it? I realize suddenly how long our list of crimes is.

"Well," Isolde breaks the silence. "It sounds like we have a plan."

Sonya and I nod. "We'll continue traveling to Vasen and meet you there," I confirm.

“And I’ll escape with Brangaine, meeting you outside the city,” she finishes.

We all turn to Estènne, who is smiling at us. “It’s nice to see you working together so well already. But there is one more thing,” she adds. “You should have a means to communicate between yourselves in the interim.” When Isolde and I glance at each other, unsure how that could be possible, Estènne continues. “There’s a spell I discovered long ago that enables telepathic communication, much like my relationships with you. You just have to create a bond first.”

The princess and I stare at each other before turning back to Estènne in confusion. “What do you mean, ‘bond’?” Isolde asks for the two of us.

Estènne chuckles. “You’re so distrusting. Reach into your minds and find your thesis.” After a moment of hesitation, we do so, then nod. “Maintaining a touch on it, seek out the other person’s mindsoul.”

I close my eyes to better focus. In my darkness of my mind’s eye, I can feel the shimmering thesis wall, and I look up into the dark sky of this world. Faintly, I can make out a small point in the darkness that I assume must be Isolde’s mind. I start to move toward it, and it grows closer and brighter. Eventually, we reach each other, and we grab each other’s hand. Echoing from the vast sky, I hear Estènne’s voice: *Cast “symé” to finish the bond.*

Tightening our grip on the other’s hand, we call out “symé” into the void. Suddenly, I feel a surge as Isolde’s soul courses through my body for a moment, and I assume she feels the same with mine. Despite the peculiarity of the situation, it’s not unpleasant: my body flushes with a gentle heat, and her soul is gentle and soft. When this process is finished, we break

contact and return to the Palace, our minds reeling from the experience. I feel like I have a faint and implicit understanding of Isolde now. It's almost like we knew each other a long time ago but haven't met since.

Estènne is still smiling. "Okay, you have now bonded. It's an implicit connection, but a powerful one." She looks at us intently. "Over time, you'll develop some sort of sixth sense regarding the other person, being able to feel when they're in danger, and a few other things. Moreover," she continues, "it allows you to seek out the other in your mindsoul, and you will be able to speak to each other in that world, much like you have with me. Over time, it will become second nature. Try it out."

Nodding, Isolde and I face each other, then close our eyes, retreating once again into our mindsouls. I reach for my thesis, but I'm stopped by Estènne's voice ringing in my head. *That won't be necessary. You can find her without it now.*

With that, I move to search the sky for the same light I sensed from her earlier, but I first notice a tree in the courtyard beyond the shimmering wall. It stands in stark contrast against the empty blackness of the sky and the expanse of white that populates the ground. Reaching through the wall to approach the tree, I can sense Isolde's presence, and I project my thoughts toward her avatar. *Isolde? Can you hear me?*

I can almost hear the smiling lilt in her voice. *Yep. Loud and clear.* Putting her hand on her hip, she adds in a mockingly serious tone and with an almost evil laugh, *You'll never be able to get away from me now!*

I decide to play her game. I return her smile, curtsying in mock formality. *It is an honor to work with you, Fair Princess.*

We return to the outside world, finding ourselves back in Isolde's bedroom, Estènne and Sonya watching us. "I trust you

were able to succeed?" Estènne asks, to which Isolde nods.

*You've been in my head this whole time, Estènne, I tell her. Surely, that's a rhetorical question?* I'm mostly teasing, the princess's playfulness allowing me to embrace mine.

The avatar rolls its eyes at me in faux annoyance. "Then it seems like today's meeting has been a success. You know your plans and can communicate as your hearts desire. I will relinquish this spectral form for now." With a gentle smile, she looks to me, adding "Elena, you may release the energy binding me here."

"It was a pleasure meeting you more properly," I say, nodding my head toward her. After Isolde and Sonya express similar sentiment, I release my hold on the magic that brought Estènne's avatar into the room. I sigh, a bit tired. A bit confused. A lot stunned.

"Well, that was a thing," Sonya finally says, breaking the silence.

I nod, and Isolde speaks up. "Yes, it certainly was." She's silent a moment more, then adds with a hint of sadness, "Unfortunately, I am needed elsewhere. Responsibilities of being a royal. I'll escort you two out."

We follow her once again through the maze of hallways that make up the palace. When we reach the front entrance, she turns to us. "It was lovely meeting you. Do stay in touch." She curtsies, and Sonya and I hasten to do the same.

"The honor is ours, Fair Princess," I respond.

A scowl appears briefly on her face before I hear her voice in my head. *You're right to maintain appearances here, she tells me. But I don't want us to have any tension arising from my... status, as it were. Treat me as you would a friend, nothing more.*

*Understood, Isolde. You seem to make a wonderful friend.*

*As do you. When I'm not busy with royal duties, I would love to simply chat with you.* I can hear the secretive whisper in her voice when she continues. *You wouldn't believe how boring it can be to be a princess.*

I give her a wide smile, barely restraining myself from reaching forward to hug her. *I look forward to it.* Sonya and I curtsy once more and take our leave, pausing at the gate for Brangaine to let us back onto the streets, normal citizens to the world once again.

## Festival Citron

It's a few days after our meeting with Isolde before the Festival Citron begins. That whole encounter was strange and incredible. We'd instantly made first-name basis with the Fair Princess, planned her escape/kidnapping, met the legendary Estègne Cerveille, learned of an ancient evil that we're destined to stop... It's a lot to take in. And it's not like we can tell anyone else about it. We've been thrown back into the world as Mia and Sofie, traveling to Lintnor. Isolde has been busy with her princess obligations, and we've not been able to talk since our meeting.

Though somewhat tempered by these events, my excitement for the festival is nearly unbridled. However, despite her insistence to the contrary, I can tell that there's something bothering Sofie. Her more upbeat behavior is her effort to cover up for her true negative feelings, but she's overcompensating. It's subtle, and I doubt anyone else would have noticed, but Sya and I have spent a fair amount of time together over the years. Whether it's the result of guilt, exclusion, anxiety, fear... I can't tell, and she's not going to come forward about it. I decide to

drop the issue but still keep an eye on her for the time being.

On the morning of the festival, I wake up early in excitement, and Sofie is still asleep, her expression tranquil as she's laid her head on my shoulder in the night. As I'm also on the side of the bed against the wall, there's no way I'll be able to get out of bed without waking her up. As I lie there, using my free hand to gently stroke her hair, I let my mind wander, trying to piece together what has—and will—become of our lives.

We need to stop Corbelle and whatever allies she's gathering, though I'm not quite sure how we'll do that. I'm not skilled enough to put up much of a fight against an ancient evil—physically or magically. And who knows how long I'll have to learn before we're forced to confront her. Sure, Estènne said she'd be able to share much of her power and experience after the incarnation ritual, but...

*Worry about it later*, I hear Estènne's voice in my head. It seems like she's been watching me again. She always manages to come out of nowhere; when Isolde and I were communicating in our heads, I was fully aware of Isolde's, even when she wasn't talking, but I can't usually tell when Estènne is there. *There is a festival today, Elena*, she finishes.

I hesitate a moment. *Surely, we shouldn't be wasting time?*

*Well*, she explains, *we're not going to get an opportunity like this for a while, so we might as well make the most of it now*. I can almost hear a dark smile in her voice, and I can't help but acknowledge the logic in her arguments. *Besides, you already have plans to leave with Akàné tomorrow*.

*Very well*, I tell her. *I'll do my best*.

Admonished, I shake my head and force myself to think about anything else... which quickly becomes the festival. How there will be games and music and dancing and lemons and lemons



and more lemons. (And a handful of other crops, but mostly lemons.) As silly as it sounds, there's always been something almost magical to me about lemons. By themselves, they're sour and somewhat unpleasant, but their tartness and acidity makes wonderful other things, like lemonade, and I realize that my mouth is now watering.

A few moments later, I feel Sofie stirring against my hand. She yawns then looks up and gives me a sweet smile. "Good morning, El."

"Hey, Sya," I smile back at her. "How you feeling?"

"What's there to complain about?" she asks. I'm looking for any signs of deception, but I don't see any. "I can certainly think of worse ways to wake up than like this." I realize just how domestic the situation is, so far removed from camping on our way to Catens or to the rest of our journey. I look down at Sya's face and know that I could get used to this. Being with my best friend with all the independence that comes from not living at home and just living a normal life. "Do you want to head to the festival now?"

I look down at her, smiling, and brush a small bit of her out of her face. "I thought you'd never ask."

We get out of bed and start getting ready: getting dressed, emptying our bags (the thing about festivals is that you often end up with more stuff than you take with you). We head downstairs to find Akàné half-asleep on the rocking chair in the corner of her living room. "Are you girls heading to the festival?" she asks us, her voice dripping with sleepiness despite the daytime hour. It occurs to me that we've barely seen her this week while we've been staying here, even though this is her house. She's been out, working, most of the time.

Sofie and I glance at each other before she answers. "Yeah,

we're just about to leave." After a moment of thought, she adds, "Am I right to assume that you won't be going?"

Akàné gives a slight smile. "Yes. It's been a long week, and I'm planning on just sleeping. Besides," she continues, "we're planning on leaving for Steilla tomorrow, right? I'd like to be rested before we do that."

"That makes sense to me," I tell her. "We'll get out of your hair, then. Come on, Sofie." I grab Sofie's hand and we head out the door into the large crowds once again occupying the streets. This time, at least, I'm excited about the event, unlike the Monarchs' speech a few days ago.

Looking around, the streets are laden with merchant stalls, some selling fresh produce from the farms, others using the festival's crowds to drum up business for their other wares. There are several areas housing different festival games and activities, and, though we can't see them from here, there will be carts and carriages driving people out into the fields for them to be part of the harvest themselves.

"Where to first?" Sofie asks, pulling me out of my reverie.

I take a moment to fail to make up my mind, eager as I am to try many different things. However, the rational part of me eventually steps in. "We should head over to the city gates and take a carriage out to the farms." Most of the crops would have already been harvested to bring to the cities, so if we want to pick our own, we don't want to wait. Sofie nods, and we walk toward the edge of the city, hand-in-hand so as not to lose each other.

We slowly press ourselves through the commotion to arrive near the city gates. A nearby sign instructs us to wait for an available carriage, as all three are already out to the fields. Seeing this, we take a seat on a bench next to a woman and

two young boys. The boys are restless, impatiently shifting constantly in their seats, while the woman sits there, calming watching her charge.

As we wait, Sofie starts humming to pass the time, and I begin quietly singing along. The song she's chosen is *Embrace*, a popular ballad and love song:

*You wake to the sound of rain on your window.*

*A sprinkle, not yet a storm.*

*Yet the drops on the glass are tears of the crying sky,*

*Who kill the excitement of adventure.*

*But I'll be there to comfort you,*

*Just as you've been there for me.*

*You curse the seemingly unending rain,*

*For all the sadness that it's brought.*

*You say that Hope, Happiness are hiding,*

*And only Misery is there.*

*But you're not alone, I promise you.*

*No, you're not alone, I promise you.*

*We can fight this together.*

*The sunny skies return and bring their warmth,*

*The chaos is returned to peace,*

*And a sparkling rainbow appears:*

*Just for you and me.*

As I let the last note fade, people start applauding, and I open my eyes to find a handful of people listening in, much to my surprise. I'd stopped paying attention to the world around me, and I must have been louder than I thought in order to draw attention. I'm taken aback and I can feel my face flush red with everyone looking at me. It's at this point that I realize that Sofie is also applauding. I perform a quick curtsy and retake my seat, lowering my gaze to avoid looking at anybody.

"Excuse me, miss." I look up to see a young man from my audience, has walked up to me. He kneels on the ground in front of me so that our eyes are on the same level. His are a deep, dark blue that I feel like I could get lost in.

"Y-Yes?" I stammer out, turning away from him in embarrassment. I didn't really want to draw attention to myself today.

He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, a common gesture among modern royalty and long-ago chivalric romantics. In other words, it's out of place unless he's confused me with Isolde somehow. He's flirting with me, and while I can recognize that he's actually quite handsome, I can't say I'm really looking for romance in this moment. Regardless, I feel myself blush even harder and pull my hand away instinctually.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I-I don't want to bother you, but..." At least he's flustered, too, I guess. And at least most of the audience has stopped paying attention. "My name's Liti Koso," he continues. "I-I'm here in Catens from Steilla as a journalist, but my father is a musician." In his nervousness, he's started speaking more quickly. "He has been searching for a singer for his latest piece. I believe you are the perfect musical goddess he has been seeking!" he finishes, strongly and confidently, despite his earlier trepidation.

I want to roll my eyes at him, but I have the wherewithal to realize how bad of an idea that would be. Instead, I turn to look him straight in his eyes. There are two things to dispel—one: that I'm not interested in performing; two: that I'm not interested in him. "I'm honored," I tell him, which is true enough, I suppose. "But I'm traveling and don't have time to spend in Steilla performing." Also true. "And as for your obvious flirtation, I'm a Sister, meaning I'm off-limits," I continue bluntly, placing my hand on my hip. Okay, it's not

technically true, but Mia is a Sister, even if Elena isn't, so I figure it's fair game. Besides, it should solve the problem.

'Should' being the operative word. He rises, and I can sense a slight hint of annoyance...? anger...? incredulity...? in his voice. "So how come you're here, then? Most Sisters don't travel across the country, and you don't seem to be wearing their dress." I can tell that he's not going to take "no" for an answer.

"Long story." As we've talked, one of the carts has arrived. I stand up, though he's still taller than me, so my gesture is not as imposing as I'd prefer. But, even more coldly than before: "One that I'm not particularly inclined to tell you." I turn behind me to Sya. "Let's go, Sofie." We walk over to the newly-arrived cart, pushing him out of our way as we do so. I don't like being so blunt and rude to him, but there's something about him that just rubbed me the wrong way, and I wanted nothing to do with him. With a shiver caused by his unpleasantness, I help Sofie into the cart before climbing up myself.

The cart is a simple, wooden open-topped box. The inside of the perimeter is lined with small bales of hay for seating, and the sides of the cart come up just high enough to be used as a back to the makeshift chair. Sofie and I find seats near the front of the cart, facing out one side. Once we've sat down, I allow myself a deep breath to calm down.

Sofie reaches over and grabs my left hand, and I turn to face her, towards the front of the cart. With a firm but gentle squeeze and a look of concern in her eyes, she asks, "You okay, El?"

"Y-Yeah," I stammer out unconvincingly. "I'm fine."

She looks away, and her voice is firm but still gentle. "It's just that you seem... well... not fine."

You're certainly one to talk, I want to tell her. There's been

something bothering you these last few days, but you keep insisting that everything's fine, even when I can clearly see that it's not. But then I realize that I'm falling victim to the same problem.

"I mean... if you don't want to talk about it," she mumbles. "You don't have to. I get it."

The cart has been fully loaded with people now and is starting to make its way past the city's stone walls into the more open air. "No, that's not it. There's just, you know, a lot going on," I tell her with a laugh. "And I've felt like there's been something bothering you, Sya, so I guess I've been tensely walking on eggshells around you the last few days." Another light laugh. "And then pretty-pitiable Liti shows up..." I trail off, shrugging, the implication clear. "But," I add forcefully. "This is a festival and we are going to enjoy it, okay?" I give her hand a light squeeze. She nods, and we lean back against the wall of the cart, watching the beautiful landscape pass by as we wait to arrive at the farms.

A short ride later, we arrive at this lemon grove, the sharp greens and yellows of the lemon trees contrasting the autumnal reds and oranges of the deciduous trees of the forest beyond the fields of pale wheat. The cart pulls to the side of the road. As the last of us gets off, a few of those already here get on for the trip back to the city, and the cart leaves, its wheels clattering on the road. Behind us, a path over which hangs a sign reading "Blasenwall Farms" branches out toward the grove, and the group walks out that way.

Sofie and I head to an otherwise unoccupied tree, and I realize that the lemons on this tree are just out of reach, which is probably why everyone else went to a different tree. "Do you think you could reach if you were sitting on my shoulders?" I

suggest. She looks up, judging the distance, then nods. I kneel down, and she climbs onto my shoulders. "Okay?" I ask. With her approval, I stand back up. Our human-stacking solution works, as Sofie is now able to reach many of the lemons. With each one she pulls from the tree, she drops it into my hands, and I put it in the bag we were given at the entrance to the farm.

After a few minutes, she's grabbed all the ones within easy reach, and she has to stretch to reach the others. As she extends to grab one slightly behind her, the change in balance is enough to upset mine, and we topple backward, landing on our backs, though she manages to cushion my fall somewhat, meaning she takes the brunt of it. After getting the wind knocked out of us, I hear her start giggling. "I got it," she manages to say between giggling fits, holding the lemon triumphantly in front of her. We sit like that, her legs around my neck and my head on her stomach, for some time. Peacefully absorbing the beauty of the grove: the bright greens and yellows of the trees, the cerulean blue of the sky, the silvery white of the clouds; the citric aroma around us; the light breeze blowing past our skin, rustling the leaves; the cheerful chatter and laughter of the other visitors.

Eventually, she sits up, and I turn around to face her. "Would you like to go get some other stuff?" she asks. "We can go pick some apples or...?"

"Yeah, let's do that." I stand up and grab her hand to help her do the same. We dust ourselves off, then gather the lemons that spilled when we fell over. She puts the last lemon in the bag, and we head off toward the apple orchard on the other side of the farm. We walk quietly, still in that same mindscape we were in before. At some point, she reaches over and grabs my hand.

When we reach the apple orchard, we find that, once again, earlier visitors have grabbed the easier-to-reach apples within

reach, so we'll have to repeat our human-stacking solution, preferably with less falling. This time, I climb onto Sofie's shoulders to pick the apples, dropping them to her to put in the bag. "That should be enough, right?" I ask after a few minutes. We're going to have to carry these, after all.

"I think so," she says, kneeling so that I can get down. We walk back over toward the farm entrance, where we find a second bag so that we can divide the fruit between us for easier carrying. On the other side of the path, we find a worker from whom we can buy our produce.

"Hello, girls," he says politely as we walk up. He looks in our bags, counting the apples and lemons. "That'll be one gold, two silver, please." Nodding, I pull out my purse and hand over the necessary coins. "Thank you. Have a nice day," he tells us with a smile and a slight bow. We smile and return the farewell, heading toward the road to wait for the next cart to the city. When it arrives, we climb on and enjoy the ride back to Catens.

It's only mid-afternoon, so we decide to stash our small harvest in our room at Akàné's house before returning to the pleased chaos of the streets. We each order lunch from one of the nearby stands before investigating and participating in many of the activities and games scattered around the town. Pumpkin painting and carving, carnival games, et cetera. As such, the rest of the day passes rather uneventfully, and we return to Akàné's just after dinnertime.

"That was fun," I hear Sofie say as we get back.

I nod, smiling. "Yeah, we needed that." I enter the guest room we've been staying in and sigh. It's at this point that I realize once again how different today has been from our recent past. Illegally escaping a city and hiking to the next, meeting the princess of the realm and the Estènne Cerveille of legend,



learning that we're at the focal point of an ancient good-vs-evil prophecy... "But we should get ready for tomorrow." Since we'll be leaving with Akàné early tomorrow morning, we need to repack our supplies and go to bed correspondingly early if we're to be awake in time.

Unfortunately, packing is a mindless task, beyond making sure that we haven't missed anything, leaving my mind to wander back to worrying about our future. I'd been able to push the fears away for most of today after Estènné's light chastisement this morning, but there isn't a festival to distract me now. Even after we make it to Vasen and join up with Isolde, we still need to make it to Thessia. We still need to perform the incarnation ritual, which still makes me shudder at the thought. If we're to stand any chance against Corbelle, I should be training my magic...

I can tell that Sofie is picking up on my negative energy and using it to fuel her own brooding, and I'm, in turn, feeding on hers, but there's nothing that either of us can do about it in the moment. Once everything is packed, we prepare for bed and try, mostly in vain, to find comfort in sleep. At first, it's that our minds are too busy to relinquish themselves to the land of dreams; later, it's that the land of dreams is fickle and unkind to worriers.

But time passes regardless, and we find ourselves reluctantly getting out of bed at the appointed time and meeting Akàné in the main room of the house.

## The Road Once Again

It's still dark-'o-clock in the morning, but we want to get a head start on the traffic out of the city. Since people flocked to Catens for the speech by the Monarchs and the festival, many of them will be leaving today. And we're not walking, unlike our journey to Catens. Akàné already has a horse that she'll be riding, but Sofie and I still need to acquire one, so our first order of business is to head to the stables near the center of town. Though we're not the only ones looking to get an early start to the day, the streets are unsurprisingly quite empty, making our journey correspondingly painless.

The stables have only recently opened for the morning, and we're the only ones there when we arrive. Several stable stalls line each of three walls, only a few of them vacant. I'm struck by the wide variety of horses before I call out to the stable master, who is organizing some supplies, facing away from us in a back room. "Excuse me, sir?"

He turns around with a start, apparently not expecting anyone at this hour. "Oh. Hello, ladies. Welcome." Entering the main room with a bow, he introduces himself. "I'm Tristan Forada.

How may I help ya?" He's an older gentleman, what wisps of greying hair he has matching his beard. Wearing a tartan shirt, he seems to fit the stereotypical equestrian.

"We're looking for two horses and tack. Doing a bit of traveling, nothing special," I tell him.

He looks us over carefully, and I feel myself blush at the attention, though he doesn't comment. After a moment, he asks, "Do you have any experience riding horses?"

"No, sir," Sofie speaks up, her eyes downcast. "I've never ridden before."

"I've ridden once or twice," I say. I may have limited experience, but I was told that I was a natural rider, picking up the skill remarkably quickly. I credit the horse, though.

Again, Forada ponders a moment before responding. "Then you'll probably want some mild tempers." He leads us over to the eastern wall and indicates a few of his recommended horses. "Look 'em over. Let me know what ya think," he tells us, returning to the back room to finish organizing.

Sofie and I look at the horses, some of whom are still asleep. Eventually, one of them catches my eye. A beautiful dapple grey. I walk over to her and cautiously hold out my hand toward her. She gives me a questioning look before sniffing my outstretched hand, equally cautious at first. After a moment, she must have decided that I'm not a threat, and she nuzzles my palm, allowing me to stroke her. "Hi, there," I whisper gently. The mare neighs quietly, shaking her head back and forth.

*She likes you*, Estènnè tells me out of nowhere. I really can never tell when she's hiding in my head.

*You think so?* I ask.

There's a short pause. *I'm not too familiar with horses*, she admits. *They're not native to Thessia. But I can interpret the broad*

*strokes of tone and body language and... she trails off, realizing that she's starting to ramble. Anyway, that sounds like a happy horse.*

I smile and look over at Sofie, who seems to be timidly trying to make friends with a chestnut horse a few stalls down. I walk over and ask if she's found one she likes. "Yeah, I think so," she replies. "This one seems pretty nice," she continues, indicating the chestnut horse in the stall. Upon closer examination, it appears to be a younger male, though I can't tell if it's a stallion or a gelding. I take Sofie's hand and lead it toward the horse's face in an effort to introduce them. He doesn't seem to take too much of an interest in her, though he also doesn't resist when she begins to stroke his mane. After a moment, Sofie looks back to me and nods. "What do you think?"

The horse's response to her seems to be pretty neutral, which I suppose isn't the worst outcome. "I think you've chosen well, Sofie. Should we call Forada back over and get moving?" After she agrees, we walk over to the stable owner to tell him we've picked our horses, indicating the two in turn.

"The dapple grey mare in stall three?" he clarifies, to which I nod. "You've got good taste in horses, young lady. She'll run ya a bit more coin, but I reckon she's worth it." Turning to Sofie, he clarifies her request as well. "The chestnut gelding in stall eight?" After she nods as well, he adds his quick sales pitch. "A no-nonsense mount, he is. Puts in the work without complaint, but he's not much for games or the sort."

Sofie and I look at each other and nod, then I turn back to Forada. "How much for the two of them, plus saddles?"

He runs the numbers out loud, "I reckon forty-five gold for the mare, twenty-five for the gelding. As for supplies," he rambles on. "Another fifteen for the both of you."

I add these numbers as he calls them out. “Eighty-five gold then, sir?” When he nods, I count out the necessary coins from the purse my father gave me when we left Rædes. Forada seems surprised by this, but he accepts them without comment. He pulls out the paperwork for each of our new horses, asking us to sign them to affirm the horses’ newly-owned status. As we do so, he removes a pair of side saddles from the wall and brings them over to the counter where we stand.

I shouldn’t be surprised. But I let the slightest amount of frustration into my voice as I tell him, “We’ll be riding astride. Sir.” When he tries to convince me that no, we really don’t want to do that, I stand my ground. “I’m ordering traditional riding saddles. I can see them on the wall over there, so you don’t have a reason not to sell them to me.”

“Very well, but you must know—”

“Yes. I know quite well,” I tell him pointedly. “The saddles, please. We’d like to be on our way before daybreak.”

He flounders a moment before acquiescing with a sigh. “Yes, ma’am.” He turns to fetch the other saddles, and I look over at Sofie to wordlessly roll my eyes about the situation. Putting the supplies on the counter, he unlocks the stalls housing our new horses, bringing them to the counter as well. We put the saddles on the horses, and I help Sofie onto the gelding before climbing onto the mare. Thanking Forada for his help, we return to Akàné’s house. As we ride, I give Sofie a few pointers on controlling her horse, which fortunately seems pretty easy for her to control. That, or it’s realized it can just follow mine.

When we arrive, Akàné is justifiably annoyed by the time it took us, as the sun is beginning to peek above the horizon. I shrug, blaming Forada, and we decide to make the most of the situation, packing our supplies onto the horses and getting

on the road as quickly as we can. Since Akàné has made this journey before, we follow her, Sofie and I riding side-by-side just behind.

"Steilla isn't that far on a horse," our leader says as we get outside the city. "I reckon we'll be able to make it by tomorrow night."

"Certainly beats walking," I let out with a slight smile. We're suddenly passed by a pair of speeding horses, their riders paying no attention as they zip down the road, nearly crashing into us. I have to swerve toward Sofie to avoid them, but they're gone before we can even raise our voices to complain. A bit unsettled, we carry on, carefully watching our backs.

A short way into our ride, Sofie calls out to Akàné. "You were nice to let us stay at your house this week, but we've hardly seen you at all," she says, clearly confused.

"You said the house had been pretty lonely since your brother moved out," I add, remembering our initial conversation outside the tavern. "But you were hardly home yourself."

There's a pause as she ponders her response, the only sound the clacking of the horses' hooves along the road. After a sigh, she finally responds. "As usual, everything was far harder and took far longer than it should have." Her voice is resigned, but there's still a hint of bitter annoyance. "I needed to make certain... preparations for this trip, but my business associates failed to deliver. Ended up having to do half the work myself in order to make it happen."

"Sounds like you need better associates," Sofie offers sympathetically.

Akàné gives a sharp laugh. "Ha! Like that'll ever happen! No," she explains, "I work in the information trade. Part of a giant network—getting information from farmers, merchants, police,

you name it. Make sure it gets to the right people, you know?"

Still confused, I ask, "So, what's the big problem?"

She turns around in her saddle, apparently failing to see how I, myself, could fail to see the problem. "There's a lot of... under-the-table information that goes around, too," she explains. "Means we deal with a lot of black market dealers and other criminals. You know the type? Of course you do. Not always the most cooperative animals in the zoo," she finishes, a clear disdain in her voice. Sofie and I exchange a look, hoping she doesn't realize that we fall under that umbrella as well. "But I suppose I don't have to deal with them for a while," she says with a slightly devious smile. "I get to escort you to Steilla now."

We continue riding in silence until the evening, when we stop at a small farmyard with a sign that reads Aubergine Auberge. "It's not a city," Akàné tells us as we approach. "But it's a nice place to stop for a bit." As the sign indicates, the barn is painted what presumably used to be a lovely dark purple that's now faded almost completely. The underfoot gravel path crunches as we dismount and walk towards the main house. After the day's ride with only a few short stops earlier, my legs are sore and surprisingly unsteady under me, and I stumble as if I were drunk. I notice that Sofie is wincing every few steps as well, though she's doing her best to hide it.

Akàné rings the bell that rests on the window sill near the door, and an older couple dressed in traditional farmland clothing comes to the door, turning to Akàné in surprise.

"Ah, Miss Verrader!" the man exclaims. "It's been quite a long time! Come in, come in." They gesture for Sofie and me to follow into the deceptively large home. Cedar planks line both the floors and the walls, though the rugs and paintings make for an inviting, homely space that I feel like I'm invading. Another

lone traveler sits in the adjoining room, head buried in a book.

Akàné speaks with the host couple, then introduces us. “Girls, this is Sylvia and her husband, Aðan,” she says, indicating them in turn. Reversing the roles, she adds, “And this is Mia and her friend Sofie.”

When we curtsy as is tradition, the Sylvia and Aðan laugh. “No need to be so formal, girls,” Sylvia tells us. “This is meant to be a nice, friendly place for travelers to rest a bit before they head out again.” Turning to Akàné, she adds, “If you want to hook up your horses in the barn, they can rest a bit, too.”

After she leaves to do so, Aðan asks if we’d like anything to eat, offering a few different options. When we seem surprised by the offer, he reminds us that they run this place as an inn. “And we and Akàné go way back, so don’t worry about anything, you hear?”

We nod, graciously taking a seat as the food is brought to us, by which time Akàné has rejoined us. “Thank you again,” she says, stretching out in the chair on the opposite wall. “It’s always lovely to stop by when I’m traveling.”

“Nonsense,” is their response. “It’s always lovely to have you stop by.”

As they catch up on each other’s lives, Sofie and I zone out, purely enjoying the food and the simple comfort of the couch after a full day’s ride. After a while, Sofie’s hand grabs mine as she snuggles against me, and I instinctively put my arm around her shoulder. “Hey, Sya,” I whisper in her ear, pulling her closer.

She rests like this a few moments, her eyes closed as she lays her head on my chest. “What should we name our horses?” she asks gently, raising her head. The innocence and simplicity of the question fit perfectly with the innocence and simplicity of our evening here at Auberge. Here, it’s easy to forget just how



much innocence we lost in Catens.

I ponder the question for a moment, picturing my mare in my mind. Given its complexion, one name stands out to me. “Béo,” I whisper back, feeling a rush as I say the name. “I’m going to name mine Béo.”

Sofie lets out a soft high-pitched squeal of approval. “Aww, her coloring even kind of looks like a wolf. I think that’s perfect, El.”

“And as for yours...” I trail off, thinking. I’m not great at naming things. We had a few pets when I was growing up, and my father always had to name them for me. “What about something cute, like Brownie?”

“It is cute,” she agrees. “But... I don’t think it’s quite what I’m looking for.” We try to come up with a good name, bouncing attempts back and forth for a few minutes. “What do you think of Oakleigh?”

“It might still be a bit cute, but I like it,” I tell her. I can’t put my finger on why, but it reminds me of when I was little. It’s not a name from any of the legends, and I can’t remember knowing any horses with that name, but it feels strangely familiar, comforting. “Béo...”

“... and Oakleigh,” she finishes, smiling, nestling her head snugly against me again. I slide myself into a slightly more comfortable position, closing my eyes. All I notice are Sofie’s warm figure and spirit against mine and the fading din of the adults’ conversations as I fall asleep.

\* \* \*

“Wake up, Mia.”

I’m woken by a hand gently shaking my shoulder, and I

groggily open my eyes. Sitting up, a sharp pain courses through my legs, and I place my hand behind me to catch myself. Looking around, I notice that Sofie's the one who woke me up. "What's up, Sya?" I ask, still half-asleep.

"Akàné's tending to the horses. We're going to be heading out soon."

I groan, and look out the window, where dawn's light shines through the panes. At least it's not as early as yesterday. With a grimace, I get my bag and meet Sofie and Akàné outside, making sure to thank Sylvia and Aðan again on my way through the kitchen. We saddle up without and hit the road without incident.

After a while, I've woken up and grown accustomed to the soreness in my legs, leaving my mind free to wander. We should reach Steilla tonight, then it's only a few days until Vasen, where we'll meet up with Isolde. Isolde, Fair Princess of the State. I realize that I haven't spoken with her since our meeting at the Palace and decide to call out to her.

Leaving enough attention on the road, I retreat inward to my mindsoul, the nearly-empty garden where I find Isolde's avatar. She's sitting at the base of the tree, delicately inspecting the purple flower in her hand. *Hey there, little princess.*

*I thought I told you: I'm not your princess!* Despite her apparent annoyance, there's a playful undertone to her voice.

I give her a childish giggle. *You did.*

*Then why...?*

*Because I thought your reaction would be funny. And it was.*

She lets out a sharp, indignant sound, and a short lull falls over the conversation, neither of us quite knowing where to take the conversation from here. *A-Are you hurt, Elena?* she eventually asks when I grimace as Béo lands from jumping over

a log on the road. How could she know that? It's a moment before I recall Estènné's explanation: Over time, we'll develop a sixth sense regarding the other. And since we're in each other's heads at the moment, it's a lot easier... *Yep, that's about it*, she confirms, and I realize that I was projecting those last thoughts to her unintentionally.

*Just sore from riding*, I tell her. *I've never been on a horse this long, and my legs are chafed.*

I can sense her surprise. *And Estènné hasn't taught you a healing spell yet?*

Now that she points it out, I'm surprised as well. *No, she hasn't. Though she hasn't taught me a lot of spells in general*, I add with a frown.

*Well, try "sanasé".* After a beat, she adds. *A warning, though: it'll help, but it's going to feel weird while you're healing.*

I shift my focus to the outside world, reaching for my *theresis*. With one hand on the reins, I place my other hand on my leg, whispering the spell. Immediately, my leg is flushed with a glacial iciness that overwhelms all of my other senses, and I bite my tongue so as not to scream out. Almost as quickly as it arrived, however, the cold is replaced by a strange itching sensation. Or maybe it's just my adrenaline pulsing. Either way, it's a relief when both it and the original pain fade a few seconds later. I take a moment to recompose myself, taking a deep breath before repeating the process for my other leg.

When I finish, my breath is coming in shallow gasps, and I notice Sofie's look of concern. I know that it's because of the ironically sharp pain from the healing spell along with the associated *theresis* drain, but she has no idea what just happened. Careful not to give anything away to Akàné, I mouth "I'm fine. I'll tell you later," and this seems to placate her, though

she still seems unsure.

*Thank you. Though, I'd call that more "painful" than "weird",* I tell Isolde, explaining what happened.

*I'm sorry,* she says, considering this. *I wonder if it's different person-to-person. Either the person casting it or the one on whom it's cast.*

Our theorizing quickly devolves into idle chatter, helping both of us pass the time. Eventually, we bid farewell when Akàné, Sofie, and I stop for our mid-afternoon break and Isolde goes to attend to some final business in Catens.

Sofie and I excuse ourselves from our leader walking into the privacy of the woods overshadowing the trail. I pull her aside to explain what happened earlier and offer to heal her legs as well, though with a better warning than what I was given. She nods her approval, sitting down and closing her eyes as I reach for her legs. I take a deep breath and funnel my thesis into the spell. She arches her back in pain, then slumps a few seconds later, panting.

"I'm sorry, Sya," I whisper in her ear, grabbing her hand.

"I-I'm fine," she says between breaths. "My legs feel a lot better now. So, thank you," she smiles at me sweetly before standing up. I don't believe her. Not that my healing worked, but that she's okay. She's been overly sweet and affectionate these last few days. She's always been one to overcompensate when things are bothering her. But I don't know what to say, so I stay silent until she speaks again. "We should probably get back before she starts looking for us."

I nod silently, still unsure of what to say. I keep an eye on her, but I can't read past her façade. Eventually, we get back on the road, just a few hours outside of Steilla.

The rest of the journey passes well enough, if uneventfully.

The city's walls stand as a backdrop to a gorgeous approach. Trees and flowers line the road, which transitions into a marble bridge standing over a silver stream. Though Catens is an impressive city, its chaotic rebuild leaves it a bit disheveled, a problem that Steilla doesn't suffer from. As we reach the gates, we hand over our identification paperwork to be checked. The guards give it a cursory glance before waving us into the city. Inside the walls, the first thing I notice is how uniform most of the buildings are: they're stratified, but each section's buildings all look the same, and none of them are run-down or out-of-place. The streets are also much wider than Caten's, making it easy for us to follow Akàné as she leads us to a tavern at the far end of the city.

"It's a nice enough place," she tells us, turning around in her seat. "But it's in a rough part of town. Be careful."

I tighten my grip on the reins, ready to grab the bow of my back if need be. As we move forward, the buildings grow progressively more unkempt: untrimmed vines and ivy eclipse the walls, doors and windows sit in disrepair. It's a far cry from our first glimpse from the city entrance.

The tavern itself, marked by an eccentric sign reading "Cold Star" over its door and by Akàné's gesturing toward it, stands out for its clean stone exterior. We dismount, tying our horses in the nearby stables. The inside of the tavern meets the standard set by the outside, with light woodwork floors and tables. The few patrons are divided into two groups of different apparent standing. Those in the corner are wearing relatively nice clothes; those in the center of the room are much more

disheveled, and they seem considerably drunk. I take care to walk at a distance as we head to the counter.

"What can I do for you?" the barkeeper asks, his bandaged left hand scratching his greying beard. As Akàné speaks with him, I turn sideways to watch both sets of patrons out of the corner of my eye.

"We'd like two rooms for the night," she tells him. The center group of patrons is staring at me, and I blush, turning away. I realize that I'm a young girl in a tavern with a group of middle-aged drunk men. I'm not keen to repeat my experience with Liti here. I tense, ready to defend myself if need be.

The barkeeper reaches below the counter for two keys, handing them to Akàné. "That'll be eight gold for each room," he tells us. After Akàné and I each pay, she hands me one of the keys. I'd expected something more durable, but it's light in my hand, seeming almost delicate. The number three is written on an attached tag. The barkeeper returns with a small glass for each of us, handing them to us with a wink. "On the house," he whispers secretively, looking over my shoulder at the other patrons.

My eyes water as the liquid hits the back of my throat in a roaring icy fire, and it briefly overwhelms my senses. Once Sofie and I recover, we take our leave, eager to get a proper night's sleep after traveling. Especially if we're to travel again tomorrow. "Good night, Akàné," I call out to her. "Thank you for everything." She smiles, curtsying, before returning her attention to the bar.

Sofie and I retreat to room number three, upstairs. It's a plain square room with minimal furniture, but it'll do for the night. Throwing down our bags in the corner, we change into our sleepwear and collapse on the bed.

\* \* \*

When I wake up, it's with a great fogginess punctuated only with a splitting headache. My throat is dry. My lips are chapped. There's a slicing pain in my left forearm. A dull ache in my back. The air around me is quiet, still, cold.

I open my eyes and sit up. This place isn't familiar. This isn't the tavern.

My breathing almost seems to echo in the small, enclosed space. The bed I'm sitting on is no more than a slab of stone, a theme shared by the floor and walls. Except the wall opposite me, which is made up of metal bars. There's no one else here.

I'm in a prison.

## Lock and Key

I'm going to need to add "prison escape" to my list of crimes, aren't I?

I've taken stock of what I can regarding my situation. I have a few small cuts and scrapes on my arms and legs. I'm still dressed in my nightgown. The cell, which measures no more than a few meters square, is cold and slightly damp, and there are no windows in sight. And despite the fact that I'm fairly short—barely over a meter and a half—the ceiling is uncomfortably low. There aren't any other furnishings, nor anything else, for that matter. The barred wall leads to a narrow hallway with more cells, though they appear to be empty. No guards stand posted at the door, much to my surprise. Judging from my hunger and dehydration, I estimate that I was unconscious for two or three days.

I reach for my mindsoul, calling out to Estènné and Isolde, to no avail. Maybe they're asleep? I have no way to know what time it is now. I also have no idea what happened to Sonya and Akàné.

Who gave us up? I cast my mind back to that night, and



something clicks in my head—the barkeep. The way he slyly handed us those drinks, how he kept glancing at the drunken men in the center of the room. He must have been in on it... whatever “it” is. Was it about those men? They were eyeing me, and it was their lustful gaze that made me uncomfortable. Men often lose their what little gentility they have in their booze. And a young woman, attractive or no, walks into the bar? That might not end well for her. And while I’m only modestly proportioned and my already not-quite-feminine features were worn by travel, I suppose a hardened, tomboyish girl might be just their type.

It doesn’t explain why I’d be in prison though, unless someone found both of my identification cards in my bag. And even then, it’d just show that I wasn’t who I claimed to be, which isn’t enough to deserve this particularly solitary arrangement. No one knows that Elena Vardis is a theria, after all. Unless they tracked down my father and got a confession out of him.

I let out a resigned sigh. I was drugged, am now in prison, my best friend and my father may well be in danger—it’s not been a great day. But there’s not a whole lot I can do about it at the moment. And it’s not worth eating at myself when I would rather eat actual food.

I take another look at the barred wall. The vertical gaps are obviously too narrow to slide through, but if one of the bars were removed, I think my slender frame would fit. With a whispered “inar”, I direct my thesis to where the bar meets the floor, attempting to burn through it. After a moment, it becomes clear that this isn’t going to work: the bar isn’t melting. Unsure of what else to do, I climb back onto what might be generously called the bed, clenching my knees to my chest.

I pass most of the time in my mindsoul’s garden, in the area

past my thesis. The tree near which I usually find Isolde is still there, but Isolde herself is not. Its hues of summer-green leaves contrast against the complete blankness of the landscape surrounding it. The ground at the base of the tree is dotted with grass and a few small flowers, but everything else is just a flat, empty whiteness or the flat, empty blackness of the sky. I decide to liven up the place, using a recurring dream I've had. Near the tree, I place a white marble fountain whose form consists of an elaborately twisting plant, its wrapping vines headed in light blue bell-shaped flowers from which the water flows. A wide dirt path joins to the base of the tree, where I sit down, and wait.

When I've nearly fallen asleep in boredom, my mind is shaken awake by the Fair Princess's avatar, newly arrived in the garden. *Elena!* she yells. *What happened?!*

I feel a rush of emotions. Joy and relief at seeing her, disappointment that she doesn't know what happened either. *I don't know*, I tell her, the confusion bubbling in my voice. *We arrived in Steilla, I went to bed, and woke up here, in some prison cell, about an hour ago.* I feel her shock, but I manage to squeeze out one more sentence before she jumps in. *I haven't seen anyone else here, even a guard.*

*You arrived in Steilla the night we last talked, right?* When I confirm this, she continues. *Then you missed a day: it's the second morning since then. What do you remember?*

I tell her everything—riding into Steilla, arriving at the tavern, my theory about the barkeeper and the other patrons, of waking up here. She's attentive and doesn't interrupt the story. Even afterward, she's quiet, pondering all of the events that transpired. When she does speak, it's hesitantly, as if she's still trying to piece together a theory. *If you're in such an isolated cell,*

*it's likely that they know who you really are: Elena Vardis, theria. I can hear the smile in her voice as she continues. The question is: What are we going to do?*

*Well, I'm not keen on staying. And, assuming that Sonya's here, too, I'd like to get her out.*

*She pauses a moment before asking sharply: And Akàné? Did she take the drink at the tavern?*

*With a sinking stomach, I realize where she's going with this. Akàné works in information. If there were anybody who'd have a chance at knowing who we are, it'd be her. No, I say quietly, the emotion in my voice conveying that I understand Isolde's point.*

*Then she's probably the one who turned you in, she says unnecessarily. As you might imagine, there's a pretty good reward for reporting traitors.*

*I echo her question from just a moment ago: What should we do, though?*

*She sighs before answering. Honestly? I have no idea. A short pause. Well, let me rephrase that: We need to get you and Sonya out of there, but I have no idea how we're going to do that.*

*Is there anything you can do, as the Fair Princess? I ask in desperation.*

*Not without more information. And not without drawing a lot of attention. When I'm silent, she carries on. You're almost certainly still in Steilla. The city has one of the most fortified dungeons in the country, and it doesn't make much sense to rush you to Catens or Vassen.*

*A knot forms in my stomach. You know, "most fortified dungeon" isn't quite the news I was hoping for, Isolde.*

*She simply shrugs nonchalantly. Sorry. We're arriving in Steilla today. I'll see what I can find out. Let's keep each other posted.*

I agree and break contact, returning to my empty cell. Releasing a sigh, I prepare myself for... well, I'm not sure, actually. As nice as it is to be working with Isolde, I could use Estènne's help, too. But I've never had any luck with reaching out to her: she just appears when she has something to say.

Fortunately, I don't have to wait long before I hear a commotion in the hallway. I sit up, tense, ever more anxious to know what is happening. Two figures come to the door: a male guard wearing silver armor and, as if it were a surprise, Akàné, who must be here to gloat.

"You were a fool to trust me," is the first sentence out of her mouth. Yep. Here to gloat.

I restrain the urge to roll my eyes at her. Instead, I simply say, "So it would seem." Hoping that I might get something out of her, I continue, "May I ask to what I owe this pleasure?"

"Tsk, ts, Elena Vardis," she chides, a strong emphasis on my real name, at which I flinch. She simply laughs. "You couldn't have thought I didn't know who you were. I'm part of the largest information network in the country, as you might recall."

"So what's going to happen to me, then?" I ask coldly.

She draws herself up with pride. "Well, you're an illegal theria who illegally took on the identity of a Sister and illegally helped your dear friend Sonya leave Rædes illegally." Her laugh is cold and dark, but strangely not mean-spirited. "To be honest, I don't really care what happens to you. I just collect the bounty." She adds in a stage whisper, "But it's probably not going to be great for you." I frown, and she returns to a normal voice to explain what happened. "I lured you to the tavern, the barkeeper spiked your drinks, and you fell deeply unconscious upstairs. Then we brought you here," she finishes simply, as if that was a full explanation. With a sly smirk, she adds, "Oh, don't worry. We

made sure those men kept their hands off you.” With that, she turns and walks away, leaving me in the sole company of the guard.

So Isolde was right. Akàné’s the one who turned us in, purely for the coin. And Akàné was right that we were foolish to trust her. The whole situation was too good to be true. Look where it’s gotten us.

The guard is facing away from me, focused on the hallway. I call out to him, “E-Excuse me, sir?” When he turns to face me, I ask, “So, what is actually going to happen to me?”

He hesitates before speaking a single word. “Classified.”

“As if I could do anything with the information. I’m stuck inside a guarded cell with no one to pass it along to,” I pointedly remind him. It’s a lie, as I can easily pass it along to Isolde, but he doesn’t need to know that.

While he hesitates again, I study him. He’s young, perhaps only twenty years old, with a surprisingly handsome face below a matte of speckled red hair. He appears to be of a larger build, but that’s probably because of his armor, which is in pristine condition. Either he’s obsessive about cleaning and polishing it or he’s new and inexperienced. His breastplate is marked with the seal of Steilla in black: a large encircled star symbolizing the significance of the city (just as is the significance of the sun), defended by its walls. A thin rapier with a plain guard hangs at his waist. As I step toward him, his right hand gravitates toward the sword. “C-Classified,” he says again, cautiously.

I flick my hair behind my shoulder and tilt my head. “Not even a hint?” I ask, putting emotional hurt into my voice. I feel like an idiot, essentially flirting with the prison guard for information. I also don’t like being seen as the type who uses her status as female to manipulate men into doing what she

wants. But I don't have a lot of options here.

He blushes and falters a moment before turning his head to make sure no one else was in the corridor. Leaning toward the bars, he whispers, "You're going to be held here until the Royal Front arrives here later today, then you'll have a hearing with them." He nervously adjusts his breastplate, looking over his shoulder again. "The accusations Miss Verrader has brought on you seem extreme, and her reputation is the main reason the hearing will proceed this soon. Normally, such... extreme accusations would be vetted by the local courts first." He looks at me and gives me a warm smile laced with sadness. "So you're lucky in a way."

I cock my head at him. "How so?" It's hard to imagine anyone in my position would be considered lucky.

"Well," he fumbles. "You won't have to sit here for too long before the hearing and sentencing. Most people would sit in detention for days, weeks, or even months before the trial."

"Do you believe the accusations are true?" I ask him, torn between curiosity and playfulness.

"Whether I believe them is irrelevant," he says quickly. After a beat, he adds more carefully, "They do seem a bit ridiculous. We haven't had therii in centuries. But it's not my place to judge."

Any therii except Isolde and me, I guess. "Do you know anything about my friend?" If I'm going to rescue Sonya, then I'm going to need to know what she's up to.

He shakes his head. "No. I've just been assigned to you. I don't know anything about the other prisoners."

I try to hide my disappointment. "That's okay, you've still been quite helpful. Thank you. If I might ask one more question," I continue, noticing that he flinches in response. He's already given me substantially more information than he should

have. "What's your name?"

I can tell he's surprised by the innocence of the question. Here I am, just moments ago asking for classified information about prisoners, now asking simply for his name. That, and I somehow can't imagine most prisoners making friends with the guards stationed at their door. "Auren," he says finally, having decided there wasn't any harm in telling me. "Sir Auren Hart."

"Mia Sameri." I curtsy and give a girlish smile, returning to sit on the so-called bed. "Or Elena Vardis, I suppose, if the accusations are anything to go by." Surprisingly, my own name sounds strangely foreign in my mouth. The conversation lulls as I've gotten what I needed and neither of us know what to say. Not that we should be talking anyway. Auren turns away to face the hallway again.

I reach out to Isolde again, telling her what I've learned. *You were right. I'm still in Steilla, I tell her. The guard outside my cell is Sir Auren Hart, and his breastplate has the Steilla insignia on it. And Akàné is the one who turned us in. I'm going to be held here until you arrive later today, when my trial will be held.* Fear and concern peppering my voice, I add, *I have no idea what Sonya's situation is.*

She's quiet a moment. *A messenger just brought us the news of the hearing a few minutes ago. I'm surprised it's not tomorrow, at least. They must really want to get rid of you.*

*Wait. Treason hearings are held by the Monarchs, right? When she affirms this, I carry on. But if the time of the hearing was set before you even knew about it, who gets to order the Monarchs around like this?*

*The Council, she explains. There are members in each city, including Steilla. They have some powers, but the Monarchs have to agree to any major decision.* After a moment, she adds, *And my*

*parents did agree to have your hearing tonight.*

I let out a sigh. *Is there anything you can do?* I'm grasping at straws here.

She cocks her head at me, considering her options. *Let me see.* Her presence fades slightly as she focuses on the world in front of her. After a few minutes that seem to drag on forever, she shares the fruits of her efforts. *Well, I will be there during the hearing, but I won't really have any say,* she admits. *Why would they trust the eleven-year-old to make a good judgment, right?*

*Well, yeah. Especially in this case.*

*I should be able,* she carries on, ignoring my comment, *to have a word with Sir Hart, however.*

*Can we trust him?* I ask, concerned.

*Do you have a better idea?* she retorts. And no, I don't have a better idea. With a sigh, she continues in a much more gentle voice. *Sonya's being held somewhere in the complex, but I don't know where. Her trial will be directly after yours, though.* When I'm still silent, she adds, *Don't worry, El. We'll save her, too.*

We let the conversation fade, each of us returning to our own world: her to her journey, me to my cell. My stomach growls loudly, and I let out another sigh.

"Food will be here shortly, Miss Sameri," I hear Auren say with a chuckle. "It won't be that great, but I reckon you won't care too much."

"Yes, very funny," I reply in faux annoyance before letting myself laugh as well.

I soon learn that Auren was right, as another guard brings lunch for both Auren and me not long after. I also learn that Auren was right about the quality of the food. It's a repulsive white glob of... I'm not exactly sure, actually, but I waste no time, devouring it with the veracity of someone who clearly



hasn't eaten in two days. I can feel Auren's eyes boring holes into me, judging me, but I ignore him.

"Not quite the proper lady you carried yourself as earlier," he mocks once I've finished eating.

I feel my cheeks flush bright red, and I stammer out a weak, mumbled "I was hungry", which is true. Clearing my throat, I add, more strongly, "I'm deeply sorry, but I was disadvantaged by my ravenousness. Now that it is no longer an issue, I assure you I am more than sufficient to play the part."

He smiles at my over-the-top portrayal. "Be that as it may, you are still a prisoner in my care. A position not well liked among the court's men, as I understand it."

"Perhaps." I have no idea what this game devolved into, to be honest, but Auren gives a sly smile before hiding it as he turns away, returning the cell to its previously quiet, isolated self. I sit on the bed, knees pulled up to my chest, rocking forward and backward as I daydream. Eventually, I get a brief message from Isolde: *We just made it to Steilla. We'll quickly settle in, then proceed onto the hearings. There's one before you, then you, then Sonya.* I indicate my understanding and return to my reverie, anxiously awaiting what's to come.

It's only about an hour, though it feels like days, before a second guard comes down to my cell. I strain my ears, but his words to Auren are too quiet for me to hear. He raps on the bars of the cell with his baton, signaling me to follow. When the door is opened, he kneels down to attach a ball and chain to my right ankle, the cold iron digging painfully into my skin. Auren indicates the way, and I follow, shackled, escorted by the two guards. They really don't trust me, do they?

My heart races, pounding twice for every echoed slap of my feet and the grinding of the iron ball along the floor. I force

myself to focus on these latter sounds in a failed effort to distract myself. What am I going to say in my defense? Akàné is actually right in her accusations. And, if I'm honest, this isn't exactly how I'd choose to meet the King and Queen.

We take a convoluted, twisting path through the dungeons that I couldn't hope to remember, which is probably the point. This hallway looks the same as every other, but its mouth feeds outside. When we reach the end, the harsh midday sun blinds me before I can notice that this is the central courtyard of the palace. Ivy clings to the marble walls, giving the castle an alive, veined texture.

We walk through an elegant door, then down another hallway, the walls coated with historic wallpaper. Auren opens a door to our left, leading to a large ballroom that has been converted into a hearing chamber. The Monarchs sit on a raised platform at one end; the prisoner, flanked by three guards, and the accuser stand before them. A few members of the Royal Front, easily recognizable by their uniform, stand behind the Monarchs, and many other advisors and aristocrats seated on the room's perimeter.

I shiver as the King's voice booms, filling the room with echos as he pronounces the hearing's verdict: "Marcus Shay, this court finds you guilty—without repeal—of the crimes heretofore discussed. You are sentenced to execution, to be enacted within one week, and imprisonment in a solitary cell in the interim. This hearing is dissolved."

Marcus's guards begin to escort him out of the room, clearing the space for me. As they leave, Marcus fights his restraints without success. "I ain't ever eaten cheese in my life!" he yells. "In my life! You can't kill me before I get to try some cheese!" When his party reaches mine, he looks over at me with an

unsettling smile. "Have you ever eaten cheese, little miss?"

"Uh... yeah?" is all I can get out in my confusion.

"Not me. I ain't ever eaten cheese in my life! You should buy some peppers, though!" As his guards continue escorting him, a bit more forcefully now, out of the ballroom, he continues rambling to himself. "I ain't ever eaten cheese! Not cheddar, not provolone, not..."

In the doorway, the guard who shackled me looks after Marcus with disdain before staring me down. "You are about to meet the King, Queen, and Fair Princess," he says, his words sharp and clear. I glance down at myself, suddenly very conscious that I'm still wearing my nightgown. Comfortable, but not quite court-appropriate attire. I'm not even wearing a bra. "You would do well to act accordingly. Do you understand?"

I force myself to nod. My heart racing even faster than before, I take a deep breath to stabilize myself, but the stakes of the situation newly wash over me, more sharply realized after Marcus's sentencing. I feel a gentle warmth as Isolde reaches out, her voice calm and comforting, drowning out the waves of noise in my head. *Shh, it's okay, Elena. You're not in this alone.*

She's right, of course. Another deep breath, and I square my shoulders, nodding. *Thank you, Isolde*, I whisper back to her. *Just don't judge my choice of wardrobe or anything*, I add with a smile only she can see.

*No promises*, she laughs.

"The court's hearing of Mia Sameri shall now commence," I hear the Queen announce, and my two guards escort me to the front of the room to stand just a few meters from the Monarchs. Unsurprisingly, Akàné steps forward as my accuser as well. She shoots me a glance that combines pity and an unabashed sense

of superiority. I simply turn away.

“Defendant, what is your defense?” the King asks me, his dark eyes drilling holes in my skull. I freeze, incapable of feeling much anything but fear in his presence.

*It’s a trap, I hear Isolde say in my head. Ask to hear the charges first.*

My voice is embarrassingly small when I speak, and it trembles along with my hands. “I-I’d like to hear the charges brought against me before I make a statement.”

Isolde nods her head almost imperceptibly, mouthing something silently, and suddenly, the majority of my fear and nerves are gone, replaced by a calm serenity. *Thanks, I say.*

*It’s a calming spell: “ivos thima”, she replies. Whatever you do, don’t use magic during this hearing, though. They’re going to be watching you.*

I wonder why she can use magic on me, though my question is interrupted by Akàné listing my charges. “This here is not Mia Sameri, as she claims,” she begins, “but Elena Vardis, of Rædes. Moreover, Elena is also not a Sister of St. Marie’s Convent, despite her claims to the contrary. As such,” she continues with a devious smile aimed at me, “she is charged with Impersonation.”

“Is this the only charge brought upon her, Lady Verrader?” the Queen asks.

“Hardly, Your Majesty. She fled Rædes along with Sonya Nederaï, and used this false identity to enter Catens. Most importantly, Sonya never completed Aramoth, so Elena is further charged with first-degree Criminal Enabling.”

I’m aware that she works in information, but I have no idea how Akàné knows all of this information. Fortunately, Isolde’s spell keeps my heartbeat steady.

The Monarchs look at each other before glaring at Akàné.

King Lance leans forward in his throne. "Neither of these are charges that could not be tried at the city courts," he says, clearly impatient.

My accuser bows in faux humility. "Of course, Your Grace." She shoots me a glance that condemns me more than her words do. "She is also charged with Heresy on account of being a theria, en route to the islands of Thessia." The hall is filled with a deafening silence at the conclusion of this last accusation. There had been some mumbling among the spectators before, but each is now silent, shocked.

Everyone's eyes are on me—the young girl in shackles and a mere nightgown.

Akàné breaks the silence, her voice filling the space despite its now lackluster volume. She looks at me with a sly smile, knowing she's beaten me. "I only wish that Lightness possess what power it must and that Darkness be given Nightmares."

Isolde's face betrays a mix of surprise and shock for an instant before she regains control, and a deep part of me shares the same sudden recognition. That was Inoire's motto. Akàné must be working for Inoire, which might be how she learned everything.

The Queen speaks next, her voice sharp and direct. "Mia Sameri. How do you plead to these charges?"

*Do I have any chance of defending myself here?* I worriedly ask Isolde.

Her voice is quiet when she answers. *If she was able to figure it all out, probably not.*

*What's the execution method?*

*Poison.*

I consider this for a moment. *Can we convince Auren to help us? I have an idea.*

She scoffs. *Of course. I'm the princess. What's your plan?*  
*You're not going to like it.*

Everyone's eyes are on me—the young girl in shackles and a mere nightgown. The young girl with eyes of steel.

I stand up tall, proud. My eyes focus on the King and Queen.  
“I am guilty as charged, Your Grace.”

## Encaged

It's probably not very often that people freely admit to heresy charges.

So it's unsurprising when the whole room does a double take when they realize what I've said. I hear a quiet cacophony of shock from the spectators and smile at their confusion.

Isolde is the first to react. *You're right*, she says bluntly. *I don't like that plan.*

Her mother, Queen Riviera, is the first to speak aloud. "Is that so?" Her words flow slowly from her mouth, and she leans forward in anticipation, eyebrow raised. "Personally, I find it hard to believe. We haven't seen a theria in, well, how long's it been?"

Though her question is obviously rhetorical, I choose to answer anyway. "At least four centuries, Your Grace. Before the great Continental War. It would have been Estènne Cerveille, who was tried for heresy by the ruling monarchs of the time." I think I'm enjoying this a bit too much, thanks to Isolde blocking my fear. "Though, she was acquitted, so it may be true that no Incerin therii have ever existed." Apart from, of course, Isolde,

my mother, me, and who knows how many other secret therii there have been over the years.

"You know your history," Riviera says, leaning back. It's not a compliment. "I would imagine you'd know the punishment, then, for being a theria." She looks at me with piercing eyes as I nod slowly, and her voice is just as sharp. "Consequences known, will you alter your testimony?"

I feel a pang of concern from Isolde. *We're taking a huge risk here, El.*

*Calm down, little princess, I say. Dead people can't escape from prison. Fortunately, poison's a relatively easy death to fake.*

Isolde considers this for a moment, weighing the options. *You're ostensibly executed, and they have no reason to suspect your escape.*

*Exactly.*

I can feel her forcing herself not to roll her eyes at me as she sighs. *Fine*, she finally says.

Smiling, I reach for my thesis. "Ínar."

With that single word, a blue flame appears in my right hand, and my two guards instinctively take a step back in a mixture of surprise and fear. Just as quickly, however, they've drawn their swords on me. I hear gasps from the onlooking crowd. Glancing over at Akàné, I can see a smile teasing her face.

The King raises his voice to re-usurp control over the room. "Order!" The room goes deathly quiet, and I feel everyone's eyes burning into me hotter than my fire was. "Elena Vardis, you are hereby found guilty of heresy, to be punished by death at this week's end, imprisoned for the full interim. Dismissed!" Each of my two guards roughly grabs one of my arms. "There will be a fifteen minute adjournment before the trial of Sofie Ressena," the King adds as I'm led out of the room.



My sentence means I have the rest of today and tomorrow, then I'll be executed at the end of the third day. Isolde releases her calming spell, though I don't feel as nervous as I probably should given the situation. Auren's dark glare at me almost seems to be hiding a pained expression, as if I had somehow betrayed him. However, I need to deal with Sonya before anything else.

I call out to Isolde once again. *We need to help Sonya.*

Disconsolately, she responds simply. *I'm not sure how, to be honest.* After a moment, she elaborates. *You obviously can't talk to her, and I won't be able to get close to her without arousing suspicion in my parents.*

Her words renew my anxiety. Sure, I'll be able to escape, but Sonya is facing one of two likely outcomes—one: imprisonment here in Steilla; two: being sent home to her father in Rædes. Probably both, actually. And it's not like her father is going to be any nicer to her now that she's run away. Either way, it would be a lot more difficult for Sonya to escape—plus, it would just put an even larger target on her back if she did.

And this whole situation is my fault. Sure, she wanted to leave Rædes but... I'm the one who convinced her to leave the way we did, I'm the one who dragged her on this adventure halfway across the world, I'm the one who likely drew Akàné's attention, I'm the one who led to us being imprisoned by trusting her...

I can tell Isolde wants to say something to comfort me but is unable to. I sigh and force myself to return my focus to the world in front of me. The cold metal door of my cells rests alone at the end of this hallway. I just have to make it a few more days in here. On the other hand, that means we only have a few more days to figure out and execute my escape. I sneak a glance at Auren and notice his eyes staring angrily ahead. I recognize

that expression: it's the same one I mask myself with when I'm trying to pretend that my surroundings aren't frustrating me.

As we reach my cell, I feel Isolde pull away, her focus stolen by Sonya's trial. A knot tightens in my stomach, but I try to ignore it. The second guard, whose name I still don't know, unchains my ankle and roughly shoves me through the door before turning around without a word. I sit down on the floor, my back against the "bed", watching Auren. He's facing away from me, eyes on the hallway beyond the metallic barrier.

I clear my throat. "Auren, I—"

"Shut up," he interrupts sharply without turning around.

"No, I—"

I hear a metallic scrape. "I said, shut up!" He's facing me now, leaning inward towards the bars. I look down and notice that he has pulled his sword halfway out of its scabbard. His breaths come in huffs as he continues. "If you don't stay quiet, I'll... Well, it won't end well for you," he stammers out.

I study his face a moment to gauge how serious he is. He's certainly angry, but he wouldn't actually kill me. Confident in this, I stand up and take a few steps toward the door. "You know, threatening someone who's already marked for death seems a bit silly," I say, rolling my eyes. He flinches, tenses, as I reach through the bars and place my hands upon his sword arm. Looking into his eyes, I tell him, "You're clearly upset with me."

He pulls away from me, hand still on the hilt of his sword. "What gave you that idea?" he asks dryly.

"We seemed to be getting along earlier just fine," I continue as if he hadn't spoken. "What changed?"

"You mean other than that I learned you were a dangerous theria?!"

"I'm not sure if 'dangerous' is the right word," I say modestly with a smile. "Regardless, you seem to have taken this quite personally."

"You summoned a fistful of fire in the courtroom!"

"With no intention of harming anyone. Look," I continue with a sigh. "If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't be trying to have a civil conversation with you. So, what is it?"

He turns away, and much of the harshness in his voice vanishes. "Why'd you do it?"

"Huh?"

"From what I gather, most people don't just freely admit to heresy charges like that," he clarifies, turning back toward me. I can feel his eyes boring into me, and I'm suddenly self-conscious about my state of dress again, blushing slightly.

I look Auren deep in his eyes. "This stays a secret," I say slowly and carefully. "Got it?"

He nods. I'm still hesitant, and I sit down on my bed before speaking. "Akàné was totally right about everything she said," I manage to get out. "And if she was able to figure all of that out, I didn't stand a chance at winning that trial." A sad smile traces itself on my lips. "Plus, it might take some pressure off my friend Sonya."

Auren leans his back against the corridor's wall. He's still gazing curiously at me, but it doesn't feel as brute-force invasive as before, despite his questioning. "But why commit the crimes in the first place?"

Again, I take a moment before responding. "I was hoping to avoid this whole situation," I say finally, gesturing at my surroundings. "I was hoping to make it out of Incerin without drawing attention. Thessia won't judge me for being a theria." A dry chuckle escapes me. "Of course, that didn't quite happen."

“As for helping Sonya,” I continue. “She’s been my best friend for years, but her home life... has never been great. As children, we’d always dreamed of escaping Rædes together and traveling the world, always searching for a new adventure.” I lay down, staring up at the ceiling as I reminisce. “In particular, we were obsessed with the Thessian legends. ‘Wouldn’t it be cool to have magic powers, to be the heroïnes like in the stories?’ we’d ask ourselves.” I let out a sigh. “But we were kids, you know? The legends obviously weren’t true. And even if they were, we wouldn’t get to be part of them. We’re just two normal girls in a normal city in a normal country, after all.

“Then tensions between Sonya and her father came to a head, and I learned that I am a theria.” I should feel uncomfortable releasing this secret to Auren, but it’s strangely cathartic. “So, we both needed to leave our home behind. I feared that if I couldn’t learn to control my power, I’d hurt someone and draw too much attention. And Sonya deserved an escape from her father. She hasn’t completed Aramoth, so we had to get a bit creative in order to actually leave Rædes. We traveled for a while, and now we’re here.” Story finished, I sit up to face Auren, who is clearly taken aback by my recounting. And that’s even leaving out the important parts, like meeting Isolde and Estènne and needing to stop a prophecy and all that.

He lowers his head. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “I shouldn’t have so quick to judge you. I...” he trails off, and it’s a moment before he begins again. When he does, his words are slow and laced with sadness. “I had a younger sister—Adriana. We were always best friends, inseparable. When we met this morning, you reminded me a lot of her. Despite myself, I...” He’s embarrassed now, shifting his weight back and forth. “I loved Adri. I miss her so much that I guess I was pretending

that you were actually her.” He uses his left hand to wipe away a tear and turns to face me. “So when everything went down in the trial, I felt like you—she—betrayed me by being the ‘bad guy’ or whatever, and I couldn’t take it.”

I don’t know what to say. All I can manage to get out is a quiet “I’m sorry.”

Auren puts on a genuine smile through his tears. “What’s funny is just how similar you two are. That yearn to leave home and adventure, that drive to help others. You even look kinda similar, what with your stature and long brown hair and that cute smile and... well...” he finishes uncomfortably, embarrassed once again.

“What happened to her?” I ask gently after a moment’s pause.

His smile fades. “She passed away from illness a few years ago. She was only fifteen. Couldn’t even make it out of our little town near Vasen before she died.”

I get up and walk over to him, grabbing his hand once again. “I’m sorry,” I tell him again, stronger this time.

He takes my hand in his and squeezes gently. “Me too. She didn’t deserve her end, and you don’t deserve yours. I wish there was something I could do to help...”

I look at him mischievously. “Hold that thought.”

\* \* \*

*Ugh, sometimes I hate being a princess,* I hear Isolde say with annoyance, pulling me out of my daydream. It’s a few hours after my trial ended, and I haven’t heard from her since.

I smile, knowing how often she complains about it. *Only sometimes?*

She simply ignores my comment and continues complaining.

*Always so many things to do, and I never want to do any of them.*

*I think a lot of people would love to trade places with you.*

*Are you one of them?*

I can't help but continue teasing her. *Are you in a maximum security jail cell, Fair Princess?*

*That's not... I-I mean...* she trails off.

*I know*, I tell her with a giggle. As playfully sarcastic as she always is, it's fun to flip the tables on her every once in a while. *If it makes you feel any better, with any luck, neither of us will be in this position for much longer.*

She sighs. *I hope so.* After a pause, she continues. *Speaking of, we need to work out how we're going to get you out of here.*

*It seems like Auren wants to help.* I briefly recount the conversation I had with him earlier. *I didn't give any details about the plan, just that I was working on one. He doesn't know you're in on it, either.*

Isolde considers this for a moment. *That should cover your escape; we just need to figure out how you're going to, you know, not die first.*

I know this is an important thing to work out, but at the moment, I'm more concerned about Sonya's trial. *Before we do that, what's going to happen to Sonya?*

*As much as she might hate her father*, Isolde says, *in this situation, she's lucky to be his daughter.* Sensing my confusion, she explains, *My parents can't make an example of Sonya because of her father's influence: he'd get upset and only cause more problems for them. So, she's getting off pretty lightly given her crimes.* There's a pause before she continues. *She was given a choice. One: imprisonment here in Steilla for six months before returning to her father's care in Rædes with a small amount of community service work required after that.* She pauses again, making sure I understand. *Two:*

*One year's imprisonment in Steilla with a concurrent work program, gaining her freedom at her term's end.*

Isolde was right: those are two fairly generous offers. I mean, they're both undesirable, but given the alternatives... Harboring a capital criminal like me would normally come with a pretty heavy cost. *She chose the second one.* There's no doubt in my mind, even given the longer sentence. I sigh. She didn't deserve her previous life in Rædes, but she also doesn't deserve this. *How does she feel about this?*

*I obviously can't read her as well as you can, Isolde says, but she didn't act terribly upset. She was calm and composed, and she accepted her sentence without outward complaint.*

I sigh again. I really need a way to talk to her, figure out what we're going to do. I can easily coordinate with Isolde, but, as it stands, it's impossible for me to communicate with Sonya at all.

*Are you planning to help her escape?*

I find myself holding my knees tucked against my chest, and my voice is quiet when I respond. *She doesn't deserve this, Isolde.*

*I know, she whispers back. It's late, but I'll try to go talk to her tomorrow morning for you.*

*Thank you. I'll owe you after all this.*

*Just kidnap me, and we'll call it even.*

\* \* \*

One minor problem with being in a dark cell with no windows is that you never know what time it is. So, when I wake up, I have no idea how long I was asleep. I was so worried about what is going to happen to me, to Isolde, to Sonya in the next few days that I lay on the bed for what felt like hours before slipping away; now, my thoughts are blurry and my eyes are

heavy, so I probably wasn't asleep very long. The guard posted at my door is not Auren, but whom I assume is my night shift guard.

I groan as I sit up. "What time is it?" I ask the guard, who simply ignores me, continuing to stare into the depths of the hallway. I repeat the question slightly louder, but he continues to ignore me.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I am a prisoner who's to be executed in a few days, after all. It explains the general lack of humanity of my imprisonment: isolated life in a small, dark cell whose only furnishings are a toilet in the corner and what might generously be called a bed, though I'd describe it more accurately as a stone slab. My shoulders are sore from laying on it. Since I don't need to impress anyone, I've also not been given a change of clothes, so I'm still wearing just my nightgown from two nights ago.

What's worse, however, is the boredom. Many people complain about not having enough time in their life, that there aren't enough hours in a day. Never before have I been so acutely aware of how wrong that sentiment can be. There are certainly a lot of hours in a day. You can only sleep for so long, and then you're left to fill your waking hours somehow. Worrying only fills so many before you risk insanity. I've nothing to work on, no one to talk to. I can't plan my escape without Isolde or Auren or without knowing what will happen to Sonya. So I do what I can.

I wait. Count the bricks in the wall, the heartbeats pounding against my chest. There's nothing happening in or around my cell, so I wait until Auren shows up or until I hear from Isolde.

Eventually, my patience is rewarded by Auren's arrival. He and the other guard exchange a few short lines before Auren



dismisses him. I walk up to the barred wall.

"How are you holding up?" he asks me once the night shift guard is out of earshot.

I take a moment before answering, struggling to articulate myself. "Anxious," I finally say. "I don't know what to do besides worry about what's going to happen, but worrying isn't going to change anything."

"Well," he says quietly, even though we're alone. "If you're still trying to figure out how to get out of here, some worrying might be prudent."

"I need more information before I can figure anything out." After a pause and a mischievous smile, I add, "I'm hoping that I'll be getting that soon."

His confusion is evident. He doesn't know about Isolde, after all. "From where?"

"Classified." I giggle as I turn away, throwing my hair over my shoulder as I return to sit down on the bed.

"Isn't that my line?" he laughs.

"I'd like to protect my source until things are a bit more settled. Plus," I add with a genuine smile, "I don't want to get you involved until I have to."

His confusion is still evident. How could I possibly have a source of information? It's not like anybody else is going to come in and tell me things. "Magic, I assume?"

"Maybe," I say in a false shyness. I'm not sure why—he's seen me use magic before, but it still somehow seems weird for me to say out loud.

"Well, I'll be here to help once you let me," he reminds me.

"And I genuinely appreciate that," I tell him. "I've only been here one day, and I'm already eager to get out."

*I think that's the point of the punishment,* Isolde says. I didn't

realize I was also projecting some of my thoughts to her. *Either way, Brangaine and I are on our way to talk to Sonya.*

*Okay. Let me know what you find out, I say. I'll, uh... Well, you know where to find me.*

*Will do. I'd also like to meet the guard who'll be carrying your lifeless body out of here. Just to see if I trust him.*

"Elena? Are you okay?" Auren's words cut through my conversation with the princess and I realize that I've spaced out on him.

I'll talk to you later, then, I tell Isolde, then return my attention to my cell. "Y-Yeah," I say unconvincingly to Auren. More strongly, I add, "Yeah, I'm fine. Just spaced out for a moment."

He looks at me with concern, but doesn't say anything further. Our conversation at a lull, we leave the other to their own devices. I'm excited: Isolde is coming soon. I sit on my bed, rocking back and forth in anticipation. A short time later, she signals that she's on her way, and I move to the door of my cell.

Auren and I both notice the princess and her guard coming around the bend in the hallway. As the two approach, Auren stands at attention, hand raised in a salute.

"Fair Princess Isolde," I curtsy. "Sir Brangaine." Auren seems surprised by my recognition of Brangaine, but any question he would ask is interrupted by Isolde.

"They still haven't given you a change of clothes, have they?" she asks jokingly. For her part, she's wearing a beautiful deep purple dress that reaches her knees, a white sash around her waist, and white heels that clack loudly against the stone floor. It's a far cry from my current ensemble.

"I thought I told you not to judge."

She motions to Brangaine, who pulls some clothes out a bag, handing them to me. "And, as you might recall, I made no

promises,” she says, a playful smile across her face. I pull apart the pile of clothes, noticing two full outfits. “I had to guess on your sizes, but I’m pretty sure I got close.” I grab a pair of jeans, a light pink linen shirt, a set of undergarments, and a hair ribbon, placing the other outfit on the bed. Isolde incites the two men to turn around while I change, though it still makes me uncomfortable to be completely naked while they’re nearby, even if it’s only momentarily.

“Thanks, Isa. This is great,” I say as I try to hug her through the bars once I’m done changing.

“As is that nickname. You know,” she says with a slightly sad smile, “most people don’t have the nerve to be so informal around me.” She turns to Auren, who has been completely silent since she arrived. He has dropped the salute, but there’s a tenseness in his body. “Is this him?” she asks me. When I nod, she continues. “Auren, I’ve been told you’re planning on helping this little birdie escape her cage. Is that true?”

“N-No, Fair Princess!” he exclaims hurriedly, his composure broken. “I would never do such a thing!”

Brangaine sighs and puts his hand on Auren’s shoulder, looking him dead in the eyes. “You just saw Isolde’s interactions with Elena. You really think she wants her stuck in here?”

Auren turns to me, eyes wide. “W-Wait! She’s your source!?” Isolde and I nod, surprising him even more. “How’d a capital criminal from Rædes like you end up with the Fair Princess’s support and friendship?!” Turning to Isolde, he asks, “Couldn’t you do something about her sentence, then?”

It’s Isolde who answers. “You’ve met Elena: You should have figured out that therii aren’t universally evil.” She sighs. “I knew she was one when we met, before her trial.” A frown crosses her face. “The trial, however, was the first time my parents learned

of her, and they aren't so keen on keeping a theria alive. I, on the other hand, need her neither imprisoned nor dead." She looks pointedly at him, adding, "I'm counting on you."

"So what's the plan?"

"It depends on what's going on with Sonya," I say, looking expectantly at Isolde.

She sighs, and it's a moment before she answers. When she does, she doesn't make eye contact. "She doesn't want rescued, El. I..." She seems to be choking on her sentence, unable to get the words out.

Brangaine steps forward, answering for her. "She wants to serve her prison term and gain her freedom of her own accord."

I'm stunned. "A-Are you serious?"

He nods. "She said that she really appreciates you helping her get out of Rædes but that your... mission... is more than she bargained for." He pauses a moment before continuing. "She realized that what she wants is a peaceful life where she doesn't have to worry for her safety. Escaping from prison puts that at risk."

"She also said," Isolde adds, "that it's the hardest decision she's had to make, that she's been fighting herself about it ever since you reached Catens. Our meeting was the first turning point; being imprisoned was her breaking point. She... She only wishes she could have told you herself."

I don't know what to say. I absently notice that tears are running down my cheeks, but I don't care. "I..." I sit down on the bed, face buried in my hands. I suppose I shouldn't really be surprised: Sya was always one who wanted to follow the rules. She wanted to convince her father to let her go rather than force his hand. So, it makes sense that she'd want to serve out her sentence. I feel like it's all my fault though, and I can't

just let her go like this.

I feel a small hand against my back. “Shh...” It’s Isolde. She must have had Auren open the barred door to let her in. I didn’t even notice. She wraps her arms around me as I let my head fall on her shoulder.

*I can’t just let her go like this.*

“I know,” she whispers in my ear, starting to rock back and forth. “She was adamant about making sure you knew that none of this is your fault. When you left Rædes, she wanted to come with you, and she’s grateful. But she also knows this isn’t her fight.” She raises my chin with her hand, staring into my eyes. *Her exact words were “It’s not your fault, you silly wolf, and you know that.”*

I take a deep breath, still a bit shaky. The two guards are just watching us, unsure of what to do or say, but I barely even notice. “I can’t just leave her half the world away, Isolde.”

Her words are simultaneously eager and hesitant. “I... might have a solution to that,” she says slowly. “It’s not ideal, but it’s better than nothing.”

That’s enough to pique my interest. “What is it?”

*I still don’t want Auren to know that I can also use magic, so play along,* she says. Out loud, she continues. “The problem is that you can’t create a certain ‘bond’ with Sonya like you were able to with me, right?”

I nod. “Yeah. It only works with certain people. Some sort of compatibility thing, I think.” That’s technically true, if slightly misleading.

*Good.* “And you remember that one communication spell you used the first time we met?” *How you projected Estènné’s avatar?* “I think you told me that it allows you to project, in some way, your bond with someone.”

“Yes.” I’m still unsure where she’s going with this. “The bond lets me speak directly with someone, and the spell lets me make that visible so anyone else in the room can speak to them as well.”

“I’ve done some research—” *by talking to Estènné*—“and I learned that you should be able to store some of your power in gemstones so that you can use it later. And,” she continues, “you can create a spirit to inhabit the gem, casting a single specified spell when activated, drawing upon the power you stored.”

It takes me a moment to process this complicated setup. “So, if I stored power in a gem, created an inhabiting spirit, and gave it to Sonya, she could activate it, effectively casting whatever spell I instructed the spirit to use?”

Isolde nods. “In particular, if you could bond with the spirit—and as its creator, there’s not a compatibility issue—it could cast that projection spell, allowing the spirit to project its bond with you to Sonya.”

Auren, who has been silently watching this conversation unfold, finally speaks up. “I’ll admit, I have absolutely no idea what you two are going on about. That sounds remarkably over-elaborate, though.”

“I agree,” I tell him. “But the only way to really communicate over a long distance, barring sending a letter or something, is through magic.”

“And this plan is about granting Sonya—someone who’s not a theria—access to magic,” Isolde adds. *There are a few drawbacks to this plan, she tells me. Sonya won’t be able to use it in public, since your avatar would be visible and audible wherever she is. And, because neither she nor the spirit can produce her own thesesis, casting “maisú récon” will drain the thesesis you store in the gem, limiting the number of times it can be used.*

Those are problematic, but I don't have any other options. I sigh. "Okay, I'll do it."

Isolde nods. "Auren, could you go to the confiscation room and retrieve the necklace in Sonya's belongings? She's being held in cell 07A2."

He straightens up, saluting. "Yes, Princess," he says before turning on his heel to complete his assigned task.

Before he can leave, however, Isolde adds, in piercing seriousness, "Just so we're absolutely clear, Auren. None of this conversation is to be repeated to anyone outside the five of us. Ever. Do you understand?"

He tenses, newly nervous. "O-Of course, Princess Isolde. It shall remain a secret."

She scrutinizes him, verifying that he's telling the truth. "Very well. You may go," she says after a moment.

"When will these idiots ever learn that they don't need to try so hard?" Brangaine asks disapprovingly once Auren is out of earshot.

"Oh, come on. Give them some mercy," Isolde answers. "You were the same way once."

"Hmph." He turns to me with a sad smile. "I want to apologize to you on behalf of the Royal Front." He takes his sword from its scabbard and takes a few steps toward me. "Know that Isolde and I will do everything we can to help your flight from here, and that I will support the mission bestowed upon you two by Estègne Cerveille once we escape Vassen. This I swear to you upon my life." As he finishes, he kneels with his head down, holding the sword up to me.

I look over to Isolde in confusion, who nods in assent. Taking the sword, I place its flat edge on each of Brangaine's shoulders in turn, saying "I am truly honored by your service,

Sir Brangaine. Rise and retrieve your blade.” As he does so and returns to the door, I turn to Isolde again. *I thought he was more of the carefree, unceremonial, jokester type.*

*He is, most of the time. Despite what he says, she tells me, he takes his position very seriously. The fact that he so formally professed his support to you is important. He meant what he said about swearing upon his life.* She smiles. *That said, expect a fun traveling companion who just so happens to be quite skilled in combat rather than a stereotypical knight.*

“You two just aren’t what you seem, are you?” I ask, her smile contagious.

“Nope. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Just then, Auren returns with the necklace, handing it to Isolde.

“Thank you, Auren.” She turns to me. “What are you going to name the spirit, Elena?”

“Aurore,” I say after a moment. I’m not great at coming up with names, but I’m happy with this one.

*Then you’ll need to use “né alva ís Aurore” to create it and “flýtt ís thesís verla” to transfer thesís, she tells me, handing over the necklace.* “You know what to do, right?” When I nod, she continues. “Your execution tomorrow will go as anyone would expect, apart from the part where you die, of course. Auren,” she says, turning to face the guard, “she will, however, appear dead. Your job will be to carry her out of the dungeons and out of prying eyes. Officially, you’ll be burying her in the graveyard.”

“Understood, Princess.”

*Isolde, what’s the plan for having me not die when I’m poisoned?*

*Somehow, I seem to recall that you were the one who said faking poison death would be easy, she says with a playful shove. No, I’ll cast a restorative spell on you. It won’t be pleasant, but you need to*



*look dead, even if you aren't.*

I nod, and she stands up to leave. Before she can get away, I wrap my arms around her in a tight embrace. "Thank you, Isa," I whisper.

"Of course. Unfortunately," she says with a frown appearing on her face, "I need to get going. Do what you must. I'll see you two tomorrow." With that, she and Brangaine leave, and I'm left with Auren once again.

He simply stares at me for a few moments, trying to figure out again how words work. "This whole situation... It's crazy."

I chuckle. "That's an understatement. I'm sorry for getting you involved in all this, though."

"Nonsense," he says, looking into my eyes. His words are firm. "Remember, I'm the one who said I wanted to help."

"Look what happened to Sonya, though," I insist.

"And she seems to accept her position. Besides," he says, "I wasn't planning on staying a prison guard much longer anyway. I'm tired of this job. I'm ready to head back home. What about you? What are your plans after this?"

I hesitate before I realize there's not much harm in telling him after everything else he knows. "The Royal Front is going to be in Vasen next week. I'm looking to meet back up with Isolde there."

His face lights up. "Would you want me to come with you? As I said, I'm from a small town near there."

He seems strangely excited about the idea, but he probably shouldn't. "I'm going to be traveling light and swift and drawing as little attention as possible," I tell him. "I don't think you want to. Plus, if we got caught, you'd be in a lot more trouble that way." When his smile quickly fades, I add, "I just don't feel comfortable putting you in that situation—or letting you

put yourself there,” I finish, noticing his intention to interrupt. “That’s all.”

“As you insist, Miss Vardis.” He shrugs. “You can count on me to get you out of here, at least.”

“Thank you. Two last questions: Could I have my bags when I escape? And do you know what happened with my horse?”

He ponders this a moment. “I can stash your bags when I leave tonight where you can get them. As for your horse,” he says, “you should probably ask the princess. I’m not sure.”

I nod and call out to Isolde. *Hey, Isa. One more question: Do you know what happened to my horse, Béo? Will I get to have her back?*

Her response is slow to come. *Brangaine says she was taken to the city stables.*

*So if I want her, I’m going to have to steal her back?*

*Hmm... Maybe not. Brangaine says he might have an idea. I’ll let you know tomorrow.*

*Alright, thanks.*

I guess there’s just one more thing to do.

## Matters of Life and Death

I return my attention to the necklace in my hands and take a deep breath. I'm not quite sure what to expect from this process, to be honest. With another deep breath to settle myself, I reach for my thesis. "Né alva ís Aurore," I whisper. The deep blue gem in my palm suddenly radiates a bright light across the room before settling into a slow, dim pulse. The majority of my thesis has been drained by the spell, which I suppose shouldn't be surprising given that I just created a magical being, but it's a long few moments before I can begin to recover from the light-headedness.

My attention is slowly drawn by a small voice calling out in my head. *Mistress Elena?* Inspecting the garden in my mind's eye, I notice that the voice is coming from a new visitor: a small, feyish creature flitting her wings while sitting on the rim of the fountain's basin.

Approaching, I call out in surprise. *Aurore?*

The one and only! she exclaims with a charming lilt. Sensing my lingering discomfort, concern colors her voice. *Are you okay, Mistress?*

*Y-Yeah, I say unconvincingly. That spell just took a lot out of me. I'm still not entirely sure what happened.*

*You cast a spell, and now I am here, ready to do as you command, Mistress Elena.*

*You don't have to be so formal with me, Aurore. I wonder if this is how Isolde feels when people keep calling her Princess. And what exactly do you mean, "ready to do as I command"?*

*I am a class-one fairy, an "alva" in the magical tongue, she says. We are bound to a creator—you, in this case, ma'am—in order to obey their command. And I am but your loyal servant, Mistress, so the formality is required. You would not disrespect your gods or creators, would you? She can feel my hesitation at the thought of maintaining a servant or slave. That isn't what I had in mind. To be honest, I hadn't even considered that this would be the implication of Isolde's plan. You worry about infringing on my freedom.*

*I take a moment to compose my words. No one deserves being imprisoned or enslaved, I insist.*

*What you are neglecting, Mistress, is that I exist to be useful to you, nothing more. Her eyes drill into mine. Though I may appear to have a complex personality, I am essentially a magical machine. I can sense the object I inhabit and can execute basic spells if you instruct me to do so and provide me a pool of theseris. She can tell I'm still not convinced. You would not wish to prevent me from fulfilling my purpose in life, would you?*

*I'm still troubled by the whole situation. Okay, I say slowly. But if our arrangement ever becomes uncomfortable, then I order you to discuss it with me. Is that understood?*

*Understood, Mistress, she affirms. With a large smile spread across her face, she asks, What would you have me do? What is my mission?*

I'm pushed back to the moments after Isolde told me the news, the same pangs of emotion pulsing through my chest. *I...* My voice catches as I try to explain to Aurore what our project is. *I'm going to be separated from my best friend for a long time, maybe forever. I want to at least be able to talk to her once in a while, and I'm hoping that you can help me with that.* I take a few deep breaths to try to displace the pain in my heart with the air in my lungs. I'm not particularly successful. *I'm going to imbue this necklace with some thesis and give it to her so that you can project our connection to her.*

She rests her hand on my arm, looking sorrowfully into my eyes, but with a glint of hope. *I would be honored, Mistress Elena. Thank you, Aurore.*

\* \* \*

Twelve hours officially remain of my life. Auren returned for his day shift just after daybreak, he said, and my execution is scheduled for sunset, near shift's end. My heart pounds painfully against my ribs. I think it's trying to escape the pain my body will endure later today. Though, given how that would actually kill me, I'm hoping that doesn't happen. Deep breaths, Elena. Deep breaths.

My thesis is still largely depleted from my exertions last night, but with the second spell that Isolde taught me yesterday, I funnel what I can spare into Aurore's necklace. Thin white tendrils subtly swirl across the surface of its deep blue gem, which is still lightly pulsing from Aurore's presence. I'm leaving the necklace with Auren tonight, so the gem will only hold what energy I can give it before then.

It's not a lot of time.

It is, however, quite sufficient time for my impatience to eat through whatever semblance of calm sensibility I could muster. A quick calming spell, the same one Isolde used on me during my trial, is enough to quell my nerves, but it can't do anything for boredom. With the bulk of our plan established, there's nothing for me to do but wait. I'm glad my sentence ends tonight, because there's no way I could endure much more time here without going insane.

\* \* \*

It's been a slow day.

Around lunchtime, Isolde informed me of their failure to return Béo to me. She and Brangaine had planned to arrange for someone to purchase the horse and meet me a mile outside the city walls tomorrow morning, but they couldn't find anyone to be trusted with the errand. Fortunately, Auren reminded us that he's leaving the city soon anyway and that he could bring me my horse in the morning. "I'll use mine as a pack horse and ride Béo as I leave Steilla," he said. "I'll give her to you, then carry on my way, if you insist that you'll be fine alone." I nodded, appreciative. My plan to escape the city doesn't have room to bring a horse, but I'll need one if I'm to get to Vasen on time to kidnap Isolde.

Other than that, I've spent the afternoon alternatively laying mindlessly in bed and pacing around the small cell, the stone floor cold on my bare feet. Isolde brought me shoes yesterday, but I gave them, along with the second outfit, to Auren to put with the rest of my belongings. Today, despite his glances, he hasn't commented on my impatience. Perhaps he just has nothing to say, which is fine with me. It's more attention I

can spend to not freaking out, though I suppose I haven't been doing a great job of that.

Eventually, a small entourage appears at my cell door: the Monarchs Lance and Riviera, Isolde, a trio of guards that include Brangaine, a chaplain, and whom I assume to be the executioner. I pause in my pacing, taking a seat on the bed, as Auren stands at attention. There's an energy in the air now, a heavy tenseness I can almost taste.

It's the King who speaks first: "Elena Vardis." His voice is filled with a derisive, distrusting tone. "The time of your execution has arrived. This you understand, yes?" I nod, my voice caught in my throat. An eyebrow raised, perhaps displeased with my silent answer, he motions Auren to open the door to allow the chaplain to enter.

Given my charges of heresy, I'm not sure whether the presence of a chaplain is particularly apt or merely ironic. He approaches me hesitantly, cautiously. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that he doesn't trust my powers. Not that I have any at the moment—I've spent it all creating Aurore and fueling her gem. It'll be a few days before I'll have fully recovered, even if he can't know that.

Regardless, as he approaches and takes my shoulder in one hand, his knuckles are white from his ever-tightening grip on his necklace. "Miss Vardis," he says, his voice just as tight, "your position is quite a regrettable one, wouldn't you agree?" I answer with a sharp nod. "It is a shame that you have fallen from the righteous path. However," he continues with a slight waver, "though we may not be able to aid you further in this life, we must enable your journey to the next, so that your spirit may rest and be saved."

I suppress a chuckle and an eye roll as I notice the strange

emphasis on the word “must”, confirming that he’s not doing this because he simply wants to save me. That reaction would probably not go over well, so I instead nod solemnly, adding, “All I can do is thank you, gentle sir, for this opportunity. I will not squander whatever futures I may have.”

He quickly finishes his ceremonial and retreats to the corridor. The executioner takes his place, and he isn’t nearly as nervous. He looks me up and down, a neutral expression across his face, as if he’s done this hundreds of times and the whole procedure is trivialized to him. He hands me a glass filled with a red liquid, the poison. “Any last words?” he asks dryly.

“No,” I respond simply.

“Then drink.”

I glance over at the attendants outside the cell and notice Isolde give a subtle smile. *It’s time, El.*

Warmth floods my body as her protection spell takes effect. *Thanks.*

*Don’t thank me yet. This isn’t over, she reminds me. Things are about to...* Her concern carries through her soft voice. *Well, just hold on to me with all your strength.*

I tentatively take a sip of the potion. Against expectations, it tastes almost... pleasant, somehow. I drink the rest of it in just a few gulps, placing my trust in Isolde.

“You will die soon,” the King speaks up. “Until then, it won’t be pleasant.” His voice is sharp and pointed, betraying no sympathy.

“I understand, Your Majesty.” I lean against the wall and close my eyes. I can feel the pain rising from my stomach, the heat crawling through my body. The King wasn’t lying. The pain grows quickly—unnervingly quickly. It feels like I’m burning from the inside out, as if my insides were on fire. The amount



of sensation is overwhelming. I lose track of the pain as it consumes me whole. Even thinking has begun to hurt, each thought a hot knife slicing through my brain. I... can't... form... coherent... thoughts... anymore...

*Hold on to me!* Isolde shouts, the clarity of her voice enough to push back the fog far enough for her panic to grab my attention. *Elena! Just hold on to me!* The raw emotion conveyed is the foothold I needed to concentrate.

Pressing my consciousness into as small a point as possible, I focus on the bright light in my mindsoul: the princess. I reach for her light, attempting to escape the darkness and pain within myself.

The pain is more distant now, dull and aching rather than sharp and agonizing. In its place forms an endless dark and empty abyss that I could all too easily fall into. After another few moments, I feel the abyss stop growing, and I know that means my body is dead, just as anyone else would be after being poisoned. The only thing keeping me alive is Isolde's protection spell—and even then, only if I can keep conscious. Since my mind is not currently in my body, I'm isolated from my senses: I can't see or hear or anything. I can't have any idea what's happening around me.

*Don't worry, El. I've got you.*

I clutch at Isolde with my entire being, our mindsouls overlapping for a time. We experienced something similar when we created our bond the day we met, but this isn't just a passing blur that neither of us expected or were prepared for. She's literally holding my life.

*Is... Is the plan working?* I ask.

*It looks like it,* she says after a moment's pause. *You were just declared dead, and the chaplain finished his duty.*

*And my body?*

*Auren is taking... it? you?... She pauses, confused as to which pronoun to use in this situation. In her defense, it is a weird situation. ...to the graveyard outside. When you feel my spell take effect again, you should be safe to return to your own body without alerting anyone.*

Honestly, I'm struggling to believe this is even working. It would have been entirely impossible without Isolde's and Auren's help. I notice Isa's attention slip slightly as she's called back to her world by her parents. Without as strong of a target to focus on, I make an effort to compensate.

A few moments pass, and Isolde returns her focus to me. And a short time after that, the abyssal chasm between my body and mind weakens, progressively more shallow. *I think I'm alive again.* It's such a strange sentence to have to say. Of course, returning to my body means returning to the frame that just took a poison beating, returning to pain I fled.

Isolde can feel my hesitation. *It hurts now, but the pain will fade,* she comforts. *I promise.*

Still I hesitate a moment before whispering a simple *Okay*. I let go of her, retreating into my own body. Despite the pain, I force myself to lie still to prevent any potential observer to notice that I'm not actually dead. Or... try, anyway, as I subconsciously tense up and gasp loudly. Really subtle, Elena. Fortunately, Auren is the only one here.

"Everything's alright," he tells me, putting his hand on my shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

I groan as I sit up, burying my head in my hands to prevent the world from spinning around me. My limbs are heavy and stiff, a dull ache passing through them while my head and torso blaze painfully in flames. "Ugh," I let out. "I feel like I ought to

be dead or something.”

He chuckles. “I wonder why.”

Once my pain has settled somewhat, I take a look around. I’m in a modest graveyard next to a newly filled hole, the palace a mere silhouette in the darkness. It’s foreboding, even if my intentions are to escape it.

Auren helps me to my feet. “Are you ready?” I nod, and he leads me to where my pack is hidden. Retrieving it, we head toward the exit to the graveyard, where it meets the city proper. We pause, and he looks into my eyes. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Y-Yeah,” I say after a beat. “I’ll be fine tonight.” There’s a protective concern across his face, as if he holds himself responsible for me. “I promise,” I assure him.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning, Elena.”

I nod, then pull the necklace from my neck. *Are you going to be okay, Aurore?*

Her cheerful voice catches me off-guard in the moment. *Yep. I’m honored to perform my duties. Stop worrying about me so much.*

*If you say so.* I pull a journal from my bag, writing a note to Sonya.

Sonya —

*I’ll admit, I wish it didn’t have to be like this. I wish we could have escaped Rædes, even Incerin, together and lived the life we dreamed of when we were kids. But I don’t blame your decision to stay. I wouldn’t force you to come with me even if I could.*

*But I can’t just leave you entirely. Take this necklace*

*again and remember me. Remember how you talked to Estènné when we met Isolde? I've enchanted this necklace so that we can do the same. It only holds so much magic, so we can't waste our opportunities, but that means we can even treasure them more. To activate it, turn the gem in your hands and call out to Aurore, the spirit that inhabits the stone. Obviously, this (and my survival) must remain a secret. I'm sorry.*

*I... I'll miss you, Sya.*

— Elena

I wrap the necklace in the note, placing it in Auren's hand. "Would you make sure this gets to Sonya, please?"

He clasps me on the shoulder again. "I promise."

I hesitate a moment, my feet unwilling to leave. Eventually, I tear my eyes from Auren and turn toward the city. It's time to escape. After a deep breath, I force myself forward without turning back.

The issue that I face is getting out of the city. Both of my identities—Elena and Mia—are known criminal aliases, so I can't simply go through the guarded city entrances. I need to get out without anyone knowing. To that end, I'll be heading through the underground sewer system. It won't be particularly pleasant, but I'll take what I can get. I quickly find an empty street and, in its privacy, change into an old pair of clothes from my bag, replacing them with the gifted outfit I have on. Afterward, I crawl into my new escape tunnel.

My progress is slow. I'd prefer not to linger here, but I'm still shaken up from earlier, and added exhaustion from the late hour isn't doing me any favors, nor is the uneven terrain easy to navigate in the dark. I find myself walking almost mechanically,

one foot after the other without much conscious intention. It's an hour's trek to pass the north end of the city, but I reach the sewers' exit without major incident.

The tunnel's mouth is a large circular opening embedded in the side of a hill. Prison-like metal bars are its teeth, though the gaps are wide enough for someone of my size to easily slide through. I suppose they, along with the opening's height several meters from the ground, are meant to prevent people from entering the city the same way I'm exiting it, but though it's a painful landing, it merely knocks the air from my chest.

After a moment's recovery, I search for a place to camp for the remainder of the night, the moonlight significantly brighter than the tunnel was. Away from the road to avoid suspicion, I find a cluster of trees that should provide sufficient cover. I hungrily scarf down some bread and water from my bag. Unable to keep my eyes open much longer, I quickly fall asleep, even on the hard ground.

## A New City

The ground wasn't worse than my prison cell. Better, actually.

A dull soreness permeates my frame, but I feel relatively refreshed despite myself. The normally mundane mid-morning sunlight is surprisingly striking after being imprisoned in a room without windows for a few days.

A small stream runs near where I camped, and I wash up, another luxury of freedom. The water is cold, causing me to shiver nearly uncontrollably at times, but it's certainly worth it. When I'm done, I just lie on the grass for a few moments, stretching my limbs and drinking the simple beauty of the sky and feeling the way the breeze brushes over my bare skin.

I change into the second of Isolde's outfits, nearly identical to the first. Practical and comfortable, and my feet are thankful for the shoes that are more willing to embrace the rocky ground. Gathering the rest of my things, I grab some more bread from my pack and head out toward the meeting point, a few miles up the road.

The road itself is empty of traffic barring a lone girl bearing no official name or history or even life, a pack slung over one

shoulder, a bow under one arm. I sigh. With Béo, I'll be able to have her carry the pack while the bow sits on my back, but until then, I just have to awkwardly carry it. I haven't used it since Sofie and I were traveling to Catens, when I killed the deer. It was—I count the days in my head—just under two weeks ago, but it feels like it was ages longer than that.

About an hour after I set off, the sun is high in the sky, and I arrive at the farmhouse where I'm to meet Auren. With a wave of nervousness passing over me, I slowly walk up to the door and knock. There's a long pause, and I'm about to knock again when the door finally opens, a middle-aged man standing now in the entryway.

He seems confused by my presence. "Can I help you?" he asks.

"Uh, yeah," I stammer. "A friend of mine told me to meet him near here this morning, and I was wondering if you'd seen him?"

The man's eyes light up. "You're looking for Auren, then?" I nod. "He was waiting a while, so I asked if he wanted to come in. I'll go get him for you."

"Thank you, sir," I say. When he leaves, I let out a sigh of relief. I was worried that something had happened to Auren as a result of him helping me escape. Nothing good will happen to him if either of us gets caught.

The man returns with Auren in tow. The first thing I notice is how different Auren looks without his armor. I'd only seen him in the prison, but now he's wearing a simple outfit of trousers and a dark grey vest over a white shirt. It's strange, really: the armor is designed to be impressive and, yet, I like him better like this.

"Oh, there you are, Adri!" He approaches with a smile and a

quick embrace. For my part, I return the gesture, appreciation and confusion coursing through me. I may have gone by a few names, but Adriana isn't one of them. "I was worried you weren't going to make it."

"I'm sorry. I just got delayed when I was trying to leave this morning." Auren raises his eyebrows, concerned, and I realize that my half-lie is the cause. "Alright, fine. I woke up late." I frown.

He places his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay. Shall we be going, then?" When I nod, he turns back to the other man, thanking him for his hospitality before leading me back out the door and toward the barn on the east side of the house. "The horses are in here," he says, indicating.

"So... Adriana?" I ask slowly once we're out of earshot.

My question doesn't help the situation, as Auren sighs and darts his eyes across the landscape, unable to make eye contact with me. "I didn't know what other name to use."

I can tell he's telling the truth, but much like my comment earlier, this is clearly only part of the story. There's something more going on. While I'm trying to figure out how to put the words together, we reach the barn. Auren opens the door, and I notice Béo on the far wall, standing next to another horse I presume is Auren's. A chestnut stallion by the looks of it, he stands a few hands taller than Béo. She gives a gleeful sound as I approach and pet the side of her face. "It's good to see you again," I whisper.

Auren and I saddle up and return to the road. When we both turn to the north, I shoot him a questioning glance. "I told you," he says. "We're heading to basically the same place. Might as well go together." He shrugs. "Besides, a lone girl traveling the open world is asking for trouble."



Again, this is true, though part of me wants to roll my eyes at the last part, but there's still something he's not telling me. These sound more like excuses to travel with me than his actual motivations, as if he's desperate to stay with me, even if he's playing nonchalant about it.

"And I told you that I don't want to drag you any further into my chaos than I have to. You've risked enough already." I sigh and try to remove the edge from my voice. "I won't stop you, but I'm worried that, along with throwing away your own safety, you might be trying to convince yourself that I'm actually your sister. And," I pause, hesitant. My internal debate tells me to say my next thought, as uncomfortable as it may be. "I'm worried that when we part ways, it's going to be ever the more painful for you."

He's quiet and refuses to look me in the eye. "I..." he says before trailing off and shaking his head.

We continue riding in silence for a few hours, neither of us quite sure what to say. At some point this afternoon, Isolde told me that the Royal Front had left Steilla and would likely arrive in Vasen in two days' time; at the pace Auren and I have been riding, I should reach Vasen tomorrow night, beating Isolde by about half a day.

Auren calls for us to take a break, and I acquiesce despite my eagerness to keep going. The horses drink from the nearby stream as we eat. Throughout the meal, I can feel Auren's eyes darting around, often landing on me for a few beats before darting away again. There's a tension in the air, the casualness that existed between us in my cell now gone. But I'm not going to back down from my accusations. I'm not sure if he had realized quite what he was doing before I'd pointed it out, but it's made things uncomfortable since then regardless. And the rest

of the day passes in much the same fashion. Near sunset, we find a place to camp for the night and each make our preparations for bed.

Once I'm confident that Auren is asleep, under the cover of darkness, I quietly gather my supplies and load everything onto Béo, having woken her with a calming spell. I rip out another page from my journal, leaving a note to assure Auren that I'm safe so he hopefully won't panic when I'm not there in the morning. That accomplished, I hop on Béo and we leave at a gentle walking pace. I'm more concerned about not staying at camp than I am about making up distance, so there's no need to push her right now. In fact, I ride only about an hour before remaking camp away from the road, on the other side of a large hill.

\* \* \*

Deep breaths, Elena.

I feel guilty for abandoning Auren last night, but what's done is done. I can't tell if I'm being selfless or exactly the opposite in denying him his wish for his own good. Who am I, a woman of no name, to decide his fate? But this is my mission and Isolde's, and Sonya's choice to back out of it was an epiphany for me: though we yearn for adventure, Isolde and I are chosen for this path, not inherently the other way around. Maybe that's just the lie I tell myself to avoid guilt over betraying Auren. I'm not sure, to be honest, but I don't really care at the moment.

I just need to get to Vasen. I gather my belongings and set off on Béo. She seemed surprised to see me yesterday, but she's perfectly calm now, even if I were to push her. Not that I need to: we're still on pace to reach the city tonight.

*How's your freedom?* I hear Isolde ask around midday, breaking the silence.

*Aww, is the Fair Princess jealous now?* I reply with a teasing smile.

She lets out a sound of annoyance. *She won't be in a few days' time if her friend can do something about it.* A beat, then she lets up on her pouting. *But no, I was just genuinely asking how you've been.*

I pause, unsure. *I'm glad to be out of prison, but...* I briefly run through the events since I escaped. *I'm just not sure if I'm being unreasonable.*

Perhaps. *But you're not going to go back and find him, are you?* No, obviously not. *Then you have more important things to worry about. Like getting us out of Vasen,* she finishes with a laugh, a mixture of serious and not.

*Right,* I say slowly. *Still working on that one, I'll admit.* After a moment, I ask, *Vasen doesn't know about my arrest and execution, do they?*

*No, it was kept under wraps in Steilla. Why?*

I try to figure out an escape plan on the fly, but none comes immediately, so I resort to a less satisfying answer. *I just wanted to know how much I'm going to need to hide while I'm there.*

*Well, I wouldn't go around using magic if I were you, but otherwise, you should be fine.*

I nod, and the conversation turns less serious and more toward idle chatter, both of us bored in our travels. When I was young, I constantly dreamed of traveling across the world, being part of the theria legends. I'd have been stunned to learn that in the future, when those dreams would actually come true, it wouldn't be nearly as gloriful as I'd envisioned. Everything would be fun, I'd thought, but here I am, tediously riding from

one city to another, entertained only by Isolde's charm. And even that isn't forever, as she drops out from our conversation to bitterly handle her duties as Fair Princess.

And so, I try to have a conversation with Béo, with mixed success. She whinnies and neighs from time to time, but I've little idea what she means to say from them. With a sigh, I resolve myself to the silence of the air broken only by her hooves' percussion as the sun lazily falls toward the horizon.

Once the orange sky fades and the moon is still low, Béo's exhaustion is met with the city walls towering over us. I reach for my bag, ready to pull out my identification papers before a question washes over me: which name am I going with? I've not a lot of time to make the decision.

"Mia Sameri?" the guard on my left asks once I've handed him my papers. When I nod, he continues. "May I ask what you're doing in Vasen?"

I reassure myself that this is normal questioning, especially at a time of day when intercity traffic is low, even with the Royal Front arriving tomorrow. Yet I can't help my pulse quickening. "I'm simply passing through on my way to Lintnor. I'm joining St. Marie's convent there."

"And what of your weapon?" he asks nodding to the bow on my back, suspicious of my answer.

I do my best to adopt an apologetic expression. "My brother insisted I take it with me in case I would need to defend myself. Not that I'm much good with it, but a woman's safety on the roads, you know?"

Returning my papers, the guard nods and waves me through, and I enter the city. What I told them still isn't the truth, and I don't even have the excuse of trying to "escort" Sofie Ressena there. A knot manifests in my throat, another in my chest. It

feels like someone is sitting on me, and I notice my breathing shallow. Yet, despite the apparent pressure, my chest is a void, cold and empty, yet crushed. It's strange.

I focus my attention on finding the stables to house Béo for the night. She's earned some rest. It's an easy search given Vasen's organized layout. The streets are laid out in a square grid, and frequent signs make navigation easier, in some sense, than even my hometown. Once my horse is settled, I set off for the piers. If Isolde, Brangaine, and I are to make it to Thessia, then we're going to need to travel across the sea one way or another.

Just one of those problems with islands, I guess.

The shipyard is on the north side of the city, so I have to do a decent amount of walking to get there, and it's late by the time I reach it. Several ships sit in harbor, but I can't find any workers on the docks due to the hour. I double-check each dock to make sure, but no, no one's here. Frustrated, I sigh. I'd wanted to start trying to resolve the issue tonight to help Isolde and me make our final plans, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

Deep breaths, Elena.

So, I return toward the center of town, mindlessly walking its wide streets by moonlight and whatever light shines through the shops' windows. A breeze ruffles my jacket, and I wrap my arms around my chest as a shiver rushes through me. Eventually, I find the tavern, ordering dinner and a few nights' stay. I find an empty table and zone out, the din of the surrounding tables a wash of white noise as I think about nothing in particular. The food is delicious, but I hardly notice as I feel... it's not a pain, but something else I can't identify... in my chest and an accompanying heaviness to all my limbs. I force the food down,

knowing I have no choice but to eat, and lifelessly retire to bed.  
Falling onto the mattress, my eyelids fall of their own accord.

Things can be solved tomorrow... when Isolde arrives...

## Encore

I wake to the light of the late morning sun streaming through the window, a pulsing pain in my head. With a groan, I sit up in bed, noting that I must have been significantly more tired than I'd imagined to have slept so long. At least I had the wherewithal to undress before falling asleep.

I squint my eyes as I groggily look out the window. The Royal Front's arriving today, and people are fighting their way through the streets to get an early glimpse of them. *Why fight with everyone to just look at the royal family pass by in carriages when you could simply capture one of its members to have all to yourself?* I ask Isolde with a devious chuckle. *Especially the best one.*

*Hmph.* Her voice is dripping with hurt and insult, though I can tell it's ingenuine. *Why, I... I might not even let you pretend to be my servant if you're going to be that way about it!*

*Fine, then,* I snap back, equally ingenuine. *Maybe the princess isn't worth all that effort someone would have to put in after all.*

She gives a playfully frustrated growl and pulls away, leaving me back in the tavern, staring out the window. With a bit more

excitement than before, it's time to see what arrangements I can make to get us to(ward) Thessia. So, after eating a late breakfast downstairs, I head to the docks, though this means that I've now joined the waves of people crowding the streets, except that I'm going against the tide.

When I eventually reach the north end of the city, I'm somewhat surprised to see a few workers walking around the area. Some of them are loading the ships, others are inspecting the vessels, and still others are talking with the captains. A few of them shoot glances at me as I walk to the shipyard office on the west side of the street.

The building is quite small, a single front room with two desks and a handful of chairs and what looks to be a storage room toward the back. At one of the desks, a lone woman sits, looking up from her paperwork. She looks young, just a few years older than me, with simple clothes and short blonde hair. This isn't exactly where I'd expect to find an attractive young woman like her, though I suppose that I'm not the usual customer either.

"Can... I help you with something?" she asks, and I notice that I had awkwardly stopped in the doorway.

Remedying that by walking toward her desk, I answer, "Yeah, actually. I was hoping to get some information about the ships in harbor. Where they're going and when, specifically."

I don't think she can decide whether to be apologetic or suspicious. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm afraid I can't just give that information out to people. Why would you need this?" There's the suspicion I was waiting for.

"I have family in Aspe," I lie. "I got a letter yesterday saying that my aunt is quite ill and is likely to die within a month or two. My sister, my cousin, and I want to go visit her as soon as



possible before that can happen.” I pause, forcing a tear. “I just wanted to know if there were any ships we could take.”

There’s a shift in her expression, leaning back toward the apologetic side of the spectrum, signaling that my story had its intended effect. I’m ashamed of how easy it was for me to lie about the whole situation. “I...” She takes a look around the empty room, assuring her that no one else is here. She consults a stack of papers on the left side of her desk before waving me closer. “Go talk with Captain Kreth,” she whispers. “His is the third ship to the east.”

I give a sincere thanks and head back outside, counting the ships as I approach Kreth’s ship. It’s of medium size, its wooden hull proudly displaying the name *IMS Leliana*. I notice a few shipping crates on deck, being loaded by two workers. “Excuse me. Captain Kreth?” I call out to the man overseeing this operation.

He turns, his silver beard glinting in the midday sun. His eyes seem to be burrowing through me, and I feel naked and exposed. “What’re you doing here, young lass?”

I take a deep breath before explaining the situation, using the same lie I used in the office. “I wouldn’t bother you if it weren’t important for us to leave as soon as possible,” I tell him—and that’s a technically true statement. He still seems uneasy, though his expression has softened somewhat. I reach to my pocket, subtly knocking my purse, the coins inside making a faint clink.

He looks over his shoulders, ensuring that no one can see or hear him. He leans closer to me, whispering, “Well, if you’re coming, then you’re going to need to buy your tickets.” His expression hardens, his teeth bared as he hisses, “But no one is to hear of this. You got that?”

I nod sharply, pulling coins from my purse. “Three tickets

please, sir.”

Once he’s content with the payment, he turns to me with a smile and extends his hand, which I take. “Pleasure doing business with you. We’ll be leaving tomorrow just after sunrise, and you’ll want to be on the ship before then.”

“Understood.” I thank him again, returning his smile. “You have no idea how much of a help this is.” I give another round of thanks before backing away, returning to the city. I find a small grassy area toward the northwest end, and its surprisingly empty. I lie down, embracing the sunlight on my body. Somehow, there’s a bit of peace in the chaos of the world. As I relax, I lazily reach out to the princess. *Isa.*

*El.*

We sit in silence for a few minutes before I tell her the arrangements I’ve made. *We’re leaving at sunrise tomorrow, sis, I finish. So, you’d best be ready for a breakout tonight.*

*I’m looking forward to it, she says with a devious smile. I’ll let Brangaine know. After a moment, wherein she presumably fills in Brangaine, she returns to me. Head to the cathedral around midnight. We might need your help.*

*As you wish, Princess. There’s a tense silence for a few seconds. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.*

*I know, but...* Her voice is small, and I’m suddenly reminded of just how young she is. I’m caught off-guard, since she always portrays a maturity far beyond her years, even despite her near-constant playfulness. *That doesn’t make it any easier.*

*You put a lot of effort into saving me, I remind her. When you held my mindsoul as I died, you didn’t get the impression that I would do anything to return the favor? A beat. You’re not alone, Isa. I promise.*

*Thanks.* As we continue sitting there, words only unnecessary,

her anxiety melts somewhat into contentment before annoyance and frustration pepper her tone. *There's always so much to do around here. I'm not going to miss this part.*

When she lets go, I find myself with the rest of the day before I need to meet her and Brangaine. I could just keep sitting here in the sun, but, with Vasen being the City of Knowledge, it has the largest library in the nation of Incerin. An easy place to while away a few hours. It's in the southwest corner of the city, a relatively short walk from here.

The building itself stands out against the mostly shorter buildings of the city, its elegant brickwork hiding its age. As a cultural center, it escaped destruction during the Continental War a few centuries ago, as not even the neighboring nations in the midst of war could bring themselves to destroy it; even if they had, Incerin forces may even have protected it above militarily strategic positions. It's a large source of pride for the city of Vasen and the nation of Incerin as a whole. There's a certain grace to the structure that demands respect and reverence, in much the same way as the city's large cathedral, which notably didn't survive the war and was subsequently rebuilt.

I roam the shelves, mindlessly scanning hundreds upon hundreds of book spines until I realize that there may well be extant books about the islands of Thessia or even therii from before Estènne's day that escaped censorship. It takes nearly half an hour to find the section I'm looking for among the chaotic labeling of the simply astronomical numbers of books. "Library of Vasen: We might have every book ever written, but you'll never find it in your lifetime," I mutter to myself. Technically an exaggeration, and it's not the catchiest tagline I've ever heard, but it accurately conveys how I feel in

the moment.

I'm more thorough now, carefully reading the titles of each book, inspecting ones that catch my eye. Of course, most of them seem to be indicting commentaries on the untrustworthy Thessians, how magic is dangerous, or biographies of Estènne that brand her as the embodiment of evil, power-hungriness, and heresy. There's one in this last category that draws my attention. It's an ancient leather-bound journal criticizing my childhood idol, but I can't shake the feeling that there's something more to it. This feeling grows ever stronger and stronger as I continue browsing, and I find myself returning to it repeatedly. I flip through the pages, a flash of inspiration hitting me from nowhere. "Lýpto ís alíth lí kirya," I whisper, a shiver passing through me.

As a light shimmers across the book, I drop it and take a step back in panic. My heart rate jumps up in line with my breathing, and I take a worried glance around to make sure nobody saw what happened before refixing my gaze upon the journal now on the floor. I have no idea what my spell did or even how I knew the words. Once my body calms down (which takes an embarrassingly long few moments) and the pages have likewise returned to a more normal appearance, I hesitantly pick it up. The cover looks almost the same, except the title has changed. No longer "She Was Heresy Among Us", but "A Field Guide to Theri Magic". I flip through the pages. The handwriting is completely different, a more flowing script rather than the blocky characters from before. And, just from a quick glance, I can tell that the title change is appropriate. The first division the book is devoted to an abstract description of thesisis and magic in general, and the last division is a long list of spells, carefully annotated. At the top of the list is written

“ivos alith—restore this book to its normal appearance”. When I whisper this phrase, the book returns to its “She Was Heresy Among Us” version.

A magical spellbook! Not quite what I expected to find here, but it’s also way more useful than I what I expected, so I’m not complaining. I take another panicked glance around, my heart pounding as I seek to confirm there’s no one else here. When I’m sure, I quickly pin the thin volume to my back under the band of my bra. It wouldn’t do for anybody to see my stealing books. The leather is cold against my skin and feels awkward as I walk, but I nevertheless hurry to the library’s exit, a not insignificant portion of my consciousness focused on making sure the book doesn’t fall. Any eyes on me feel piercing, as if anyone can instantly read the fear and burning anxiety running through me.

They can’t, of course, but that doesn’t make my flight any easier.

I eventually reach the relative safety of the room I rented at the tavern. With the door and curtains closed, I sit down on the bed, pulling the book from its hiding place. My heart is pounding again, but in excitement this time as I start reading. I want to read it cover-to-cover, but my thoughts are rushing, and I find myself largely unable to focus on the huge blocks of abstract descriptions. Instead, I head to the list of spells at the end, paying particular attention to the ones I think will be the most useful. Hours fly by as I read and reread the spell list, trying to memorize as much of it as I can. I practice whatever spells will neither overly drain my thesis nor draw attention to my room.

Soon enough, the day’s rays have faded, and it’s almost time to meet Isolde. I grab my bag and head downstairs, ordering

food from the bar. No use being hungry in the middle of an extraction operation. Once I'm finished, I double check all my preparations, then make my way to the meeting point. The nighttime wind is cool against my skin, and I have to retie my hair back so that it stays out of my face.

The empty streets do little to ease my worry, simply making me feel as if I'm even more suspicious. This feeling intensifies once I realize I need to get inside the cathedral, which is locked. Just one more crime to add to my list. I check the doors and windows, first making sure no one is inside. I could break down a door or smash a window, but I'm hoping to be a touch more subtle than that. With no obvious way inside, I return to the front door. "Lýo ís daria," I whisper, remembering my studying. With a soft click, the door unlocks. I enter just as quietly, relocking the door from the inside. *I'm in the cathedral*, I tell Isolde.

Her response comes after a few moments. *Find the basement. Brangaine says there's a secret passageway into the palace from there.*

*What about you two?* I ask, concerned.

*I'm the damsel in distress, remember?* She laughs. *I'll be waiting for my knight in shining armor, Elena.*

*Well, I can't guarantee "shining armor,"* I reply, matching her situationally inappropriate joking tone. *But I do have an outfit given to me by the Fair Princess. Does that count?*

A mock sigh. *I suppose it'll have to do.*

I need to find the basement. From the main room, there are two doors in the back and a hallway off to one side. On instinct, I hurry down the hallway to my right, nearly knocking over a chair in the process. With a quick "yfloní lempéa" to provide some light, I quickly explore two of the rooms to no avail before stumbling upon the kitchen, which features a metal door that

leads downward into a cellar. The cellar door is both heavy and stuck, so it's a good few seconds before I can pry it open.

Once I climb down the now-exposed staircase, I'm greeted by a heavy darkness that puts me on edge. Some more fire seems to fix the situation, but I can't shake the trembling in my limbs regardless. I take a deep breath and force myself to calm down, looking around the room. It's rather small, only a few meters across, with stone walls showing signs of age. Shelves line two walls the walls to either side, and the opposite wall seems bare. There doesn't seem to be anywhere to go from here. I'm about to ask Isolde for guidance when I finally see it: there's a thin crack that runs up the mortar between a column of stones. Looking for it, it still took a while to find. Unfortunately for me, it doesn't seem to be able to open from this side.

"Sarkéa ís sena," I whisper, placing my hand flat against the wall. With a sharp crack, a portion of the wall crumbles, leaving a gap large enough to crawl through. The makeshift door hid a long corridor, which I assume leads into the palace. A lever sits on one side, connected to a swinging hammer that would destroy the wall in much the same way I did. The passageway itself is relatively narrow, but it makes up its volume from its sheer length. Even at a brisk walk, it's a full ten or fifteen minutes before I reach the end, the path never deviating more than a few feet in any direction. It's a marvel of engineering, actually.

Everything must end, however, and I find myself against a metal, barred gate much like the one in my prison cell. On the other side appears to be a small square room like the cathedral's cellar, a staircase leading upward on the opposite wall. I notice a lever opposite me as well, its handle pointed away. I grab the rope from my backpack and tie a loop in one end. It takes a

few tries (and some magical cheating), but I'm finally able to fix the loop on the handle, pulling it into the unlocked position, which raises the bars. Replacing the rope in my bag, I return the switch to the original position, just in case someone comes down here and sees the open gate.

I take a deep breath and a glance at the door above me. It almost certainly leads into the palace, but I don't know where, or if it's safe to enter without drawing attention. *Isa, I'm still in the basement, but I think I've made it to the palace.*

*I'd hoped to be done with this by now, but I'm going to need your help with another small operation,* she tells me with a sigh. *I'm trying to find some documents that detail the Royal Front's secret plans.* She pauses to catch her breath. *Plus, Brangaine got stuck on guard duty somewhere in the palace, so we need to find him, too.*

*Got it.* I open the door above me as quietly as I can, finding myself in the palace kitchen. Replacing the door, I take a look around. The dark room doesn't seem to have anyone else in it. Just me. *Found the kitchen. That's going to be our escape route. Where do you need me?*

Her response comes after a few seconds of thought. *Head to the library on the second floor. I'll meet you there.* Ah, another library for today.

I take a few deep breaths to steady myself. This is going to be a true test of stealth. Two exits stand before me, on opposite walls. On a whim, I take the one to the left, which leads to a dark corridor. Following it, I find myself in a large banquet hall, a few torches lining the walls. Even though it's the middle of the night, I'm surprised that there isn't a celebration of the royal family's arrival. Not that I'm complaining. I continue following various corridors, easily avoiding the one guard on patrol I encounter.



Soon enough, I reach the main foyer—an elegantly large room decorated with lavish carpets and statues. A guard stands at the base of the central staircase. As I realize I can't just sneak past him, I feel my heart rushing. Deep breaths, Elena. I just have to incapacitate him, I guess. I scan the room, looking for anything I can use to distract the guard. My eyes light on a torch on the opposite side of the room. "Rafale lí ínar," I say, extinguishing the torch with a small blast of air. As I suspected, the guard looks around the room in confusion before approaching the newly unlit torch. Quietly, I sneak up behind him. Placing my hand against his back, he falls asleep after a quick "sova lempéa". I relight the torch and drag him over to his post near the stairs. If anyone comes by, it'll look like he just dozed off against the railing.

With that, I hurry up the stairs, still in search of the library. Fortunately, finding it is rather uneventful. The library is a large open room, bookshelves lining the walls with a few wooden desks in the room's center. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling. I notice Isolde perusing the shelves on my right, and she runs over to me as I walk in.

"I'm glad you're alright, El," she squeaks out as she buries her face in my shoulder.

As she loosens her embrace and our heads separate, I notice tears starting to form in her eyes. "Yep. All thanks to you, Isa," I tell her, brushing away her tears with my thumbs. "How about I return the favor and get you out of here?"

She gives a grateful nod. *Well, we need to get those documents first. After that, however, I'd love that.* She flashes a cute smile before regaining seriousness. *They're in my father's briefcase, which is in the master study.*

*And? What's the catch?*

She tries to force a smile again to make light of the situation, but it doesn't quite work. *The "catch" is that the door is guarded. And my father is still in there. It's not uncommon for him to sleep in his study, but he may also still be awake. We can't know that for sure.*

This isn't good. *I imagine we don't want anyone to know the documents have been stolen, right?* She nods. *So, like, killing the guards or otherwise causing a scene is out of the question.*

*Maybe not, she counters. Well, killing the guards is, anyway. I have an idea, but it's why I needed your help.* She explains her plan to have me pretend to be a young court lady with news that requires the King's immediate attention. That way, the guards will simply let me into the study. *Once you're inside, you just need to get the documents.*

That's not a terrible plan. *Maybe easier said than done, but let's go for it,* I tell her. Looking down at my clothes, I add, *Can I actually have proper clothes to wear to talk to the King this time?*

*Hey, you're at least wearing underwear this time.* She laughs while I glare at her. *But yes, we'll find you a presentable dress after we write the letter you're showing my father.* She indicates the table behind us, a piece of parchment and a quill sitting at one end.

She dictates the letter for me to write as King Lance would obviously recognize his daughter's handwriting, but he's never seen mine. Nyrah, Incerin's neighbor to the west, is going through rough times. The Nyrian people are disproportionately poor and a large portion of their western coast is ravished with famine, which they believe is Incerin's fault for centralizing continental trade through its networks. As a result, they're planning to force the royal family's hand by kidnapping and ransoming Fair Princess Isolde. The infiltration, performed

by General Resren and a small handful of the top Nyrian spies, is planned for sometime this week, while the family is still in Vasen.

*Two questions, Isa, I say once I've finished writing. One: Won't your father recognize me as the heretic he put to death a few days ago? And two: Is any of this letter actually true?*

She puts her hand on my shoulder. *Don't worry. You'll look different enough to fool him. And no, she says, there's not a Nyrian plan to kidnap me. Not that I know of at least.* She thinks about this for a moment. *Unless you're secretly from Nyrah, I suppose.*

*So why draw attention to our kidnapping plot?* I ask, confused. *I thought we wanted to be subtle, but we're literally warning the king about what we're about to do.*

*The idea, she says, is to give them a false trail to follow so they won't know where I actually am. Hopefully, they blame Nyrah, which is the opposite direction of Thessia.*

I nod. *Makes sense. Let's get me another false identity, then.* Can I ever just be normal girl, Elena Vardis for once? Grabbing the false intel, I follow Isolde as she leads me quietly upstairs to a surprisingly unguarded bedroom. A four-post bed sits in the middle of the room, a painting on either side and an elegant white wooden nightstand on the left. A light veil of dust betrays the fact that no one has been here in some time.

*This was the bedroom of the late Duchess Esra, Isolde informs me. It's gone unused since she died a few years ago, but I reckon the two of you are about the same size, so you can... "borrow" one of her old dresses.* We search the closet for something usable. *This one, Isa says, indicating a dark purple sleeveless dress with a deep but modest neckline, its flowing skirt reaching halfway down my thighs as I hold it up against me. A complementing clutch and heels set the outfit. She helps me into the dress,*

fastening it in the back. It's a bit tight around my chest, but not uncomfortably so, and Isa gives a confident nod of approval. I tie my hair into a ponytail as the princess begins putting makeup on my face. I protest, but she stands firm. *I thought you didn't want my father to recognize you. Besides, you're supposed to be a moderately-high-ranking woman of the court; you have to look the part.*

I smile. *Remind me never to become a princess.*

She rolls her eyes as she details my cover identity. *You are Lady Hestia Holden, recently married to Nyrian noble Sir Adelin Pierce. You, Hestia, overheard your husband discussing the existence of this plot and confronted him for details. She pauses to inspect her handiwork on my face before continuing. He eventually acquiesced, giving you the information he obtained from one of his colleagues. As soon as you were able, you wrote everything down in that letter and came here to inform the King personally.*

I commit these details to memory, nodding. *I, Hestia Holden, shall inform the King, your father, of this plan to kidnap you. I put on a devious smile. And I, Elena Vardis, shall steal the documents in his briefcase undetected.*

*Good.* She puts on the finishing touches to my makeup and, taking my previous clothes in a bag, directs me to the hallway containing the study before we part ways. *I'll go find Brangaine.* As I step forward to begin my mission, she grabs my arms, looking deep into my eyes. *Good luck, El.*

We each take our separate paths through the palace. I put on a panicked expression as I approach the guarded entrance to the study. The two guards step inward, blocking the door. "This study is off-limits, young lady," the guard on the left says, annoyance creeping prominently into his tone.

"I'm sorry, sirs, but I have an urgent message for the King

that demands his immediate attention.” At their disbelieving expressions, I continue. “I wish it were not so, for I would sooner be asleep in my own bed at this hour if this were not important. But, alas, it is!”

It’s clear they still don’t believe me, but the guard on my right speaks up. “What is your name?” he asks, looking me over.

“Lady Hestia Holden, sir.”

“Very well.” He retreats into the study behind him, likely relaying to the King that I am seeking an audience with him. His partner shifts directly in front of me, his eyes burning through me. After a moment, the guard returns, bowing. “You may speak with His Majesty the King, but be brief for it is late and he other business to attend to tonight.” The two part, leaving me a path to the door.

I enter the study, which is surprisingly plain for the master study of a palace. It’s still worlds above my father’s study back home, however: a single large desk occupies the center of the room, a rug beneath it, and several beautiful paintings along the walls in silver frames. The King sits in a high-backed chair at the head of the desk. “Lady Holden, is it? I’m told you have urgent business with me.”

I nod, curtsying. “Yes, Your Majesty. It concerns the safety of your daughter, Fair Princess Isolde.” I pull the letter from my handbag, handing it to him. As I do so, he stares into my face, searching for something. I blush, averting my gaze, and he recoils, his eyes wide in shock.

“N-No... This isn’t possible,” he mumbles. “You’re supposed to be dead! I saw you die!” This is bad. Him recognizing me is bad. “Blasted therii! The heretics won’t even die properly!”

I have two options. I can double down on the lie and try to convince him that he’s mistaken, or I can put him to sleep and

hope everyone else thinks he's a fool when he awakens. "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty," I say in as innocent a voice as I can muster. If he doesn't believe the lie, I can always fall back to plan B. "I know not what you speak of, but I am very much alive, as you can see."

He seems to retreat within himself as his eyes glaze over. After a moment, he returns to normal, nodding. "Miss Vardis, I must admit that I underestimated you. And my daughter, it would seem." Okay, this is really bad. "I don't know how you managed to corrupt her in your... 'fashion', but I now understand her suspicious behavior." He rises and speaks with two voices—one his own, one a menacing female's. "Regardless, you've reached the end of the line, traitorous theria." I attempt to cast on him the same sleeping spell I used on the guard downstairs, but it doesn't seem to affect him in the slightest. There's an arrogance, almost maniacal, in his shared voices now. "You think your measly spells will work on a King with the power of the True Goddess?!"

He's equally immune to a second attempt, as well as to a binding spell. Confusion, fear, and despair quickly fill my heart in equal proportion.

*I guess we've found Corbelle's new host, Estènne says. It's almost bittersweet.*

*Estènne?* I cry out in shock. *What's happening?*

Her voice is firm and unwavering. *I've been manipulating you from the shadows for too long. It's time to fix that.* I suddenly feel a surge of power as she takes a firmer stance in my consciousness. "Yfloní to lí Elena!" she shouts with my voice. I sense a blindingly bright light fill the room, but it makes no impediment to my sight. Recognizing the distraction Estènne has granted, I rush forward and grab the King's briefcase from the table,

retreating out the door. I hear the King yell to the two guards outside, but I quickly deal with them. I rush downstairs to the kitchen, the need for subtlety past.

As I run, Estègne attempts to explain the situation. It seems Corbelle Inoire bonded with the King. She did well, getting into such a position of legal power. She shakes her head in a mixture of frustration and awe. *Based on the fact that he called her "the True Goddess", she likely convinced him that her magical power was divine rather than the same genre as yours. He may even see himself the leader of a holy crusade against the Thessians.*

*And Isolde and me, in particular, I remind her. Are there any non-Thessian therii besides us?*

She takes a moment to choose her words. *Not that I'm aware of. Corbelle does, however, have the power to grant a weaker form of the ability to some people. Notably—*

*The person she incarnates with, for one, I interrupt, sensing the conclusion. The King.*

She nods gravely. *Yes. In this case, it would seem that she granted him great defensive powers: strong resistance to theria magic and protective wards against physical attacks.*

"Alright, time to go!" I yell as I reach Isa and Brangaine. "I'll explain later," I add when I see their confusion. We run down the hidden tunnel as quickly as we can. Adrenaline and fear make the several kilometer burst possible, the pounding of my heart equally paced with the pounding of my feet on the ground. Somehow, the distance melts behind us. "Head to the docks. I'm going to get Béo."

Before I can run to the stables, Isa grabs my hand, stopping me. "Be careful." I nod, and we head our separate ways.

It's almost morning, but the sky is still dark, and the streets are still empty. Just as well, as it makes my job easier. There

are also simply fewer people to question what I'm doing. The stablemaster isn't in yet, but I retrieve Béo nonetheless, leaving my payment on the table. "Time to go," I tell her as I lead us to the docks. I'm still wearing Lady Esra's dress, which isn't the best garment for riding a horse, but I don't have the luxury of changing.

As I approach the docks, I pull the red cloth from my handbag, jumping off Béo as we pull up to Captain Kreth. "We're leaving," I tell him firmly, handing him the cloth. "Now."

When he inevitably protests about how they aren't ready, how I'm not the boss of them, et cetera, Isolde walks over and lowers the hood over her face. "Yes, I am whom you think I am," she tells Kreth. Her eyes burn through the hole they pierce in his façade. "And yes, we're leaving now. I don't want to have to threaten you." As she says this, Brangaine reaches ominously for his sword to prevent Kreth from calling her bluff.

I'd been hoping not to have to make an enemy out of everyone we manipulate, but the captain doesn't seem to be leading toward willing ally. "Fine," he growls. "I guess we're leaving. You're going to pay for this." At his last words, Brangaine pulls his sword slightly from his sheath, silencing Kreth once more.

We follow the crew onto the ship as they make their last-minute preparations. They seem to understand the urgency of the situation, even if they don't know the reason behind it. Though, in their defense, I can tell that Estènne hasn't told Isolde yet either, given the latter's curious glances in my direction. Standing on the bow of the ship, I cast my gaze back toward the city. A few soldiers are rushing toward us, swords and bows at the ready, and Brangaine gets ready to charge them. When Isa and I try to stop him, he looks us in the eyes and calmly says, "I pledged my life to protect you two. Don't turn



me into a liar.” He then pulls away from us and runs toward the Incerin soldiers without a single glance backwards.

All Isolde and I can do is avert our eyes.

Leaving later wasn’t an option as a dozen archers rush to the water’s edge, preparing to shower us with flaming arrows. Even now, if they hit the ship, we could be in for a fiery-then-watery grave. As the arrows fly, Estègne takes control of my body, extending my arms out as she creates a shield around the ship. The crew panics before noticing that the arrows simply deflect off of the surface of a shimmering translucent green sphere above the ship.

I can feel Estègne’s rage toward our home nation, power rushing between the two of us. *They’re operating under the King’s orders, not Corbelle’s*, I tell her. *We’re kidnapping his daughter and commandeering a ship. Therii or not, princess or not, the city guard is going to object to that.*

She’s hesitant to respond. *O-Of course. I let my emotions get the better of me.*

*It’s okay, Estègne. You’re human, just like the rest of us. You’re allowed to make mistakes.* It’s strange having a second consciousness in your body, especially when it begins crying softly. Isolde joins me as I lean against the bow, and the three of us sit like that for some time, comforting each other as our emotions run loose now that the adrenaline has faded and reality has retaken us once more.

## Friends in High Places

Our reprieve is interrupted unceremoniously by Captain Kreth. "Does anyone want to explain what's going on here?!" he roars.

No, not particularly. Especially when you yell at us like that. Especially when we just saw one of our allies execute his own suicide mission. But somehow, I manage to resist the urge to say any of that out loud. *Just play along, Isa*, I tell the princess. "I told you that my sister," I say aloud, indicating Isolde, "and I wanted to visit our bedridden aunt in Aspe. You, on the other hand, seem to disbelieve me." For good reason though, I suppose, as it's not true.

"It seemed more like you were kidnapping the Fair Princess," he says pointedly. "Those were royal soldiers shooting at us, weren't they?"

Isolde steps forward, hands on her hips in annoyance. "I'm the Fair Princess, you blundering idiot of a ship captain! You think I would order you to set sail if I were being kidnapped?!" *I told you I'd get to use that line*, she laughs in my head. "And that was a royal soldier who threw himself at them to buy us enough time to escape!" Catching herself, she sighs, then adopts an apologetic

expression. "I'm sorry. It's already been a stressful day, and I'm unfairly taking it out on you." His expression softens as she finishes. "But, in fairness, Mia here did technically lie to you before." *You're a bastard child. Just play along, El*, she says teasingly.

...Okay? I shift uncomfortably and look at Kreth in false shame before sighing and looking away once more. "The truth is that Isolde and I are half-sisters, with the same father—King Lance." Nope, that's still not the truth. "I, however, was born out of wedlock. My mother was a noble woman in her own right, but not the Queen." I pause, letting Kreth process the news. "Because I'm older than Isolde, I pose a threat to the established line of succession, and the King would like to pretend that neither I nor the rest of my family exist. And it's my mother's sister that we're going to visit, so the Royal Front isn't exactly thrilled."

"When she told me the news, I was determined to go with her," Isa continues. "I may not be related by blood, but if she's important to her, then she's important to me. My father, on the other hand, was determined to stop me. He's just paranoid that they'll get me out of the way to establish her as the heiress," she finishes with an eye roll.

"But that fear's completely ungrounded—and that's being generous," I say. "I've never wanted the throne, and no one on my mother's side of my family has been pushing for it either."

There's a long silence while the captain tries to understand the scandal we've unleashed, none of it true (barring that the King would probably like me to not exist, I suppose). Eventually, he pieces his thoughts together. "That's great and all, but that doesn't change the fact that we're now flagged as an enemy to Incerin. They've already shot at us when we cast off. I've

seven-eighths of a mind to just turn around and give them what they want: you.”

“Hmm... Yes, I suppose you could do that,” I tell him. “Though I’d hate to have to commandeer your ship to prevent that from happening. I will not have my family torn away from me again.” I soften my voice, trying to be more gentle. “How’d you choose the name for your ship, if I may ask?”

His eyes betray an annoyance, and he looks away as he realizes where I’m going with this. “Leliana was my daughter,” he says quietly, still looking away. “She passed away a few years ago. She was the best thing that ever happened to me, of course. All parents say that, but that’s because it’s true.” Isolde scoffs quietly, though Kreth chooses to ignore her. “I loved her more than anything else. She was kind, gentle, always wanting to help others. But she was also a troublemaker. Got it from me, I suppose.” As he turns back to us, I notice tears starting to form in his eyes, and his voice catches. “One day, she kept pestering me for some thing or other, and I eventually snapped at her. Nothing too serious, but she was upset and ran off.”

“And she never came back,” I whisper, and he nods.

“It was the least I could do to name the ship after her, keep her in my life just a little while longer.”

I place my hand on his shoulder, employing the calming spell to ease his pain. “I’m sorry about what happened to you. But that’s what I’m trying to avoid with my family. Can we count on you to help us?”

He takes a moment to make his decision, a tense moment for the three of us whose futures—lives, possibly—depend on his decision. But Kreth nods his head slowly, and we take a collective breath of relief. “I’ll do what I can.”

Isolde snaps her finger with an idea before retrieving a piece

of parchment from her pack. “Captain Kreth, does your wife live in Vasen?” When he nods, she begins writing. “When you return, you’re going to be questioned about harboring us. I’d like you to take this,” she says, handing him the parchment. “Demand to be judged by the King and Queen, even if you have to be escorted to Rædes. Give them the parchment and request consideration via ICL-781-4. That should make your life easier. And no,” she adds, smiling, “what I’ve written there isn’t even remotely true, don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Fair Princess,” he says, bowing.

Isa rolls her eyes, and she and I together insist upon thanking him, rather than the other way around. As the conversation falls terribly awkward, Kreth excuses himself, claiming to need to check on something. Isolde and I head below in order to get some sleep—it’s been a long night, to say the least. I change out of the dress I borrowed and into something a bit more befitting the situation before we curl up together on the bed in the corner of the cabin, falling asleep nearly instantly in each other’s embrace.

\* \* \*

It’s a loud explosion that wakes me up. Another follows shortly, and my suspicion is confirmed when one of the ship’s crew rushes into the room, announcing that we’re under cannon attack. I grab Isolde, who’s still half-asleep, and head top-side. An enormous ship, easily thrice the length of Kreth’s, lies a short distance away.

One of Kreth’s sailors approaches us in his full armor, making me once again feel outdressed in my nightgown. “Those were warning shots,” he explains. “They’re flying the Incerin flag, but

that seems like a pirate ship to me. It's likely they want to come aboard and steal things rather than sink our ship."

"Do you think they know about us?" I ask, concerned.

He shrugs. "It's possible, but we can't know for sure unless we talk to them." Cracking a smile, he adds, "Though, even if they don't know she's on this ship, I'd bet they do know who Isolde is. You? Maybe not. You're not a famous princess, after all."

"That's reassuring," I say, joining in on his smiling despite myself.

"Raise the parley flag!" Kreth yells from the helm, and one of the crew members rushes to complete his new assignment. As the flag is raised, the attacking ship lowers its cannon and moves to approach, causing a tension that buzzes on the tip of my tongue. The entirety of the crew has lined up on the starboard side, facing the approaching ship.

Once close enough, it extends a thick plank across the gap between the two ships. A lone pirate with a rapier at his hip walks nonchalantly toward us, as if none of us could even hope to threaten him at the best of times. "I am Hira Ines," he announces, staring in turn at each of us, just a few steps in front of me. I notice my breath catch as his eyes reach mine, hoping he can't tell how nervous I suddenly am. "I act as Captain of this ship—" he indicates behind him as he speaks—"and as Lieutenant of the Unthern Pirates. It is in your best interest to... cooperate." He dramatically reaches for his sword as he finishes, emphasizing his bravado once again.

Kreth steps forward, nodding. "I am Captain Kreth of the IMS Leliana. I intend to cooperate to the best of my abilities. What is it that you seek?"

Hira chuckles. "I have been informed," he says slowly, landing

his gaze squarely on me, “that a certain Elena Vardis has escaped from Vasen with the Incerin Fair Princess Isolde Ennets. I have been tasked with retrieving them, bringing them to our base. Our leader has business with them.” When Kreth gives him a look of confusion, he adds, “Don’t worry, girls, we’ve no intention of returning you to Incerin. We’re pirates: we don’t get along too well with the authorities there, you understand.” A condescending smile is spread across his face, and I shudder in annoyance.

I feel Estènne stir, but it is Isolde who speaks up, taking a few steps toward Hira and pushing aside my arm as he tries to hold her back. “If I may ask, sir, what is the name of your leader?”

He hesitates before apparently deciding that it needn’t be kept secret. “She is Czarina Koraxi, long-heralded leader of our band of pirates. You should be honored to be summoned.”

Isolde doesn’t recognize the name, but she reacts to the blast of mental energy I launch unintentionally at her in my surprise. “Celaena Koraxi?” I blurt out, disbelief coloring my voice.

Hira nods. “I’m sure her reputation precedes her, then.”

I can’t believe it. Isa turns quickly back toward me. *What is it, El?*

*That was my mother’s name. We thought she died on a mission when I was little, I explain quickly. But Koraxi is a corruption of an uncommon Thessian name, so it has to be her.*

*I wonder what she wants with us.*

Only one way to find out. I look at Isa, nodding. “Pirates have a certain... reputation, you understand,” I tell Hira. “If you can assure us that we are not in danger, we will go with you, Lieutenant Ines.”

Ines agrees, though he and the crew of the IMS Leliana look at me in surprise, Captain Kreth most of all. Isolde walks

over to him and requests the letter she wrote for him earlier. After she adds a few lines to the bottom, she returns it, saying “Captain Kreth, I relinquish you from your duties to escort us to our destination. May you always find safe harbor.” I join her blessing, adding a touch of *theresis* to the words. I sense both relief and melancholy now permeating the air, and I rush to grab our bags from below deck.

It’s only a short time before we find ourselves on the enormous pirate ship, heading... somewhere. Unthern is a small island to the northeast, but everyone considers it uninhabitable. Though if my mother is the pirate leader, then perhaps she made it possible via her *theria* magic.

\* \* \*

Our time on the ship passes relatively uneventfully. We’re treated as guests, rather than prisoners or captives, but no one knows much about the situation. “I was simply tasked with finding you and escorting you back to base,” Ines had explained. “Czarina Koraxi did not explain what she has planned for you two.” When we asked him how Koraxi knew Isolde and I had escaped Vasen, he simply shrugged. “She’s always been like that. Rarely wrong, despite the ludicrous claims she makes.”

We spend our time relaxing, recovering from my escape in Steilla and our escape in Vasen. I’d presented as Mia and Hestia while in Vasen, but Hira knew my real name, so my mother has to know it’s me. That’s likely why she’s taken an interest in our escapes. But she hasn’t told any of her people, even her lieutenant, so I’d like to hold on to that advantage for now.

*Mother was... complicated*, I tell Isolde. She needs to know. *I don’t really remember her that well, but she disappeared when I*



*was four. I knew she went out on missions to go help people. It was dangerous, I knew, but she always came back with a smile on her face, the missions' heroine. I pause to gather my thoughts. She was a theria, though I didn't learn this until I left Rædes. Father knew. She came to Incerin in secret, hiding her powers for all those years. And then... one day... I trail off.*

*She didn't come back,* Isolde finishes for me, the conclusion obvious.

*I swallow and nod. No one knew what happened to her. Father works in the government, so he knew that no one had found anything. She just... vanished. I wipe away a tear. Father never talked about her much, but he kept an eye on me. He's the one who pushed me to leave when I grew into my powers. Insisted I try to take Sya with me. Whatever emotional barrier I'd erected crumbles with the reminiscing, and I find myself shaking, tears soon streaming down my face. Isolde moves to sit next to me, wrapping an arm around me and resting her head against my chest.*

*"Hey, El," she whispers. "I keep forgetting. What's your horse's name again?"*

*"B... Béo..." I manage to get out between quavering breaths, unsure of where she's going with this.*

*"That's a great name." She chuckles. "Béo is bae, yo."*

*I know she hadn't forgotten, and she knows that. She's probably been sitting on that joke for a while, just waiting for the right time to use it. It's not even a good joke, but it was never meant to be. It's the thought that counts, and I give Isolde a weak smile.*

*I'm here for you, El. And I'm sure Estènné would say the same. A beat. Her voice is delicate as she treads carefully. I know you always dreamed of being a theria and adventuring, but I also know what it's cost you. It's true that I've now lost my family and claim to*

*the throne as well, but it's not like I ever liked them to begin with.* She gives a quick laugh before taking another moment to compose her words.

*To be fair, though, you did also lose Brangaine.*

She growls, a mixture of playful and serious, annoyed at being reminded of our less-than-perfect escape from Vasen and the subsequent cost. It seems her method for dealing with it is to ignore it for now. After a quiet moment where she composes her words, she speaks again. *You've been put under a lot of pressure, too, no thanks to Estènne. Just don't feel like you have to go it alone, okay?*

I wrap my arms around the princess's smaller frame. *Thanks. As long as you know it works the other way, too. You're not alone either, Isa.*

*Hmph. Don't go underestimating me. I wasn't Fair Princess of Incerin for nothing!*

I'm about to respond to Isolde's return to that playful demeanor of hers, but I'm stopped by Lieutenant Ines entering the cabin. "Just a heads up: we're about to arrive at Unthern," he tells us. "You'd best be on your best behavior."

We nod and gather up our things. Returning to the deck, we can see the pirate's island base: Unthern, a tall rocky outcropping measuring only a few kilometers wide. With its small size and uncooperative geometry, it's not surprising that people gave up long ago on colonizing it. There just isn't enough livable land, but pirates... Pirates have ships and are known for pilfering traveling merchant ships, giving them the supplies they need. The math works out, I guess.

We wait in silence as Hira directs the ship toward a gap in the rocks, near sea level. Upon closer investigation, I notice that it's a large gate, easily fitting the ship's massive size, leading into

a cave. Seeing us, a guard raises the gate and allows us to pass. After just a few moments, the space opens into a wide cavern which appears to serve as a large, hidden, underground harbor. A handful of pirate ships, considerably smaller than Hira's, are lined up at the docks.

A few pirates, all in uniform, mill about the area, but come to attention as we approach. "Safe arrival: Ines," one of them calls out, as if our giant ship could possibly not be announcement enough.

"Mission success: Ines," comes Hira's response.

The exchange is militant in its sharp barking, and it's a strong contrast to much of the conversations I heard on our way here. It makes me wonder what type of operation Mother is running here. And what she wants with us. In my memories, she wasn't ever a strict, commanding authority. But then again, those memories are more than a decade old by now.

Fortunately, we don't have long to wait before we're approached by a pair of guards. They walk with authority, the same betrayed by their armored uniform, a blood-red sash across their torso. "Elena, Isolde. You must be our new visitors." Their voices aren't threatening, but neither are they particularly welcoming.

We nod, and Isolde speaks up. "Yes, sirs. Lieutenant Ines informed us that we've been summoned by Czarina Koraxi."

"Indeed." They explain that we're to see her immediately, once they've ensured that we're not carrying any weapons into the meeting room. Apparently, they've not been informed that Isa and I can use magic, or they're confident that we don't stand a chance against Mother. Regardless, they confiscate the bow and quiver from my back before frisking us for anything else of note, much to Hira's annoyed impatience. "Follow us," they

bluntly order us after they've finished.

I shrug and we begin following, Isolde at my side. We're led through a network of tunnels, and the few handfuls of pirates we pass largely stare at us in intrigue and surprise. Suddenly, I'm cast back to when the two guards escorted me to my trial in Steilla's palace. Sensing my sudden trepidation, Isolde reaches over and squeezes my hand. After a few minutes, we arrive at a large metal door that might as well be the door to a fortress. Our escorts take further pains to express how we are being afforded a privilege to be invited by Koraxi herself and how we ought to be on our best behavior. It's all I can do to suppress an eye roll at the infantilizing comment before we enter the room.

It's an enormous hall with several doors leading off to side rooms. A throne sits on a raised stage at the far end, backed by vibrant banners showing the pirates' crest. Surrounding these banners are those of the continental nations, each ripped through their emblems, signifying the Unthern pirates' claims at superiority. The room is empty of people barring our entourage and a single woman in brilliant armor adorned with purple at the throne. Mother. Our guards stay by the door as the three of us approach.

"It's been a while, Elena. Hasn't it?" she says with a smile.

## Royalty of a Different Sort

“Surely you recognized my name when Hira invited you along?” the pirate queen asks. She rises from her throne and walks down the steps toward us. “Koraxi isn’t exactly a common name.”

I’m torn between emotions. Shock and surprise, of course, but also fear of what she might want, anger that I grew up without a mother, excitement to meet her now, I decide to go with a calm but firm, “One which I haven’t heard in a long time. We all thought you were dead.”

She laughs, and she moves to push her long dark hair out of her eyes. “One might have said the same thing about you in Steilla, no?”

I feel a rush of anxiety fill me, and I notice the same reaction in Isolde. The last time we dealt with someone who always seemed to know what was going on, even those secrets we’d never told, Sonya and I got put in a dungeon, and I’m not especially keen to repeat that experience.

“So, why now?” I ask, my voice quiet. “Why wait all these years if you apparently know everything that’s happened to

me?”

“Well, I don’t know everything,” she says. “And pirate ships are notoriously bad for making it across land all the way to Rædes.”

Isolde steps forward. “I’m struggling to believe that it was coincidental that you brought us here. Forgive my saying, but you don’t quite seem the type to decide to suddenly restart your family.”

Mother turns her sharp eyes onto Isolde now. “Forgive my saying, but you don’t seem quite the type to understand familial bonds, given your recent cast away from them.” She sighs, then relaxes in her throne, her eyes losing their piercing sharpness. “But you’re right. It’s not the only reason you’re here. Everyone, out!” At her command, all of the pirates, even those guarding us, exit, leaving only the three of us in the room. “I am sorry, Elena, that I wasn’t a bigger part of your life, and I don’t expect you to forgive me. If you’re willing, we’ll have time to exchange tales, but there is a more important matter to discuss first.”

*Can we trust her?* I hear Isolde ask in my head.

Honestly, I don’t know. It feels weird to have this reaction given that she’s my mother, but even if I really ever knew her, eleven years is plenty of time to change.

*If I may...* Estènne begins in my head. Understanding her wish, I cast “*maisû recon*” and her avatar appears, shimmering in the light. “Greetings, Celaena,” she says, bowing. “I only wish we could meet in more favorable times as before.”

I let out a sharp noise of surprise at Estènne’s words, and I notice a similar reaction from Isa.

“Likewise,” Mother responds after a moment.

Estènne takes a moment to compose her words. “Yes, girls, I knew Celaena here long ago. When she still lived in Thessia,

she'd often come to the grove where I dwell. I knew she was special, as she would birth the child of prophecy." She turns back to Koraxi. "Understand that this is not a flash of judgment, merely an act of precaution lest we be taken advantage of. I seek to ensure that you are the same Celaena Koraxi I once knew and that your loyalties have not swayed. Resisting these spells or attempting to mislead will be seen as a hostile attack. Are you agreeable to this?"

She nods with a slight smile across her face. "I would have it no other way."

"Very well." Estènné now turns to me. *You will cast two spells: "ficern ís Celaena" and "lýpto ís alíth ís otagí ís Celaena ser". The first should prove her identity; the second should prove her loyalties. Understood?*

I nod and cast the spells as she directed. With each spell, a silver light appears over Celaena before shimmering and eventually fading. I'm not quite sure how to interpret the results until Estènné speaks again.

"I am deeply sorry that we had to perform such a demeaning procedure." She walks over to the throne and incites Koraxi to stand, opening her arms. "It's great to have you on our side, Celaena," she says, embracing the pirate queen, who gives a thankful nod.

"I trust you've explained the situation to the girls?" she asks. When we confirm this, she continues. "Then you understand just how important it is that Inoire is defeated. The problem is that she's powerful, and every non-Thessian theria is in this room."

"No, actually," I correct her. "Corbelle seems to have possessed King Ennets of all people. None of my spells affected him. It was only with Estènné's help that I was able to escape."

Mother frowns. “If this is true—if she’s already incarnated with Lance—then the situation is worse than I’d imagined.”

“Unfortunately, what Elena said is correct. I believe that King Ennets was chosen by Corbelle because of his legal power, not any particular magical aptitude, which is some small comfort. He referred to her as the ‘True Goddess’, which indicates that he sees her ability as divine, rather than Thessian, as is ours.”

“And the documents El stole from my father’s study show that the Royal Front is preparing to mobilize for a crusade against Thessia,” Isolde adds, holding the papers toward Koraxi. “It doesn’t confirm the existence of any other hostile therii, but it does seem likely they’re planning to launch a religious war.”

“We’ve also identified Akàné Verrader—” I shudder as I say the name—“leader of an underground information network based in Catens as a likely member of Corbelle’s circle. She claimed to have business in Steilla, but that may have just been escorting Sonya and me into the trap that resulted in our capture.” I feel a pang of emotion as I remember leaving Sonya in Steilla. So much has happened in so little time. I can sense Aurore in my mind, but...

It’s a moment before Mother answers. “I see. I’ve managed to identify a few small-scale agents as well, but you’ve had significantly more success in significantly less time.” She looks at each of us in turn. “I have a proposal for you: Stay with us in Unthern for a time, and we can put together a spec-ops team with you as its leaders to work to take out these agents of Corbelle’s. It’ll also be a good opportunity to continue your magical and combat training, seeing as—no offense: nor do I—you don’t stand a chance against her in your current form.”

I think back to that paralyzing fear when I was powerless against Lance in his study. Estènne was the one who saved me.



And even if she and I are to join souls in the incarnation ritual, which should allow me to tap into her power and experience, some proper training of my own probably wouldn't be a waste of time. Many of the spells I know come from the book I found in Steilla's library, and I haven't gotten a chance to use them. Nor are they all particularly apt for magical combat. And then there's the opportunity to get to know my mother by staying here. And a chance to get even at Akàné? Sounds good to me.

I can tell Estènné notices my reaction since she speaks with a smile on her face that would otherwise be unjustified. "Then it seems we are in agreement. We would be honored to accept your generous hospitality, Czarina."

"Wonderful!" She turns to Isolde. "Even though I am, in some sense, queen of the pirates, I expect your experience here will be quite different from your experiences with the Incerin Monarchs. Both of you," she says, sweeping her arms in an inclusive gesture, "will be treated as respected members of the cabinet and as leaders of your squad." Isolde tries to suppress a noise of distaste at the idea of continuing to be treated as the Fair Princess. "However, for the time being, I would like the truth of our relationship, as well as our magical abilities, to remain secret among the rest of my crew." The three of us nod, understanding. "The day is yours. I'll have Hira escort you to your rooms. If it pleases you, join me for dinner tonight. As I said, we have much to discuss."

We gracefully accept, and I let Estènné's avatar fade. Lieutenant Ines is called into the room and told to escort us. When we get back out into the hallway, the two guards return our bags. As we follow Ines through yet more tunnels to an unpopulated area of the base, I reach out to Isolde. *What do you think about all this?*

*I'm not sure, she admits. Part of me wants to get as far away from Incerin as we can and get to Thessia as quickly as possible. But Celaena is right: we should take this opportunity to train and to weaken Corbelle's network before we try to go up against her.*

*I... I feel like my judgment's clouded by her being my mother, but if you agree, then... I guess it's okay.*

*Also, I can't be the only one who's excited about the chance to get Akàné out of the game and make up for losing Brangaine, right?*

*The devilish smile on her face is matched only by mine. I didn't much like Steilla, thanks to her. I'd quite like to return the favor.*

Suddenly, we arrive at the end of a hallway, two doors on each side. "These are your quarters," Ines says. "Assign them between yourselves as you will." He hands us each a sheet of paper. "This is a map of the complex. Czarina Koraxi requested you to join her for dinner, which is here—" he indicates a spot on the map—"at seven o'clock." With that, he turns on his heels and returns to the main part of the complex.

The four rooms are identical, the coldness of their dark stone walls and floors offset only slightly by the simple wooden furniture. My chest tightens as I'm cast back once again to my time in Steilla, the prison cell's stone walls contracting around me in my memories. Isolde, sensing this, thinks for a moment before snapping her fingers. Pulling me out into the hallway, she casts "flýt verla" to carefully maneuver the bed from one room into the next. *Side-by-side, or bunked?* she asks, trying to read my face. *Bunked, got it, she says before I can even get out a response.* She delicately raises the second bed on top of the first, securing it with a whispered "aidono". She glances around the room, inspecting her handiwork. I notice another flash of inspiration cross her face. "Vardísi," and the bedsheets are

suddenly transformed from their dark gray to a lovely, warm pink, brightening the room considerably.

It's a small gesture, but a rush of emotions overcomes me, and it's all I can do to push a weak *Thank you* to her, but she doesn't expect anything more.

"Eh, I didn't like it much, either," she says coyly, pulling her gaze away in embarrassment, and I can tell that, while that might be true, it isn't why she did it. We sit on the lower bed for a few moments before she suddenly grabs my hand. A wide smile dances upon her lips.

Honestly, she seems too excited for the situation. "What is it, Isa?"

Her smile grows even wider, if that were somehow possible. "I just realized that you're the princess here, El!" When I look at her with a blank, confused stare, she gives an exasperated sigh. "Your mother's the Czarina here, right? And a czarina is basically a queen, right? Wouldn't that make you a princess?"

"I... guess so?" I'm not really sure where she's going with this. I don't have any particular ambition to take over the Unthern pirates, after all.

"And when a princess is invited to dinner," she explains, her experience showing, "it is her job to look the part."

I'm still confused. "I thought the idea was that no one else was to know that I'm Celaena's daughter. Wouldn't dressing as the princess give it away?"

"Boo," she pouts falsely. "You're still dining with the Queen, regardless of whether you're the princess or not. I just wanted to dress you up in a cute outfit, but if you're not going to play along..." She punctuates her sentence by lightly shoving me, causing me to fall over on the bed.

When I finally agree in mock annoyance, she starts clapping

and giggling excitedly. She runs over to pull the dress we took from Duchess Esra's room in Steilla from my bag, and I notice that this is one of very few instances where she actually seems her age.

We spend a large chunk of the afternoon like this. I put on the dress, and let her fret over the rest of the preparations. It's the same outfit I wore when I met King Lance, as our clothing options are a bit limited, but Isa takes the time to brush and braid my hair, complaining about the lack of makeup in between our idle chatter. Once she's finally satisfied, we repeat the process with her, though quite a bit less skillfully. Hers is the same pink dress she wore for the speech in Catens, the very first time I saw her.

Eventually, it's time for dinner, and we make our way toward the dining hall. We're ushered in by the guard at the door. Several pirates sit at the table, with Mother at the head, and a seat on her left and one on her right remain empty. For once, I feel overdressed: Mother is still wearing her armor, though the other pirates are wearing a uniform a tier more formal than the others we saw earlier. This must be the council she mentioned earlier.

Mother rises and indicates the two places at her side. As Isolde and I take the seats next to her, she introduces us to the group: "This is Lady Elena Vardis and her companion, former Incerin Fair Princess Isolde Ennets." I try to hide my surprise when she titles me "Lady", a title I don't deserve. Perhaps it's her way of covering up our relationship. "They are our honored guests, invited at my own personal request. I expect they will be treated appropriately." She then turns to us. "You've met Lieutenant Ines, of course. These are the other council members." She names them, pointing at them in turn, but I immediately forget

who is who. It hardly matters, as it is time to eat. The meal is delicious, far better than anything I've had since my first night in Catens, and I eagerly dig in.

"Lady Ennets, if I may," one of the council members begins, and Isa nods politely. "Czarina Koraxi introduced you as the 'former Fair Princess'. What happened for you to lose that title?"

"I forfeited the title of my own volition," she says slowly. "To put it lightly, there have long been some conflicts between my parents and Elena, and I was forced to choose a side in these conflicts. It may be clear which side I chose. Plus, Koraxi's invitation conveniently lined up with our departure from the continent."

I can tell the others are unsatisfied with that answer, and I glance over at Isolde. *Are we going with the same story we told Kreth?* I ask. *Are you still my half-sister?*

Sure, she smiles back. *Why not?*

"In particular, Isa and I are half-sisters," I reveal, choosing my words carefully. Everyone at the table freezes. "I was born out of wedlock, and my existence is a problem for the stability of the nation. Needless to say, it's a pretty closely-guarded secret, but the Monarchs aren't fond of me. They'd had enough and cast me out of the country."

"And I decided to go with her," Isa finishes. "I'm not going to just stand by while they exile my sister for something that's not even her fault."

Our story sobers the atmosphere around the table, and it's quiet for the rest of the meal, but I notice Mother trying to suppress a smile. She knows full well that the story isn't true, but it managed to accomplish everything we needed: answer the question that was asked, justify my presence here without revealing that Celaena is my mother, and get everyone at the

table to stop investigating too closely.

When dinner is over, Mother dismisses everyone from the council except for Ines. "You remember the spec-ops team I mentioned earlier, right?" We all nod. "The four of us will form its core. Hira, your ship's crew will be serving us, but they aren't to be told what the mission details entail." She turns to Isa and me. "You two will be our on-site force: you'll be the ones dealing with Corbelle's agents. I'll run things from here, and Hira will handle travel and supplies." A beat. "Until then, and between missions, you're welcome to do your combat training with Captain Volner, who is one of our smiths, or me when I'm not already engaged. Ultimately, you'll probably want to avoid full-on combat in the field, but it can't always be avoided, so it's worth being prepared."

"Understood," Isa and I respond in unison.

Mother pauses to take a deep breath before continuing. "I'd also like to see your skills in action tonight so that we know where we stand. I'll send agents down to Steilla and Catens to dig up some information about this Akàné you mentioned as well." She turns to face Lieutenant Ines. "Hira, how soon will you be able to set sail for Zystelle?"

"We have some standard maintenance to perform," he answers, "but we should be sea-worthy within a few days. A week, at most."

Mother nods in approval. "Perfect. Then we'll plan for our first excursion against one of Inoire's agents then." No point in waiting around, I guess. "He's hiding in Illondrès, and he should make a fine first target for you three. I'll run a more detailed briefing before then." She waits for this information to sink in. "Are there any questions?" She looks around as none of us raise any questions. "Very well. Then this concludes the

first official meeting of this spec-ops team, Maidens AGainst Inoire, MAGI for short.”

Ines excuses himself, leaving Isa, and me alone with Celaena. “If you’re sending an agent to Steilla,” I begin, “then I have a friend there who can make communication faster. She’s still imprisoned there, but I gave her a necklace that allows her to talk to me through the projection spell.”

Mother doesn’t even try to hide her surprise. “With an alva?! Estènne must have been right: you must truly be the woman of legend if you’re able to pull that off so easily.” I can hear Estènne make a contented *Of course I was right kind* of hum in my head at the recognition even as my face turns red. “Hmm... If that’s the case, then I expect you’ll pass my test with flying colors.”

With that, Koraxi begins the test, asking Isolde and me to perform various feats of magic across a range of domains: different types of attacks, magical shields and defenses, and a variety of utility spells. Though we don’t know every spellphrase, she gives us the ones we don’t know, even if I feel a touch of embarrassment each time it happens. About halfway through, she raises the difficulty by increasing her attack power against our shields, resisting our attacks more intensely, or by simply demanding more complicated and exhaustive tasks.

When we finally finish, nearly an hour later, the three of us are gasping for air, our magical energy largely spent, though a wild smile dances upon each of our faces. “I’m thoroughly impressed,” Mother admits between breaths. “Your skills are well above what I expected. Isolde,” she says, turning to face the former princess. “Your attacks leave something to be desired in terms of strength, but you outpaced Elena in the defensive and healing categories. Stay away from the main fight, and you should be fine. Elena,” she adds, turning to me. “Your skills were

relatively strong across the board, an impressive feat, though it was your attacks that you should be most proud of. You two complement each other well. As if you were half-sisters,” she chuckles. “I like the story you came up with. Keep going with it.” A beat. “Anyway, that’s not to say that you can’t still improve through training, but that is not an issue for tonight, and non-magical combat should likely be your priority in that regard.”

“Thank you,” Isolde and I say together. I give a slight chuckle before adding, “It’s nice to have a magical challenge where the stakes aren’t quite life and death.”

“There are still two things I’d like to do with you tonight,” Koraxi admits. When Isolde and I glance at each other in confusion and exhaustion and a clear desire to be done for the time being, she chuckles. “Don’t worry. It’s not that intensive, I promise. I’d like to form symesí connections with the two of you. It’ll help facilitate communication in the field, for one. It’s not much, I know, but I also feel like I owe you something, Elena, for being absent for so long. I also want to tell you how I came to be here, leading the Unthern pirates instead of living peacefully in Rædes with you and your father. Is this acceptable?”

Isolde and I exchange glances. *Is there any reason not to do this?* she asks me. Unsure, I forward the question to Estènne, who recommends going through with the bonding. After all, she points out, we established earlier that Mother is one whom we can trust, and she’s right that making communication possible is certainly not a regrettable choice of action. I share this with Isa, and we express our agreement.

“Let’s do it,” I tell Mother. Retreating into the garden in my mind, I search the dark sky for her mindsoul. It doesn’t take long, as it’s brighter than Isolde’s was. We reach toward each



other and cast “symé” to finish the bond. Like before, there’s a flush of warmth as our souls flow together momentarily; however, while Isa’s soul was gentle and cozy, Mother’s is bright, but jagged and more distant. She seems withdrawn and self-isolating, her aloofness a byproduct of a life she didn’t want to live, of a woman she didn’t want to become. And, within her, I can feel the pain of leaving Rædes all those years ago, of leaving her family, and I lose so much of my residual judgments against her.

*I can’t leave you behind now, Elena*, she says in my head with a smile. A smile that I’m quick to return. We’re here now, fighting together against Inoire. That’s an outcome I’m pretty content with. She repeats the bonding process with Isolde so that the three of us are pairwise linked, something that will undoubtedly prove useful in the upcoming missions.

The bonds formed, Mother retakes her seat at the table. There’s an awkward tension in the air as we wait for her to start speaking again and as she composes her words. “I grew up in Thessia,” she begins slowly, still unsure of herself. “I studied magic and had the strongest skills amongst my peers. But it wasn’t enough.” Her eyes lose their focus as she reminisces. “I traveled the islands, always looking for an adventure. Eventually, I came across Estènne’s resting place, a beautiful grove that would occasionally see pilgrimages. A small temple sat in its center, and I was able to unlock a hidden area that led towards Estènne herself. And there we often sat, sharing stories or magic or just enjoying the quiet. She told me that I was special, that you, Elena, would be special. But it was a secret no one else was to know.

She takes a deep breath before continuing. “I later learned that several of the city councils wanted someone to infiltrate

the continent and act as a spy, gathering information related to relations both intracontinental and related to Thessia. With my skills and desire for adventure, they asked for my services, and I came to Incerin in the guise of a foreign freelance mercenary.” A beat. “However, I met your father, and fell in love with him against my better judgment and against both the letter and spirit of my assignment. I gave birth to you and found immense pleasure in watching you grow up the first few years. But there was another rush of anti-Thessian vitriol, and I feared being discovered. Not just for me, but the officials would have done the same unspeakable things to you without a single care that you were only four years old. So I left, hoping that you would be safer.” Another beat. “But I couldn’t bear to return to Thessia after so colossally failing my mission, so I fell in with this pirate group. Magic often showing as an unfair advantage, I quickly rose up the ranks and found myself as the leader. And here I am, Czarina Celaena Koraxi, leader of the Unthern pirates at the cost of both my previous homes.” She finishes with a forlorn expression and a shrug of the shoulders.

Isa and I sit quietly throughout the story, the princess largely watching my reactions at the explanation. I gently grab Mother’s arm and look her firmly in the eyes. “Ívos thima.” Her expression softens slightly as the spell takes effect. “You’re overthinking things,” I tell her. “Now that I know the reasons, I’m not upset about it, and I don’t think you can be rightfully blamed for what you’ve done.” I pause. “I’m not sure that our relationship will ever be like a normal mother-daughter relationship, but that doesn’t mean you should keep beating yourself over it.”

“I’m not sure it’s that easy, nor am I sure I deserve that forgiveness,” she admits, “but I appreciate the gesture regardless.”

Isa fails to hide a yawn, and Mother dismisses us to bed. "It's late, and you deserve some rest after everything that happened today. Tomorrow is yours to do what you will." As we take our leave, she suddenly remembers one last thing. "I know you didn't bring too much with you, and we have a collection of clothes and other such things that we've looted over the course of our raids. I'll have it brought by your rooms tomorrow."

"Thank you," Isolde says before I can even open my mouth. "Good night," we call out as we reach the hallway and return to our room.

*Goodnight*, I hear Mother whisper once more.

I groggily climb up to the top bunk, falling asleep nearly as soon as my head hits the pillow.

## Self-Defense No Longer

*El, that's amazing. What are the odds?* Sonya activated her necklace for the first time this morning, and I just finished explaining what happened to us since we left Steilla, how King Lance seems to be working for Inoire, how Brangaine sacrificed himself, how we'd found my mother of all people yesterday, how we were planning to go after Inoire's agents.

*Probably higher than we'd think. She seems to have been keeping tabs on me, somehow, I remind her. She knew I'd faked my death in Steilla without me telling her.*

*Either way, I'll be rooting for Team MAGI from here the whole time. Her voice adopts a bitter tone. It's not like I don't deserve being imprisoned—I did commit some crimes, after all—but if you want to get your retribution against Akàné, do me a favor and deal her mine as well.*

There's a lull as I try to gauge her emotions. *How are you holding up, Sya?* I ask gently. I can't imagine prison has been too kind to you.

*Fewer life-threatening situations than you've had, she points out. So, I guess I shouldn't complain too much. It's hard not being able*

to see her nor feel her consciousness as she speaks, but that sounds like the same dismissive tone she'd use when she was hiding a spike in her father's abuse from me. *They moved me to a nicer cell after you left, and I'm not held in solitary like you were, so it could certainly be a lot worse.*

Who are you trying to convince, I wonder? *Well, Mother is sending people to Catens to track down Akàné. I'm sure we could get you out if you wanted.*

*You've asked that before. I said I was going to serve my sentence.*

*I just want to give you the option. I miss you, Sya, and don't think you deserve your fate,* I say, somewhat confused. Is that really so bad?

There's a critical sharpness to her words now. *The prophecy might justify your blatant intolerance of the law, but I, for one, am not going to be a part of that.* What happened to the Elena who fell over in shame the first time she killed a deer? A beat, and her voice is quiet. Concern colors her tone, rather than annoyance. *I miss you too, El. Just... don't lose yourself along the way, okay?* With that, I feel Aurore close the connection, Sonya having deactivated the spell.

I sit in shock a few minutes, realizing that she's right. I haven't killed anyone or anything since that day on our way to Catens, but I have been quite the little rebel all of a sudden. Ever since I learned I could use magic, just a short time ago. So quick to disregard the laws when once one would have thought I'd likely become a legal enforcer of those same laws.

"... ena? Elena?" My attention is drawn back to the world around me. Isolde has climbed up onto the top bunk with me and is waving her hand in front of my face with a concerned look on hers.

I blink a few times in order to focus on her. "What is it, Isa?"

"You seem a bit out of it," she says, and the understatement is obvious. "How was your conversation with Sonya?"

I relay the major points, ending with the troubling revelation. "I don't... I mean, she's right, isn't she?"

Isolde takes a moment to plan out her words. "Perhaps. But the only Elena I know is the one whose first magic was in anger at how her best friend was being treated and who helped her to escape an abusive life at home, who signed up for a dangerous mission to save the world without hesitation, who led a rescue operation for a different friend in enemy territory, understanding it might not end well."

"But what about all the people I've lied to, manipulated to do what I want?" I ask, my voice starting to quiver. "Auren? Kreth? How is this any different from what Inoire's doing?"

She puts her hand on my chin, forcing me to look her in the eyes. "The Elena I know demonstrated to me that she's willing to do whatever it takes to save those she cares about, even at a risk of getting herself in trouble in the process. I don't think that's something she should be ashamed of." She utilizes our symesí bond to share her emotions without words. It's the warmth of the sun in a garden of flowers against the twilight confusion in my head. "Inoire, on the other hand, is self-centered. She's doing it for her own advantages. You're not planning on taking over the world when you defeat her, for one."

"We joined an illegal task force inside an illegal pirate group where we're going to be killing people," I remind her. "How are you okay with this?"

"You seemed okay with this, too, until about three minutes ago." When I don't say anything, she sighs. "One of the first things I learned as Fair Princess was that you can't build bridges

without chopping down a few trees. You can't charge people the low taxes they want if you need an army to go to war. If two high-profile people or nations start arguing, you can't side with both of them, and the one you don't choose is going to be unhappy about it." A beat. "Every action has a cost. Our job—as the princess, as the heroine of prophecy, as citizens of the world, whoever—is to decide which actions are worth their cost. And sometimes that means doing bad things for the right reasons. But," she says emphatically, "that doesn't make you a bad person." She leans forward and wraps me in a tight embrace. "And you, Elena, are not a bad person. I promise," she whispers in my ear before pulling away. "I'll admit that it's not the most honorable philosophy, but it is the one that makes the world work." She shrugs. "You can't make Sonya accept your help. She decided that her freedom isn't worth the cost of escaping. And you should respect that. Even if she seemed angry or disappointed in you, I'm sure that won't be the last time you hear from her. You've been friends too long."

I wipe away a tear before hugging her again. "Thank you, Isa."

Some time later, a pirate whom we haven't met brings the collection of clothes Mother promised last night. "Some of this has been looted," he tells us. His manners seem a bit awkward, like he isn't used to dealing with "nobility" or whatever Isa and I count as. "Some of this was made by other denizens here. It's a wide range of sizes and styles, but you two may take whatever you'd like. Just leave the cart outside in the hall when you're done, and we'll get it out of your way." With that, he takes a bow and hurriedly exits the room.

Going through the clothes is a nice way to get my mind off of the earlier, less-pleasant conversations. As the man said, most of it doesn't fit either of us, but Isa and I share childlike giggles

whenever we try on something that's several sizes too big. We both manage to find a modestly-sized collection: a mixture of comfortable, everyday clothes, pyjamas, and a pair of formal dresses. All in all, it's an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon.

\* \* \*

The next few days pass without major incident. Isolde and I wander the campus, occasionally chatting with other residents, and attempt our combat training with Captain Volner. The problem is that neither of us have ever held a sword in our life, so it's slow progress at best. We're both better with bows, and I'm able to share my experience with the former princess. The fact that arrows are also fantastic vectors of long-distance magic isn't half-bad either.

On the third day after our arrival in Unthern, Mother calls a meeting with MAGI. Ines's crew has finished the maintenance of their ship, and it's almost time for our first mission. We make our way to the central throne room where we first met Koraxi, and where she and I have exchanged a few stories over the last couple of days.

She sits in her throne, an excited smile on her face. "Are you guys ready?" When we all confirm this, she continues. "Then this is the briefing for your first mission." She takes a deep breath and hands us a piece of paper with a sketch of a middle-aged man. "Your target is Henry Ressen, a journalist in Illondrès, Zystelle. Like Akàné, he's a focal point of the information network. Taking him out will slow down that network."

"Speaking of Akàné..." I put forward.

Mother nods. "I've sent someone down to Catens to track



her down as well. Ressen," she continues, "is also responsible for drip-feeding proselytizing rhetoric in an effort to smooth over Inoire's future ascension. That needs to stop."

Isolde speaks up in confusion. "But wouldn't killing him simply create a martyr out of him if he's writing religious editorials?"

She raises a good point, and I ponder it a moment. "And capturing him would have the same effect, wouldn't it?"

"Aye, it would," Mother agrees. "But if his death appears to be an accident, then no one ought to be suspicious of it. Reports tell that he often goes to a tavern after work, the Shielded Dragons, often ending up quite drunk. You might be able to... 'convince' him to fall off a high ledge or something." *You could also push him magically, meaning you don't even have to stand next to him,* she adds in my head, which I pass along to Isolde as well. "Add in a fake suicide note, and you have yourself a dead man without all of the suspicion surrounding the situation." She turns to Isa and me. "As enemies of Incerin, your existing paperwork may cause problems, even in Zystelle. I've had these made by one of one of our denizens, and they're good enough to fool just about anyone." She takes a stack of papers from behind her, handing them to Clarissa (Isolde) and Sylvia Rynn (me). "You two are sisters, as usual," she tells Isolde and me. "So it'll make sense for you two to be traveling together." *Let me know when you reach Illondrès. You'll be the ones on the ground, but I'll do what I can to help from here.*

Throughout Mother's explanation, I can feel Isa reaching toward me mentally in concern, but I take a deep breath and think back to the conversation we had the other day. "Okay. Understood."

"Should we be expecting any major form of resistance?"

Isolde asks. "If Inoire's agents are unregistered continental therii, then attacking them head-on won't bear many fruit, especially without magic of our own."

"It's unlikely," Mother answers plainly. "As far as I'm aware, Inoire really only has the ability to grant magical power to the person she incarnates with. While we're not completely sure who that is, we have no reason to believe that it's Ressen, so you should be safe." That's a lie, and we do have magic of our own, though she obviously doesn't say this out loud.

Isolde nods. "Good to know. That makes things a bit easier."

"It does, but don't get overconfident." Mother turns now to Lieutenant Ines. "Hira: Once you land, your job will be to make contact with our agents there. It'd raise suspicion if the Unthern pirates suddenly showed up in Zystelle's capital with no warning and no reason. Create some minor drama with them, something like we haven't been receiving any reports from them and we need to whip them back into shape."

"Understood." I notice him flash a dubious, confused look in our direction before quickly looking away again.

Mother takes a surveying glance over the four of us. When none of us raise any further concerns, she dismisses us, and we head for Ines's ship, named the *Katas*. It quickly becomes clear that the other sailors have been told we're traveling to Illondrès but only know that the reasoning behind such a voyage is classified. And, to my surprise, none of them seem to care.

"It's not that unusual," Isolde says when I point this out to her. "People are often content to blindly follow orders, understanding that it's the leaders' job to figure out what to do. It's their job to listen. Nothing more complicated."

\* \* \*

Throughout our journey, I notice Ines casting strange glances at us, though he tries to hide it. It's the same suspicion that he showed in Unthern before we left. As we near Illondrès, however, he pulls Isolde and me into a room in the underside of the ship, out of prying ears. He looks us up and down, surveying us, trying to figure out... something. "What's your deal?" he asks roughly. The question being out of context, Isa and I look over at each other in confusion. "Czarina Koraxi summons you two personally to Unthern without any explanation, and suddenly you're going to stop an international magical conspiracy to take over the world? All by yourselves? I've seen your sparring between each other, and I can safely say that you little girls don't stand a chance against anyone!"

"Do you want to take that up with Koraxi herself?" I ask with a biting undertone. "MAGI was her idea, after all."

Ines begins a rebuttal, but Isolde stands, causing him to stop mid-sentence. Her voice isn't harsh, but it does carry an authority. "Lieutenant Ines, perhaps we were of interest to your Czarina because she simply thought we were cute and she wanted the novelty of having two exiled princesses in her court. Could it not be so?" She pauses for him to start a response just to interrupt once again. "As for our abilities, could she not look for spies rather than warriors?" She turns to face me. *Play along.* "A royal court is a fantastic place to become skilled in deception, is it not, Lady Elena?"

"Certainly. I've even heard it said that many of the nation's spies found their most useful training in the court, rather than anywhere else." I've no idea if that's even remotely true, but neither Isa nor Ines make any move to counter it.

Isa takes a few steps toward the pirate captain. "What say you to that?"

He growls. "You're weak little girls who are too used to the laziness of the court to do anything for yourself."

"Wrong answer." In a flash, she grabs his collar and, in a fashion that makes the throw seem physically reasonable, magically tosses him into the wall a couple meters behind him with enough force to split a few of the wall's wooden boards. "You've got some nerve discrediting women when your leader is one as well."

*Nice throw, I say to her. But isn't using magic on him a risky idea? Isn't he not supposed to know we can?*

*I was subtle enough, wasn't I?* she rebuts with a wink.

Her actions seem fueled by a deep anger and frustration at Brangaine's death, one that she might not even have been consciously aware of, but I decide not to press the issue as Ines appears to be fine, if a little shaken. *If you say so.* I extend my hand toward Ines to help him to his feet. "I can assure you that we're on the same side here. No need to cause conflicts amongst ourselves. We have an enemy who will do that for us without us needing to do anything. And I believe that Isolde and I are sufficiently capable of achieving our mission objectives to prevent them from doing that."

"I'll admit that we're not skilled in typical sword-based combat," Isolde says. "But we're formal enemies of Incerin, and we only have that title because we have a certain set of skills that can pose a threat to them. That's not to diminish your skills in the slightest," she rushes to add. "Our skills, however, benefit from an element of surprise, meaning that can't have rumors leaking, even among our own allies. That's why Koraxi decided to keep the details a secret, even from you." Huh. That's actually entirely true.

"Plus," I tell him, "one of our other advantages is just as you

say: people won't suspect the little fifteen-year-old girl to be the one who does them in. Again: it's the element of surprise."

I can tell that he's not happy with our answers, but he meekly apologizes and returns to his post elsewhere on the ship. Grabbing my hand, Isolde leads me back to our cabin. *He's not actually wrong*, she points out. *Our position and authority are pretty strange. I mean, we did just show up and suddenly usurp control and attention over everything.*

*I'd have expected you to be used to having this sort of status just by default*, I tease.

She scoffs and adopts a defensive pose, hands on her hips. *And I'd have expected the same from you, sis.*

I simply laugh. *You'd have expected wrong. Though I guess we'll just have to prove ourselves in Illondrès.*

\* \* \*

We don't have to wait long before we get the chance, as we arrive in Zystelle's capital city via the river early the following morning. Letting Mother know we've arrived, we step off the ship and are welcomed by an absence of security guards at the docks, which is a nice change from all of my traveling throughout Incerin.

"You do your thing," I tell Lieutenant Ines, "and we'll do ours and meet you back here when we're done." He nods in confirmation, and Isolde and I walk into the city proper. Like Rædes, this capital city is larger than most of Zystelle's cities, with an elevated central area containing the vital government buildings, protecting them from invasion. Unlike Rædes and many of Incerin's other cities, however, Illondrès wasn't plagued by war, meaning that its streets and buildings are far

older, dating back centuries, and they're arranged in a less organized fashion.

Our target, Ressen, is going to be at work all day, so we take this opportunity to scout the city. The weather is surprisingly pleasant, and it's nice to be on solid ground once again, rather than the open sea, so we're certainly not complaining about our stroll through the sprawling streets. Even among the city's bustling crowds, it's peaceful enough for us to almost forget what's happened within the last few weeks and simply enjoy the day.

We start off by locating the bar that Mother mentioned that Ressen frequents after work, the Shielded Dragons. A deceptively large stone building, it stands near the east side of the city, wedged between two streets that sit at weird angles relative to the rest of the city's vaguely rectangular grid. Inside, its beautiful woodwork gives off a more formal, upscale atmosphere despite common stereotypes about taverns. In fact, it feels more like a full restaurant than a tavern, which is confirmed when I notice the menu, which contains a long list of dishes they serve. The barkeep tries to get us to stay and order something, but we finally manage to extricate ourselves by insisting that we were simply exploring and promising to come back later.

With Location 1 in hand, we need to find the site of us, as Mother so tactfully put it, convincing Ressen to fall off a high ledge. There are a quite a few buildings in the city that would work, but it would be difficult to get onto their roofs without arousing suspicion or going around security. Fortunately for us, the city park nearest the tavern, Falaise Park, is known for its beautiful waterfalls. The park sits slightly elevated relative to the rest of the city, and the river we traveled

along through Zystelle narrows somewhat, running through Falaise Park before tumbling off a cliff, forming a breathtaking view. The water flow is slow enough to avoid the crashing roar that happens at bigger falls, leaving this scene peaceful and serene. A fence stands at the cliff's edge, preventing people from accidentally falling to the lake below. And if they are lucky enough to miss the lake, a collection of sharp rocks eagerly await them. This will serve our purposes perfectly: bring Ressen here, push him off the edge, leave the suicide note, and return to the docks.

*How are we going to write a suicide note in Ressen's hand?* Isolde asks me as we leave the park.

I think about it for a moment. *I'm not sure, I admit. It was Mother's idea. Let me ask her.*

*You need to find things that he's written, is the response. If you can find a journal or something, you can use magic to write something using the same handwriting. But you can't make a copy of anything you don't have.*

Magic really does solve a lot of problems. *Where we can find something like that, though?* But I don't think it can solve this one.

*We've been tracking him for a while, and we know where he lives,* she explains. *I'll navigate you there.*

I let Isolde know the situation, and we begin walking toward the south end of the city, following Mother's directions. We soon find ourselves in a modest area of Illondrès, where the houses are comfortably spaced yet still stand small enough for middle class workers to afford. In a strange way, the area has a certain charm to it, even empty with its inhabitants at work. Finding Ressen's house, I unlock the door with a spell, and Isa and I quickly head inside.

The house is sparse, with little in the way of decorations. It's not barren, as the rooms are furnished, but the furniture is merely simple, functional pieces. Stereotypically masculinely plain, I guess. The arrangements are orderly, and the house is surprisingly clean and organized. It means that we'll have to be careful not to leave anything out of place as we search.

*I'm going to check for an office, I tell Isolde. Why don't you check the bedroom for a nightstand?*

*Got it.* She goes upstairs, leaving me to explore the main floor. Though I'm unable to find anything useful down here, Isolde calls me upstairs just a few moments later. *I found something, El.* I find her in the bedroom, flipping through a notebook that she found in a small wooden cabinet next to the bed. *I think this will work,* she says, showing me a page. *It looks like he's used almost all of the letters.*

We think for a few minutes, trying to decide what the fake suicide note should say. We skim the journal to see if we can infer any possible reason for the act: Is he struggling financially? Does he have any problems at work? With colleagues? We know he frequents the bar, so could it be a result of his alcoholism? How is his social life, romantic or otherwise? In fact, the journal seems to be largely a chaotic, ostensibly unorganized collection of notes about different people and stories. He is a journalist, after all. It appears that Ressen lives and breathes his work—and alcohol. The stories also all have a thread of darkness running through them: violent crimes, missing persons, various deaths, other tragedies. There's hardly anything personal elsewhere in the house, and Mother's intel doesn't provide much more detail. This seems to be his life.

Isolde and I look at each other and nod. We've figured out what to write. Isolde takes a piece of paper from the back of



the notebook and whispers, “téda lí moda Ressen-ser ís éton maisu éklari ser,” the spell Mother gave us. Over the next few seconds, words begin flowing in Ressen’s handwriting:

*I live my work and always have been—a task made difficult when this work is darker than the deepest abyss I could imagine. Seeing such horrors befall the others around me, I could not but turn away from life—both mine and these others’. This life they may call mine belongs not to me for I know no longer how to live it. Those escapes I could once upon a time hold on to are now reminders, exacerbating everything in multiples, and there is only one more escape I can imagine. No one else can will should give me one.*

—Henry R.

Looking between the paper that Isolde just created and the notebook from the cabinet, I’m impressed with the level of fidelity. Not that it matters, since King Lance recognized me practically instantly in Vasen, but having this spell would have made writing the fake letter significantly easier. Still, I think that our handiwork here will pass inspection.

By this point, it’s mid-afternoon, and it takes roughly an hour to reach the tavern once again on foot. Once we arrive, the barkeep calls us over to the bar in excitement, thrilled that we have made good on our promise.

“Welcome back, ladies! How was your exploring?”

Isolde’s the one to speak up. “It was nice,” she answers. “It’s always so much fun to see what a new city has to offer.”

He nods, perhaps over-eagerly, in agreement. “Indeed. I’ve been here for many years, yet I’m still always discovering new

things to see and do." A beat, wherein he realizes what his job actually entails. "Well, what can I get for you two?"

"A lemonade, please," Isolde says.

"I'll have one as well," I add when the barkeep swings his gaze onto me. He seems surprised, almost judgmental about my choice, questioning why an of-age woman would want the stereotypical children's drink, but he doesn't voice any concern, for which I'm grateful.

We were rushed so quickly to the bar that I take this opportunity to study the surrounding tables for the first time. As most people are still at work—at least for a little while longer—the tavern is largely empty, though a few older couples sit along the far wall. *I wonder where Ressen will sit*, I mention to Isolde. *If we want to be close to him...*

*Well, if you wanted to be suspicious, we could always ask the bartender*, she responds with a bit more sass than I was expecting. *He'd probably know. Otherwise, we'll just have to wait and see.* I shoot a sideways glance at her in annoyance. *Hmph. If you're really that concerned about it, El, then at least we don't have to wait long*, she adds, her eyes darting to the clock behind the bar.

I follow her gaze, confirming the time. She's right, of course. We resign ourselves to waiting the short handful of minutes before Ressen walks in the door. Conveniently, he sits at the bar to our left, taking the seat next to mine.

*We've made contact*, I tell Mother. I think back to my time in Catens, when Sonya and I were waiting to take the carriage out to the farm. There was this boy... Liti, I think his name was? Regardless, the way he looked at me when I was done singing, the way he was trying to... and here I am, setting myself up for it again, aren't I?

Isolde and I make idle chatter to occupy ourselves while

carefully listening to Ressen's conversation, waiting for an opening. Parts of our conversation are true, some contain a second meaning understandable only to ourselves, and some are completely nonsense. Throughout, I notice him trying to cast subtle glances in our direction.

"I'm worried about what's going to happen when we get back," I eventually say before taking a drink from my glass. "I'm going to miss this." I'm hoping that he picks up on the cue to jump into the conversation.

Isolde lets out a soft laugh. "The constantly getting lost in the big cities?"

"Hmph. We're not constantly lost, are we?" I give her an annoyed look. "Besides, it's worth it to get to see everything."

"Well, it's difficult to see everything when we're too lost to find it." Though our argument is fake, I still flinch at the sharpness to her voice.

"Whoa, there," Ressen interjects, much to my chagrined delight. "No need for two pretty girls like you to fight, is there?" His words are slurred somewhat, though still clearly understandable. My cheeks flush slightly at the compliment despite myself, and I hurriedly look away.

Isolde, on the other hand, seems like she's in her element. *Perfect. I got this.* "I'm not so sure about that," she says out loud with a warm but coy smile spreading across her face. *Keep playing the shy girl like that, she tells me. Fight back and don't give in until I tell you to, okay?* When I agree, she gently places her hand on my leg. *Don't worry, you'll be fine. Nothing is going to happen to you. I promise.*

As I take a deep breath, Ressen laughs at Isolde's comment. "That you two are pretty, or that there's no reason to fight? Personally, I—"

"Both," I offer quietly. "She's obviously wrong, and I'm not going to let her off the hook so easily."

Ressen raises his eyebrow, but Isolde's words are quicker than his. "Just a friendly, sisterly rivalry," she explains with a smile. "Nothing too outrageous." *Good.*

"Well," begins the response. "I'm still going to have to insist on that first one, and I'd like to buy you a drink. If you wouldn't mind, of course." He leans over, with his elbow on the bar, a confidently cheesy smile on his face.

"No, no. That won't be necessary," I say quickly with a polite smile, causing Ressen's to falter slightly.

Isolde rolls her eyes and sighs before she grabs my arm, spinning me to face her. Her voice is quiet, barely loud enough for Ressen to hear. "What did we talk about, Sylvia? Isn't this what you wanted?" I begin protesting, but she cuts me off by placing her finger on my lips. She turns to Ressen with an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry, sir. She's a shy one, you know. We're trying to break her out of her little shell." She turns back to me with a quiet, gentle voice. "Will you let him buy you a drink?" *You're doing great, El. Agree to this one.*

Following Isolde's directions, I timidly turn to face Ressen, putting on a sweet smile. "On second thought, I don't mind. Thank you. On one condition." He raises his eyebrow in surprise at my request. "My blabbermouth of a sister told you my name, but I still don't know yours." I can tell that Isolde is flashing a smile behind me.

"Henry Ressen, at your service, Captain Sylvia." He tries to bow sitting down, narrowly catching himself before he falls. It elicits a laugh from each of us, and he calls over the bartender to order my drink. "Your great 'first-mate' of a sister hasn't introduced herself either."

Replicating Ressen's method of introduction, Isa curtsies in her chair. "I'm First Mate Clarissa, dutifully serving my Captain." It's all I can do not to roll my eyes, though Ressen seems to enjoy it.

The barkeeper returns a moment later with my drink. As I pick it up, I notice a faint shimmer pass through the liquid. *I purified the drink to remove the alcohol, so you won't have to worry about its effects*, Isolde informs me. Neither blatantly obvious nor particularly subtle, I'm hoping that Ressen didn't notice the spell's visual effect. He doesn't mention anything, so I think we're safe.

What he does say is: "So, any chance I can help solve your rivalry problem? The one about you being lost in the city?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. "We're not lost!" In a quieter, more resigned voice, I add, "Or, at least, not all the time."

"What were you trying to find?"

"Falaise Park. We heard that its waterfall is beautiful."

He nods. "Not as beautiful as you, but... It really is great. It's one of my favorite spots in Illondrès." A beat. "Would you two like me to take you?"

Yes, that would be perfect. "No, no. That won't be—Ow!" I exclaim as Isa not-so-subtly elbows me in the stomach. It's not enough to hurt, but it definitely catches me off-guard.

*Let him take us. It's the perfect opportunity*, she coaches.

"I mean," I say, rubbing my stomach where Isolde hit me, "if you're sure it's no trouble, we'll happily take you up on that."

"Not at all," he insists. "It's not far from my house, so it's not too far out of the way." That's a stretch. The walk from Falaise Park to his house isn't particularly short. It looks like we may have been spot-on about his desperation in the note we left. "Shall we?"

"There's no need to rush, right?" Isolde asks. "My feet are still a bit sore from all the walking we did earlier."

At this point, I really just want to get this whole thing over with. "You could ride on my shoulders if you want," I offer.

She, for her part, adopts a teasing smile. "Ooh, you're more excited now, aren't you, Sylvia? I knew you had it in you." When I roll my eyes at her, she backs off slightly. "Fine, fine." *You're a natural, El. Even off-script, you're doing well.* I might just be imagining things, but I could swear I see her wink as well.

With that, the three of us pay our tabs, gather our things, and head out the door. Isa climbs onto my shoulders as I begin following about half a step behind Ressen toward the park. Our conversation turns to innocent, idle chatter as we walk. It's easier when I don't have to make up stories, so I try to make Ressen do most of the talking, which he seems perfectly happy to do. His job, complaining about his colleagues, the other writers, how uninteresting life gets when you analyze it for how well it can tell a story, ...

"I used to have a lot more fun," he explains, "before I got this job, before I had to look at the terrible things that just happen sometimes and figure out how to sell the story." A beat. "Oh, this prominent person died, which is tragic, yes, but none of my readers really know them. It doesn't feel the same as when your father dies or anything." Another beat. "Or pretending to be overly happy or excited or whatever when something positive happens, hoping that your fake enthusiasm is magically transferred through the words, as if that would ever happen. Especially when you're not particularly optimistic in general." His last sentence is mumbled, and I only barely manage to hear it.

I'm quiet for a moment. "I hadn't really thought about it

before, but I guess you're right." It's not the best response, I know.

His face flushes, and he turns away from me. "I'm sorry to complain so much to you. I just... You've just been nice to me tonight, and I'm sorry to have taken advantage of that."

*Don't lose him yet*, Isa warns me.

*I wasn't going to*. "Don't worry, Henry. You can make it up to us by taking us to the park." I flash him a warm smile. "Oh, wait. You're already doing that!" He weakly returns the smile, but he's quiet until we reach the edge of the park. It's an easy journey along the river's bank to the waterfall.

*Which of us is doing this?* Isolde asks, a concerned tone in her voice.

I think back to the conversations I had with Sonya and with Isolde a few days ago. I won't revel in it, but I will do what I must. This is who I am now, but I won't lose who I was before. *I'll do it*. I stumble slightly on purpose, placing my hand on Ressen's arm to catch myself. As I do, I silently cast "sova lempéa" with just a trickle of *theresis* to slow the spell's effect.

Ressen stops walking, placing his hand on his head. "I'm sorry, girls. I'm just really tired all of a sudden. I'm not sure I can keep going."

Near the waterfall's edge stand a few trees. I lead him over to one. "It's fine. Stay here, and Clarissa and I can walk around a bit." He nods, and I fully activate my sleep spell as he sits down. *This way, he won't feel anything as he falls*, I explain to Isa, who hops down off of my shoulders. I take a deep breath and check to confirm that no one else is around. There's a couple a few hundred meters away, but they aren't paying attention, nor would they be able to see anything in the near-twilight darkness. "Flýt ís Ressen verla," I whisper, directing his limp

body carefully over the edge. When I release the spell, he falls unceremoniously downward, plummeting toward the rocky ground which sits slightly higher than the waterfall's basin. I don't want his body floating away down the river, and it is a certain, instant death this way.

*Target down*, I inform Mother, trying to hide as much of my emotions as I can as Isolde sets out the suicide note under a rock near the cliff. Hopefully, someone will find it tomorrow morning, after we've left the city.

I'm motionless as Isa grabs my hand and stares into my eyes, trying to read me. *Are you okay, El?* Her voice is soft, and I wish I could fall into it forever, forever embraced by its caressing sonority and concern. She starts leading me away from the waterfall, back toward the docks where we'll reconvene with Ines.

*I think so*, I tell her. I make no effort to hide my conflicting emotions from her. *I know it needed to be done, but... It's still hard to... We just manipulated a man into starting to fall for me before killing him for trusting us...* I somehow manage to less-than-coherently splice together.

She's quiet for a few moments, the only sounds being the soft rustle of our clothes in the breeze and our light steps against the ground. *I know it's not easy*, she finally says. She presses her consciousness more strongly against mine, and I can sense the same emotions rushing through her, just a bit more tame. *But the fact that you're struggling with this is proof that you're a good person in a less-than-desirable position. Brangaine sacrificed himself for us to fight this war, and we owe it to him to press on, even when it's difficult.*

We continue walking to the docks in silence, finding Ines standing on the deck of the *Katas*. "Mission complete. Depart



at discretion," I say when we reach him. He nods his understanding, and Isa and I retreat below deck to our beds. Bunked like our beds in Unthern, I climb to the upper bunk while Isolde watches with a curious eye.

*Would you like me to...* she asks after a moment.

I impress as much warmth and gratitude as I can upon her mind. *Yes, please.* And she climbs up to join me. Somehow, the crashing waves of moral dilemma racing through each of our heads fade away in the warmth of the other's embrace and, soon after, they become our gentle tides of dormant breaths.

## A Long-Kept Secret

I may have been exhausted and not in the most perceptive of states when we left Illondrès, but even so, the tension between us and Lieutenant Ines should have been strong enough to be easily noticeable. Isa's stunt on the journey there—throwing him into a wall to prove we weren't incapable—didn't seem to help, nor did our mysterious mission completion, nor has Mother's continued unexplained favoritism of us. While Isolde and I have enjoyed this lull between missions, exchanging stories and training alone with the pirate queen late into the night, her lieutenant has been cold and distant, avoiding us when he can and speaking only in short, biting phrases when he can't.

"I told you when you first came here that I never returned to Thessia after what would be seen as a failed mission," Mother explains to Isa and me after I ask her about Ines one night. "Accordingly, I also never told anyone that I was from the islands in the first place. It'd have raised too many questions about my magical abilities." She stops my interruption with a raised hand. "He does know I've been there, however. We have a number of

agents across the continent, and I only told Ines about Corbelle once I'd received a report that seemed to fit with what I knew about her. Combined with my reputation for good hunches, he never doubted me about it. But then you, Elena," she continues with a smile, "chose to leave Rædes and set the prophecy in motion, attracting Inoire's attention to yourself, accelerating our plans considerably."

Isolde crosses her arms and adopts an indignant expression. "Hey, I was there, too. El would have been killed in Steilla without me."

I stick my tongue out playfully at her. "And you would have been stuck in Vasen without me."

Our teasing elicits a laugh from Mother. "Of course, Fair Princess Isolde Ennets. I am forever in your debt for saving my daughter." Isolde, now outnumbered, flounders at a comeback before quieting down. "Both of you girls, along with Estènne, are the keys to our victory. My experience and power reserves were enough to hold you off in our sparring the night you arrived, but that won't be the case after the incarnation ritual with Estènne." She turns to grab a box from behind her throne. "That reminds me. I should have given these to you earlier," she says, holding the box out to us: it's a pair of necklaces. "Take these for storing excess thesis. You never know when it'll be useful." We each take one as instructed. Mine is a thin chain with a collection of small colored gems elegantly splayed across my sternum. Isolde's, by contrast, holds a single larger colorless gem in its beautiful rose-gold inset.

"But what does all this have to do with Ines?" I ask.

"The problem," she begins slowly, "is that he knows none of this. He doesn't know the true nature of Inoire, that Estènne is still alive, that you two are the heroines of prophecy, that any of

the three of us can use magic, or even that you're my daughter, Elena." A beat. "You two just show up out of nowhere and rise to the top of the ranks without having to prove yourselves? He doesn't show it, but he's still bitter about me beating him out for power all those years ago—let alone you two."

"But... We did prove ourselves," I insist. "The night we first got here."

I can hear the gears in Isolde's head turning. "But Ines wasn't in the room for that test. The only thing he saw was us sparring with swords later which, no offense, El, we're not good with."

"Exactly," Mother confirms. "And your show of strength on the ship, Isolde, impressive as it must have been, wasn't enough to explain everything."

"Well, if me magically throwing people into walls somehow isn't the solution to everything, what is the plan, Celaena?"

Contrasting Isa's joking, sarcastic tone, Mother buries her head in her hands and takes a deep breath. When her words come, they're quiet and hesitant. It's a far cry from her typical sense of confidence and authority. "We tell Hira the truth. After we bind him not to tell anyone else without our permission."

"There's a spell for that, I assume?" Isolde asks.

Mother nods solemnly. "I try to avoid using it. I don't like manipulating people with magic against their will, but..." Composing herself, she calls out to the guards standing outside the door, entering at her command. "Fetch Lieutenant Ines, if you please. I would like to speak with him." At her words, the guards salute and quit the room once more, on the hunt for their target. As we wait, she begins pacing, clearly regretting this decision but no longer able to reverse it while Isolde and I merely look on.

The tension in the room makes it feel longer, but it's only a

few minutes before the guards return with Ines. He passes his eyes over Isolde and me before speaking. "You called for me, Czarina?" he asks, pulling her out of her reverie.

"Yes, Hira." Out loud, her voice is almost the same confident Czarina Koraxi that he must be used to. "There is one thing first and foremost that I must do and for which I deeply apologize." He begins to respond but stops when she raises her right palm toward him. "To aro pliro lí éton maisu corísse arèn lení," she says in a thundering voice. With what must be the binding spell she mentioned earlier, Lieutenant Ines begins emitting a faint but still noticeable red glow. "I'm sorry," Mother whispers.

"W-What is this?! What's going on? You..." Given what happened and the fact that he's still glowing, I'm surprised he's even that coherent.

Mother simply looks calmly at her fellow pirate. "That's what we're here to talk about. There are a few things we need to tell you. But I want it to be clear that it isn't that I didn't trust you: I have kept these secrets for years with very little intention to ever share them."

As Ines nods, still very much confused, and Mother begins her long explanation of her long-guarded secrets, I feel Aurore pulling at my consciousness. *What is it, Aurore? Is Sonya trying to talk to me?*

*She seemed to be debating it, repeatedly turning over the gemstone of my palace. But, the spirit says with a smile, she did eventually summon me. So, yes, she is trying to talk to you.*

I let Isolde know what is happening, as my focus is going to be drawn out of the room. *I'm ready. Cast, Aurore.* A beat. *How are you holding up, Sya?*

To my surprise, I hear muffled crying. *I'm sorry for what I said last week, El. Don't get me wrong: I am worried about you and what*

*you're doing.* Her words are faint but strong, almost as if she's rehearsed this conversation countless times in her head. *But I trust you. Just assure me that you know what you're doing.*

In her world, my avatar walks over and lifts her chin in order to look her deep in the eyes. *I promise. The only consolation is that I can protect others from having to do such terrible things if I do them myself.*

She closes her eyes and nods. *Thank you.* We sit and enjoy the moment, relishing the lack of tension between us, just as before. *A few men came to me yesterday,* she eventually says. *They said they had a message for you.*

*Unthern pirates?* These must have been the ones Mother sent to get information about Akàné.

Sonya nods. *Yes. They were confused as to how I could possibly help, but they gave me a report to pass along to you.*

*Did you tell them anything?* I know Mother is currently telling Ines about our magical abilities, but it's still going to be a secret kept from the rest of the pirates.

*No. Only that I have my ways and that they'd already completed their mission by reporting to me.* A beat. *Anyway, they didn't find anything here in Steilla, but they did some digging around Catens. Akàné is headed for Thessia.*

That's not good. What? Now?

Soon, anyway. She pauses to collect her words. *Apparently, she was summoned to speak with the Monarchs in Vasen a few days ago. She sold the house we stayed in before she left.*

*Why are the Monarchs still in Vasen?* With the other cities on their tour, they were only there for a few days, but it's been over two weeks since Isa and I escaped Vasen. *How do you know she's going to Thessia after that?*

*The Unthern agents received intel that she was traveling to the*

*south, she explains, but they were confused given that Vasen is very much not southward. Deep breath. You and I were planning to meet Isolde in Vasen on our way to Thessia. That, plus the fact that Corbelle has possessed King Lance in Vasen, who is planning an attack on Thessia... It's the only thing that makes sense.*

She's right: that does make sense, unfortunately. We're going to need to stop Akàné from wreaking havoc in Thessia before the Incerin or continental militaries can get there and make everything exponentially worse. It's quite possible that Inoire will grant her magical powers if she hasn't already, which will only make our job even more difficult. *Thanks, Sya. I'll pass this along. I can feel my tone turn somber and regretful. I have to go now, but ask for Aurore's help later, if you can. I'd like to talk about more than just acts of espionage, you know?*

She lets out a quiet giggle. *Of course, El.*

With that, I feel Aurore's magic fade and find my focus once more in Koraxi's throne room. The pirate queen is still speaking with Ines, though Isolde is staring intently at me, paying little attention to the secrets unfolding. *What's the news?*

I frown. *We need to tell Mother.* I give her the short version, and together, we resign ourselves to waiting until Ines is brought up to speed on, well, everything else. Fortunately, it isn't too long before he has processed things well enough to be confused.

"Let me get this straight," he says slowly. "Czarina, you were born in Thessia, Elena is your daughter, and the three of you are therii?"

Mother nods. "And that last piece is the true reason why Elena and Isolde are enemies of Incerin. It doesn't hurt that they, along with Estènné, are the centerpieces of the prophecy opposing Inoire herself, who has a very strong foothold in the Incerin government."

“My magical ability should explain that one encounter on our way to Zystelle as well,” Isolde offers.

For my part, I simply whisper, “Ínar. Alíd.” An orange ball of flame appears in my left hand, and a deep-blue diamond of ice appears in my right. Ines’s eyes grow wide before I let the magic dissipate and turn toward Mother. “My magic is also what just gave me useful intel about Akàné.”

“Sonya?” she asks, to which I nod. “What did our agents say?” As I relay the update from Sonya, the tension in the room grows significantly.

“Akàné is a threat,” I explain to Ines. “She’s the one who captured my friend and me in Steilla, and she proved herself to be one of Inoire’s top agents. The fact that she’s mobilizing for Thessia...”

“... really doesn’t bode well,” Mother finishes. “Thessia has always been our end goal: we need to unite Elena with Estènne before we can hope to effectively deal with Inoire. But I’ve also received word that weapon stockpiles around the Incerin coastline have received more traffic lately. It seems that she, through King Lance, is planning on starting a war with Thessia and, by extension, us.”

*If I may...* Estènne says in my head. I nod, and her avatar appears in the room, much to Ines’s surprise. “Estènne Cerveille,” she says in introduction, curtsying toward him. She turns to address the group as a whole. “Corbelle is and always has been obsessed with power. As you know, since our battles centuries ago, we two have lay dormant. The problem is that her convictions have only strengthened exponentially since then, bathed in—and feeding off of—her own caustic energy all this time. By now,” she continues, “she has incarnated with King Lance and convinced him that her power is divine, that



she is the True Goddess of this world.” Estènne looks at me in particular. “She said as much herself when Elena confronted her briefly in Vasen. As far as Inoire is concerned, that isn’t a lie: she genuinely believes that to be true. And she’s powerful enough to stop just about anyone who dares argue with her.”

The silence in the room is broken by Mother’s quiet voice. “You and Elena being the obvious counterexample.”

Estènne nods solemnly. “Yes, though our fight will still be far from a foregone conclusion. We need any advantages we can secure.”

“So,” I ask, “what’s the plan?”

“You have to get to Thessia. But we can’t win a war against the Incerin military,” Mother says simply. “Thessian forces are very limited as well, meaning we need to stop Incerin before a war can even start if we want to have a chance.”

“If we destroy those weapon stockpiles you mentioned...”

Mother surveys the room before taking a deep breath, displeasure clear on her face. “We have two objectives: one, to escort Elena to Thessia to perform the incarnation ritual with Estènne; two, to neutralize the coastal Incerin military threat against Thessia.” A beat wherein she draws herself up into a more confident, authoritative stance. “These both need to be achieved, and we don’t have much time. We’ll split the group. Elena, you and I will head to the islands. Hira, your crew will travel the northern coastline, aiding Isolde as necessary to achieve the second objective. Is this acceptable?”

There’s a torn tension in the room now. None of us like the idea of dividing the group, but I think we all recognize that it needs to be done. In particular, I hate the prospect of leaving Isolde essentially alone to infiltrate hostile military encampments in her own home country. She might be perfectly

capable of the mission, but it still leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

*I'm more concerned about leaving you against Akàné, you know.* I hadn't even said anything to her.

*I'll have Estènne and Mother with me, I remind her. You will be the only theria, you'll be in hostile territory, and Inoire could decide to show up.*

"The plan's fine with me," Isolde says aloud, breaking the silence.

Ines and Estènne reluctantly give their assent, and the entire room looks at me for my answer. Only if you promise me you'll be okay, Isa. She looks me in the eyes and gives a subtle nod. "Okay then," I finally let out.

"How soon will you be ready to leave?" Mother asks Ines. "As you might suspect, time is not our ally in this."

The lieutenant responds with a quiet chuckle. "No, it's not. We'll be ready to leave by sunrise tomorrow."

Mother turns to Isolde. "Is that acceptable, Lady Isolde?" When she approves, though seemingly displeased with the titling, Mother smiles. "Shall we leave in the morning as well, Elena?"

It's not like there's much of a choice. I shrug. "It's sooner or later, and later doesn't seem the best option given the situation." Giving Akàné more time to set up... whatever it is she's working on is not a great idea.

The atmosphere turns to one of settled awkwardness, each of us sure of our mission but unsure of what to say. "Okay, then," Mother eventually says. "If there aren't any other questions, then you two—" she indicates Ines and Isolde—"are dismissed. I have one small thing I need to talk to Elena about in private."

An expression of displeasure briefly on Isolde's face, but she

manages to conceal it quickly enough that I'm not even certain I didn't imagine it. I am surprised as well, given the perfectly absolute privacy of our symesí connection that she, for some reason, is choosing not to take advantage of. But no one raises a fuss, and Isolde and Ines politely take their leave before I can say anything.

Mother's eyes follow the two of them with a certain tension until they leave, and her expression relaxes slightly once we're alone. Despite that, her words are slow to come and heavy with hesitation. "You're not the only one worried about her, Elena," she says with quick glance in my direction before looking away just as quickly. "Our journey to Thessia is going to take a while. It would pain me to no end if we were simply traveling while she's risking everything for our mission."

I'm still confused, though I didn't particularly need reminded of the risks. "What can we really do, though? I'm not happy about it, but the two missions do both need done," I counter.

She's recovered much of her composure, but she still seems a bit uneasy. "There is one special technique that we can use to observe her progress on the mission..."

"Couldn't we just talk to her? Even if it's halfway across the world, our symesí connection should still work, right?"

"...without her noticing," Mother finishes, placing extra emphasis on the first word. "What do you think her reaction would be if we kept pestering her for an update as if we don't trust her?"

She has a point. Isolde already seems uneasy about my concern for her mission. She flat-out said that she's more concerned about leaving me to fight Akàné than she is for her own life, invading Incerin military bases where she is quite recognizable as the former Fair Princess. But I remain silent,

uncomfortable with the idea.

“Lýpto lí starí ís vet éklaro ser kun arí kalor éklaro,” she says after I stay quiet. Though it’s a spellphrase, it doesn’t seem that she has cast it now, which she confirms. “You can use this spell on her tonight before we leave, then call upon the newly-formed connection to observe her surroundings while we travel.” A beat. “Just be aware: You have to be touching in order to cast this, and it will take a moderate amount of thesisis to perform.”

There’s clearly something uncomfortable about this conversation that she is forcing herself to get through. Just as I’m about to respond to her advice, it suddenly clicks in my head: “This is how you knew what happened to me all these years, isn’t it?” My emotions at this realization are muddled, appreciation and affection swirling against discomfort and embarrassment at being spied upon all my life.

Accordingly, Mother isn’t quite sure how to handle my reaction, though she seems surprised I pieced it together that quickly. “Yes, it is,” she eventually says, turning her face from me. “I wish that it could have been different, but I couldn’t bear to lose you, Elena.”

“... Did Father know?”

“Indeed,” she nods. “It was my way of saying, ‘Even when I’m not here, I am watching over you.’ The target has to have some magical affinity, however, so I could not perform the spell but on you, even if you couldn’t properly consent at your age.”

“And you want me to do this with Isolde?” I ask with a touch of concern. “I understand the purpose, of course, but I can’t help but notice that you seem to regret doing it with me, and I’m not keen to go behind Isa’s back like this.”

She sighs, and I’m not sure if she’s relieved or disappointed. “I’m not going to force you, but I wanted to give you the option.

I recognize your hesitation, but it might still be worth it." She puts her hand on my shoulder. "That's your call. You know her better than I do."

Now it's my turn to sigh. "I'll think about it. Is there anything else we need to discuss before tomorrow morning?"

"Not that's of any importance. We'll have time to talk on our journey." She gives me a warm smile. "Go on and take the rest of the night for yourself, and make sure that Isolde does the same."

With that, I take my leave, still completely unsure of whether I'll use the spell I just learned. Lost in my thoughts, my feet somehow find their way to the room I've been sharing with Isolde, though a small part of me idly notices that this won't be the case after tonight.

The princess herself is sitting on the lower bunk, watching me as I enter the room. Perhaps she's simply curious, perhaps she can sense my confusion; either way, she cocks her head sideways and hits me with her piercing gaze. "Is there anything I should be concerned about?" she asks, her voice smooth and innocent yet still conveying an ironclad intensity and sword-like sharpness amidst its genuine, caressing regards.

I shake my head unconvincingly and climb into the upper bed, surveying the ceiling. "I'm nervous about the missions—not just yours."

She's quiet a moment, and I can almost hear her thoughts spinning in her head. "Worry is useful only insofar as it begets preparedness," she says carefully, her voice carrying the almost condescending tone appropriate of the nobility and propriety of her royal upbringing. "Beyond that, it is merely a detriment whose sole purpose is to distract you from that very preparedness you worked so diligently to achieve." She scoffs

at her own façade and regains her signature, unprincess-like tone. “Of course, while that is true, it is also quite difficult to consciously internalize.”

I turn her phrasing over in my head in an effort to unravel the advice. “So... worry as much as necessary to motivate being prepared, but don’t let the worrying consume you?”

“Precisely.”

I can tell she’s smiling, just from her tone, and it’s contagious. “Actually, Isa...” I decide that I need to tell her about the scrying spell Mother gave me. At the very least, that it exists and that it’s how she knew things about me which I’d never told her.

“Hmm,” she says once I’ve finished. “I remember, from our first night here, her joking about how one might have suspected you dead in Steilla. I was suspicious of how she knew that, but this makes sense, actually.”

“It’s weird knowing that she was watching all that time without me being aware of it. It’s not like I really have anything to hide, but it feels like a real invasion of privacy, you know?” A beat. “And she wants me to cast the spell on you for your upcoming mission.”

She mulls it over for a few moments. “It’s not a terrible idea, to be fair. It’d give you a consistent update on my situation without me having to be distracted by telling you all the time.”

“Are you sure you want me to do it?”

She laughs. “If you promise to look away while I’m changing, then I’m sure it’ll be fine.” She notices my continued hesitation. “Hey, you’re telling me about it beforehand. It’s significantly less uncomfortable if I know about it. Which I do.” She climbs up into my top bunk and sits cross-legged in front of me, a wide smile on her face. “I do have one other condition, however.” I cock my head sideways in intrigue. “I get to cast the spell on

you as well.” She interrupts my questioning glance to explain. “I’ll be heading to Thessia once I’m done up here, but that means that you’ll be working on your mission while I am traveling. It’s the same as the situation now, just with our roles reversed.”

“Seems fair enough.” I smile and grab her hand, reaching for my thesis, and the two of us say the spell in unison. I close my eyes, whispering the activating spell: “*Arí kalor ís Isolde.*” With that, the darkness from the inside of my eyelids is replaced with, well, myself as Isolde sees me. She speaks in a voice lower than I’m used to, and I realize that her senses have mostly overridden mine, though our thoughts are still separate and I maintain a vague awareness of my own surroundings. Shifting my focus back into my own body, I release my thesis and return fully to myself. Isa’s question had been what the experience was like. “It wasn’t like it is when we exchange thoughts, but I could read all of your senses: sight, hearing, touch...”

“And I felt nothing at all,” she explains. “I was just sitting here, looking at you.” A moment passes while she thinks about the situation. “May I try? I have something that I want to test.” I give her my permission, and she casts the spell. Her eyes are closed tight, great effort showing on her face. *Can... you... hear... me... El?* Her words are slow and strained, the demands of the scrying spell taking the bulk of her consciousness. When I confirm this, she adds, *Cast a... spell on... yourself.* I quickly cast the calming spell and feel it take effect. A few seconds later, Isolde takes a deep breath as she returns to herself. “Okay,” she says. “I’ve learned a few things.”

I let her catch her breath before asking, “What is it?”

“That this spell is actually quite demanding.” I move to say something, but she cuts me off. “No, it’s not that difficult by itself, but—by its nature—it makes it nearly impossible to do

much else that requires concentration. Namely, other magic.” She pauses. “Even something like projecting thoughts, which you and I normally do quite easily and readily, was a real challenge, if you couldn’t tell by how disjointed I was when I told you to cast a spell. Moreover,” she adds, “though we can usually cast a second spell while a first remains active, I couldn’t even reach for my thesis without dropping concentration on the scrying.”

I jump onto the explanation. “And we lose most of our own awareness, so it’s not something that we can do while multitasking anyway.” I smile. “Sit down and watch your friend try to save the world, I guess.”

“Basically.” She chuckles. “There is one more thing I noticed,” she adds after a pause. “Though the spell allows us to experience the physical senses of the other person, we can’t detect when magical energy is affecting them.” I must have an expression of confusion on my face as she clarifies: “You could feel the magical energy of your calming spell. Even the times when I’ve cast it on you, right?” I nod. “Well, when you cast it a moment ago, I couldn’t detect it at all, meaning that non-physical senses are not conveyed by the spell.”

She really wanted to know the behavior and limitations of the spell. I’m impressed by how she’s handled this.

*A trait which has served her quite well. And will continue to do so,* Estènne says in my head, smiling. There’s a strange quality to her voice, as if she’s trying to lead me to something.

But it’s only when it’s combined with the sudden frustration of Estènne appearing out of nowhere (as she always seems to) that it hits me. *Even with this scrying spell, which seems to be a stronger version of the symesí connection, I begin, Isolde and I still can’t read thoughts the other isn’t projecting. How is it that you’re*



*always able to read mine without me doing anything?*

Estènnè lets out a quiet chuckle. *That is the question, isn't it? A beat. Ugh, fine,* she continues in mock exasperation. *Celaena's scrying spell isn't necessarily a stronger version of the symesí connection, per se, as the latter gives the ability of communication, which I find more valuable, personally. Also, I find its lack of detectability unsettling. But that's neither here nor there.* She regroups before she continues, her voice now clear and careful, making sure that her explanation is understandable. *Though its origins are different, the connection which Isolde and I share is broadly similar to your symesí connection; however, that which binds the two of us, Elena, is different. I've mentioned previously the incarnation ritual that we will perform in Thessia, yes?*

*Not in much detail, but yes.*

*There will be time enough,* she says, likely alluding to the long journey from Unthern to Thessia. *What is important to understand is that you are critical to the ritual: it cannot be performed with anyone else. This is because of the bond that you and I share: you are the heroine of prophecy and the heiress to my power.* She takes a moment to choose her words. *This bond is, in some sense, a portmanteau of the symesí bond and the scrying spell: it enables communication, obviously, but it also grants me some access to your senses.*

*I frown, my voice unintentionally sharp. But not the other way around, I've noticed.*

*Well... It's not like a dormant soul has particularly engrossing sensory experiences.*

I'm left to sigh as she's technically not wrong, but that doesn't solve the feeling of annoyance running through me. Regardless, I return my focus fully to the room with Isolde. She's been quiet, simply watching me with intrigue.

“What’s bothering you this time, El?” she asks, a false exasperation in her voice.

I fall backwards, letting my head hit the pillow behind me. “Nothing,” I shake my head before sitting back up and forcing a smile. “I’m fine.”

We remain that way for some time, knowing full well that it isn’t going to last much longer, before eventually falling asleep, ready but hesitant to continue our adventures in the morning.

## Far, Far Away

“Arí kalor ís Isolde.”

\* \* \*

It’s been several days since Team MAGI left Unthern: I, on Mother’s ship—the Ílissa—headed northward and have now reached the eastern border between Lintnor and Zystelle; Isolde, on Ines’s ship, turned southward toward the Incerin coast and is now drawing near to Vasen. The city contains the first weapons stockpile that she’ll be attacking. It’s not the easiest—far from it—but since it has apparently become an acting headquarters of the Monarchs, MAGI wants to take advantage of whatever small element of surprise we can. And attacking this one first means that its soldiers will hopefully be less prepared for the infiltration.

That’s the plan, anyway.

“Clarissa,” Ines says as they pull into port. It’s the same false identity that Isolde and I used in Illondrès: sisters Clarissa and Sylvia Rynn. Being “Princess Isolde” of all people, here of all

places, would only bring trouble. “Be careful.”

She nods, taking a breath to steady herself. Under the cover of night, she walks down the docks toward the military compound on the east side of the city. If I focus strongly enough on Isolde’s senses, they drown out my own, and it feels eerily as if my body is acting on its own, possessed by a spirit or some such, even though it’s actually the other way around. As she approaches the base, I feel her reach upward toward the necklace that Mother gave her a few days ago, gripping it tightly. Though I can’t, she can likely feel the thesis she’s poured into its crystal over the last few days pulsing inside its cage.

An armed soldier stands at the gate in an Incerin army uniform decorated with several insignias on his soldier. Careful to stay out of his line of sight, Isolde moves along the wall of the compound searching for an unguarded entrance, though, unsurprisingly, there isn’t one. Just a uniform stone wall three meters high. “Guess I’m going to have to break my way in,” she whispers to herself, shrugging her shoulders.

She takes a deep breath and places her hand flat against the wall, just as I did in Vasen’s cathedral. “Sarkéa lempéa,” she whispers, and cracks expand in the stone from her hand until a circular section of the wall has fallen away. It’s a far more gentle and quieter effect than mine was, which echoed in a loud crack. Here, subtlety is key. She quickly climbs through the hole then, placing her hand once more in the gap, releases one more spell: “kaniso ís séna”. The fragments of stone lift towards the hole, filling in Isolde’s entrance with only a barely noticeable seam.

*Agent: Clarissa. Status: Inside the compound, undetected, she informs me with a smile. Though you probably already knew that, didn’t you?* Her voice carries her signature playful, teasing tone.

*Agent: Sylvia, I struggle to say without losing concentration*

on the spell. *Affirmative: Surveillance in effect.*

She adopts a much more serious tone. *Then let's do this.*

If she's going to destroy the weapon stockpile that Mother mentioned, she's going to need to find it. "There's probably a map of the base in the office..."

Her entrance point was a narrow alley between two large barn-like buildings that seem to be the barracks. Following the only available path leads to an open courtyard with two pairs of soldiers on patrol. This isn't going to be easy. She pauses, considering her options. *I could try to steal a uniform from the women's barracks, she offers. That might help me get around without suspicion.*

*There aren't a lot of eleven year olds in the army, Isa.*

She groans internally, knowing that I'm right. Looking around, she notices a few barrels about ten meters to her left. Carefully timing her shot with the guards' pacing, she launches a fireball at the barrels, causing them to ignite and draw the four guards' attention. As they rush toward the fire, Isolde takes advantage of her distraction to dash to the right, inside what appears to be the main building. A set of stairs lead upward near the building's entrance. As footsteps approach from around the corner, Isolde pushes herself into a dark corner under the stairs. The officer rushes out the door toward the fire. I can feel her heart pounding from both exertion and worry.

*Worry is useful only insofar as it begets preparedness, I remind her.*

She rolls her eyes at me, annoyed at the irony. *Yeah, yeah.* Despite that, she closes her eyes and takes several deep breaths, calming her rushing heart before climbing the stairs.

To our surprise, the room, which contains a number of office workstations arranged in a grid, is devoid of people. Papers

are scattered across a number of the desks, but each chair is unoccupied. One of those advantages of invading at night: almost everyone's asleep. Isolde searches the desks for a map of the compound, eventually finding one under an envelope labeled CLASSIFIED: TOP SECRET. She hesitates with her hand on the envelope before curiosity gets the better of her.

*Y19:C25—Inspection Notice*

*Incerin Monarch King Lance Ennets has informed me that Vasen's military base will be subjected to a candid personal inspection the night of the aforementioned date. This is in accordance with Incerin Legal Code 0-0110R. However, though the inspection will occur during dormant hours, soldiers are not permitted to know of this inspection in advance.*

*—General William Preston*

Panic rushes through both of us. That inspection is occurring tonight, meaning that King Lance—Isolde's father and incarnation of Inoire—will be on the premises soon. If Isolde gets caught... Well, it's safe to say that my stay in Steilla would be infinitely more desirable. Plus, confrontation with Inoire is nigh on impossible: Isolde doesn't stand a chance against her superior magical power. I was only able to escape with Estènne's help. However, the mission can't be pushed back any further. Isa and Lieutenant Ines have to set sail again tonight in order to avoid detection (they're using a well-known pirate ship, after all) at the docks.

Looking at the map, we find that the armory where the weapons are being held is on the opposite end of the compound.

It's going to take a lot more stealthing in order to reach it. However, Isolde came more prepared than I'd realized. She races toward the stairs, climbing upward toward the roof. As she does so, she pulls a rope and a grappling hook from her backpack. She ties one end of the rope to the hook and loops the other end through her legs and around her waist, forming a makeshift harness. It's going to be painful, but it seems like it will hold.

Isolde braces herself on the edge, planning her route across the eight buildings between her and her target. Tossing the hook across the first gap, it grabs onto the roof of the second building. *It's a good thing I'm not afraid of heights*, she quips at me before stepping forward, the rope tightening around her as it turning her fall into an arc. Her feet slam against the side of the building, and I can feel the air shoot out of her chest. Despite the pain, she walks up the wall, drawing up the rope as she climbs. When she reaches the top, she lies on her back, moaning and panting.

"There has to be a better way..." she gets out between breaths. I'm not sure there is, actually. Climbing across the roofs seems like the safest option in order to avoid detection, but the gaps are too wide to simply jump across. So, she repeats the process a few more times, her pain and exhaustion growing, but so too is her determination and focus, allowing her to largely ignore it. When she reaches the fifth roof, however, she notices a soldier opening the door onto the sixth, patrolling. Ultimately, she decides to take advantage of the forced delay to crouch out of sight and heal her wounds. "Sanasé," she whispers, placing her hands on her injuries before letting out a long sigh of relief. I restrain the urge to remind her that she still has three gaps to cross in order to reach the armory.

After a few minutes, she hears the door on the opposite roof click shut once again and, poking her head out from her cover, confirms that the guard has left. Giving a handful more seconds for him to get far enough away, she continues her trek across the rooftops. Once she reaches the armory, she regroups once again, making sure to heal her wounds. If she's going to have to make a run for it, it'll be significantly easier with that done. The armory itself is a massive building, though it only stands two stories high, making navigation a bit simpler. Isolde returns her hook and rope to her bag and gathers her wits, carefully making her way downstairs.

About halfway down, she hears a voice. "General Preston," it begins. "Thank you for allowing this inspection on such short notice. I look forward to seeing what this base is capable of." Isolde and I both panic for a moment: that is King Lance's voice, and it sounds like he's in the neighboring room.

*Are you hearing this, El?*

*Is it an inappropriate time to say "I told you so"?*

She grumbles some response before returning to her eaves-dropping.

"Of course, Your Majesty," a man responds, who must be General Preston. He sounds nervous, as if he's afraid of what Lance might do or say. "The Vasen base should be instrumental in Incerin's preemptive strikes against Thessia."

*Until I destroy their armaments, anyway,* Isolde smiles. *After that... well, not so much.*

There's a short pause. "And what of the incident with the fire tonight?" Lance asks, the accusation in his voice not subtle.

"I-It's under control, Your Majesty," Preston says with a nervous chuckle. "Its cause is yet unknown, but it's being investigated. Our search of the grounds has turned up empty



for sabotaging agents.” That doesn’t mean that there aren’t any.

Something suddenly occurs to me. *When you ignite the weapons in the armory, Inoire will be able to tell that it’s a magical fire, won’t she?* I point out. *You’re going to have to do this the old-fashioned way.* The fire that Isa created earlier as a distraction was fine since Inoire wasn’t here to observe it, and it’s been put out now.

*You’re right, but since I can create fire in my hand whenever I want, why would I think to bring a non-magical fire starter?*

*Either way, you could use a torch.* I chuckle. *It sure was nice of them to give you a fire you could spread.*

She smiles as well. *Agent: Clarissa. Understood.*

And so continues a tense I-wish-I-could-say-it-were-boring waiting experience where Isolde is careful not to make even the slightest noise that could possibly alert any of Lance, Inoire, and Preston. However, they do eventually leave and, once she’s sure that they’ve gone far enough, Isolde lets out a sigh and slides into the now-unoccupied room. They likely went down into the armory proper to start off the inspection, so Isa decides to wait a few more minutes.

While she continues to wait, she runs through the plan one last time. *How smoothly is this going to go?* she asks once she’s finished.

*There’s only one way to find out.*

She rolls her eyes before pulling a lit torch from the wall and walking downstairs. The armory’s storage room is filled with a number of small weapons—bows and arrows, firearms, incendiary devices—as well as larger artillery. We both realize seemingly simultaneously that—surprise!—the cast-iron cannons aren’t going to burn as well as the wooden bows.

*Those aren’t going to... // You’re going to need to... our internal*

voices overlap, and we laugh despite, or rather due, to the tension in the air.

*I'm going to have to destroy them separately, you mean?* she asks, which I confirm. *Don't I need to worry about Inoire sensing any magic I use?*

I consider this a moment. *As long as you keep the thesisis contained and don't let it escape, you should be fine.* A beat. *After all, neither of us can sense magic when it's being used at a distance. Inoire is bound by those same laws. The magical imprint of the fire will last as long as the fire is lit, but that's not an issue with a quick shattering spell.*

She nods, then realizes that, since this new step is neither silent nor particularly quick, she needs to deal with the two soldiers standing guard outside the armory. This is fortunately as easy as opening the main door and magically putting them to sleep. *Don't worry: I'll wake them up before setting the building on fire,* she says, predicting my concern. *They don't need to die. They just need to stay out of my way.*

With that, she returns to the main room and begins her work on the cannons, destroying them one by one with the shattering spell that she used on the wall earlier, “sarkéa”, checking after each cast that no one is coming to investigate the disruption. When they're all destroyed, she opens one of the barrels of black powder in the middle of the room, making a trail to the various groups of armaments so that a central fire will expand to encompass them all. Retrieving the torch she stashed when she incapacitated the guards (and loosening the sleeping spell so they begin to stir), she sets its tip to the barrel. The blaze begins in a muted orange before its tendrils reach down the trails, quickly igniting the entire room before flashing a blinding white as the incendiaries catch fire and the room simply continues to

burn.

*Time to go, Isa!* Yet Isolde stands still, having at least backed into the doorway to avoid the flames' eager grasp. I assemble the full strength of my consciousness and project it toward her with as much force as I can muster. *Isolde! Snap out of it!*

She finally seems to take notice of the world around her, rapidly shaking her head before recognizing where she is. She drops the torch (since what additional harm is one more source of ignition on the floor at this point?) and dashes back upstairs and up to the roof. Time is running out: this building is burning, and soldiers are rushing toward it. With shaking hands and a pounding heartbeat, she struggles to refashion her harness and repel down the side of the building, but she does manage without mishap. Creating a small burst of wind, she also manages to release her hook from the roof and stuff it in her bag. Putting her hand on the outside wall behind the armory, she makes crumble the point of contact, just as she did to enter the compound what feels like several eternities ago.

Climbing through, she again repairs the wall before sprinting toward the docks, trees' branches a mere blur in the darkness as she runs. Or... at least those she manages to avoid, as she ends up with several small cuts along her arms and face. As she nears the docks, she slows to a walk to avoid suspicion and to somewhat catch her breath. I can feel her hands shaking as her heart seems to be trying to burst through her sternum, her vision slightly blurred.

I can't hide the concern in my voice. *Are you okay, Isa?*

A few seconds pass before she responds, and her voice seems distant, almost muffled. It's as if she's the one struggling to maintain focus, though I'm the one sustaining the scrying spell. *I... I'm fine.*

That doesn't seem like a true sentence, but just as I'm about to try to get through to her, I feel Aurore tugging at my conscience, indicating that Sonya is trying to communicate, and the distraction causes me to drop focus on the scrying. Forced suddenly into my own world, I take a moment to find my bearings. *Now's not a great time, Aurore*, I snap, my tone unintentionally harsh as my panic manages to surface despite my best efforts. *I'm sorry. Isolde's in trouble.*

*Of course, of course, Mistress Elena!* she replies in that bubbly voice of hers. *I do apologize, ma'am.*

She starts to pull away, but I catch her before she can fully escape the grasp of my consciousness. *Let Sya know I'm sorry. I'll talk to her as soon as I can, okay?*

*Understood, Mistress Elena!*

Even in the time of that short exchange, given Isolde's condition, my worry increases, and I struggle to clear my mind enough to rescry her. After a handful of tense seconds, I succeed and am thrust once again into the disorienting world of experiencing someone else's senses instead of my own.

Isolde doesn't seem to have moved much, still standing a hundred meters from the docks. I can still feel the dull pain of her cuts, though her heart seems to have calmed down somewhat, and her vision has cleared. Even without speaking, however, I can tell that she is still out of it. *Isolde! Are you okay?*

*Didn't you already ask me that?* Well, it's good to know that she still has her sass, at least.

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. *Then let's get you back on Ines's ship so you can leave the city, okay?*

She nods in agreement and begins walking, rather mechanically, toward the docks. When she reaches the ship, she climbs aboard, Ines waiting on deck. "Agent: Clarissa. Mission

accomplished. Permission to set sail.”

Though her report makes sense, Ines looks at her in momentary confusion. Based on where her vision is focused, I imagine this is due to a vacant and distant expression on her face as she continues walking to her cabin. There, she sits down on the bed, burying her head in her hands.

Isolde is clearly in shock from what happened, several inciting factors coming to mind, but it's her level of shutting down that most concerns me. *You should get some sleep, Isa. It's late. A beat. We can talk in the morning, okay?*

She lifts her head and nods deliberately. “You're right.” She takes a few deep breaths to steady herself. *Goodnight, El. ...And thanks.*

I maintain the scrying spell a few more moments until I'm sure she's actually going to take my advice, then I somewhat reluctantly release it. Though she seemed to have regained her composure, what I want is to wrap her in a tight embrace as she sleeps, and letting go of the scrying spell feels like the exact opposite of that, even if it can't serve its purpose when she's asleep nor are hugs particularly feasible at our current physical distance.

Now it's my turn to take a moment to steady myself. Once I've finally resettled into myself, I ping Aurore's consciousness. *I'm sorry for snapping at you earlier, Aurore. My favorite spirit friend didn't deserve that, I say, giving a slight smile.*

She, for her part, is her normal cheery self. *Water under the bridge, Mistress.* She pauses, then speaks in an excited tone that somehow yet portrays a hidden nervousness. *But I am your only spirit friend, am I not?*

I find myself suddenly wondering if Estènné might be considered a spirit.

No, she suddenly says. *Or I certainly wasn't one. If nothing else, I don't consider myself a spirit.*

*That doesn't stop you from being my favorite,* I say to Aurore.

*Then I must be doing my job well!* she squeals, bowing. *I can assure you that I will maintain my level of service, Mistress. I shall fetch Miss Sonya straightaway.* A moment later, in a singsong voice: *I found her~!*

*Thank you, Aurore. Sonya?*

*I'm here.*

I should have figured out how I wanted to word this before I called on Aurore. *Sorry about earlier, Sya. I was overseeing Isolde's mission, and she... needed my help.* It's accurate, but between the vagueness and the pause, I imagine that I'll have to explain exactly what I meant. *More importantly, how have things been on your end?*

*Don't worry about it,* she says insistently. *It seems perfectly reasonable to me that saving the world from Inoire would take precedence over our friendly chat. Is Isolde okay now?*

*I think so, at least,* I tell her. *I'm not entirely sure what happened. She completed the mission, but it seemed to have put her in shock. She seemed pretty out of it. I'm just hoping she'll be fine in the morning.* There's a lull before I continue. *As you put it, though, I'd really just like for this to be a friendly chat. No espionage or saving-the-world drama. Especially after what happened today.* Though, knowing that I'm asking for an update on her life, she's going to rightly ask for an update on mine. *But the short version is that Mother and I are headed for Thessia to perform the incarnation ritual while Isolde is taking care of some things on the continent before rejoining us.*

She's silent while she absorbs this information, then she giggles innocently. *If that's the case, then maybe it's a good thing*

*that I decided to stay here in Steilla where whatever happened to you and Isolde isn't happening to me. She recomposes herself, adding, No, things have been alright around here. I've started my work program here in the prison. It's nothing fancy, she says quickly, just cleaning and kitchen work, but it's enough to prevent me from going insane cooped up in a cell for days on end. I know what that's like, and I was only imprisoned for a few days. She can tell that I'm unhappy with how quickly she's grown accustomed, apparently content, with her situation. Besides, people tend to be a bit nicer to me when they find out that my best friend died trying to protect me, she says, smiling. I've also been told that, for the later half of my sentence, I'll be permitted to apprentice someone in the city. When that's done, the government will handle my Aramoth paperwork, and I'll actually be free!*

*Which is really all you've ever wanted, isn't it?*

Sonya frowns slightly. *I mean, I'm more complicated than that.* However, she quickly forces the frown from her face for a smile. *But, yes, this is something I've wanted for a long time.*

Updates given, the conversation moves to idle chatter, which both of us can appreciate given what our lives have become. However, though I'm not sure if it's because of Isa, Sya, or general anxiety about reaching Thessia and what will happen once that happens, but there's a tenseness in my head that I can't quite shake. Regardless, it doesn't do much to spoil the mood, and Sonya and I manage to relax together for some time before we're finally forced to succumb to sleep.

\* \* \*

When I wake up late in the morning, slightly groggy, I can feel Isolde's consciousness shyly poking at mine as if she's been

waiting but unwilling to wake me up. Since I met her, I've grown to love her signature playful, outspoken personality, and I can't tell if this bashful princess is adorable or unsettling. *Good morning, Isa*, I say with a yawn. How are you feeling?

*Better.* She gives me a warm smile. *Though if I'm not mistaken, that's not actually saying much. How bad was it?*

*You were perfectly fine until you set the armory on fire*, I tell her. *But as soon as you touched the torch to the weaponry, you froze up completely. You were just standing in a very on-fire room until I threw the weight of my entire consciousness at you. And I'm still not sure you were really conscious between the compound and the ship.*

She emits a laugh, but it's filled with dark, perverse humor. *You know, you're a very wanted criminal in Incerin at the moment: you're a theria, you kidnapped Sonya to enable her to flaunt the Aramoth restrictions, you hid under false identities, you defied your sentence for those crimes in faking your death, you committed treason by assaulting several royal guards and the king and kidnapping the Fair Princess before escaping punishment yet again, and you've committed treason again by plotting military engagement against the nation of Incerin.* This isn't news to me, but I'm not sure where she's going with this, so I remain quiet. *The best part, El? I'm not that far behind you: I'm also a theria who harbored you in Catens's palace, I orchestrated your escape from Steilla, violating your quarantine, and engaged with several Vasen palace guards myself before enabling your completely false presentation to the King and eventually escaping with you. This is nothing you and I didn't know. And yet, she chuckles again, somehow, yesterday was when it all clicked in my head. Somehow, infiltrating what is supposed to be an allied military base... seemed fine, but setting fire to it very much wasn't.* Her voice is quieter now, and I can hear stifled crying in it. *It felt so different from the almost political acts of*



*treason that I'd already committed that I panicked. And I still have a handful of bases to sabotage.*

*I'm silent for a moment, carefully planning my words. Before we left for Illondrès together, Sonya called me out for thinking I was above the law and having potentially been corrupted by the allure of power and desire. You were the one who convinced me that it was okay, that I wasn't the monster I thought I was. I pause for effect, sharing my raw emotions with her through our connection. The Isolde I know demonstrated to me that she's willing to do whatever it takes to save those she cares about, even at the risk of getting herself in trouble in the process. I don't think that's something she should be ashamed of. It's exactly the same words she said to me that day. I'll never forget them. That Isolde also told me that doing bad things for the right reasons doesn't make you a bad person. And, I say emphatically, I believe her.*

*I can feel her flare up in annoyance that I've simply spat the same advice back at her that she gave me, but she abstains from a typically-Isolde sassy response, instead maintaining the conversation's deeply serious atmosphere. Either way, it's going to be hard for us ever to return here, isn't it?*

*Unless the entire political landscape changes and we somehow get pardoned for all of our crimes, I'm going to go with... yeah, it's going to be difficult. A beat. Do you really want to, though?*

*She doesn't answer right away. When she does, her voice is laden with uncertainty and confusion. I'm not sure, El. I genuinely don't know.*

## Sick of the Sea

You often hear people romanticize the ocean, how it stretches as far as the eye can see—far further, in fact—how it shows nature at its most ambivalent, almost antagonistic, toward the smallness of humanity, how the space below the waves may as well not even belong to the same world as our own. And sure, I'll admit that it can be beautiful, but...

I've grown to hate the sea.

Maybe it's that I've been stuck on this ship for who-even-knows how many days at this point. Maybe it's that I'm bored and frustrated simply watching as Isolde manages to disarm several military bases on Incerin's coastline without much trouble. Regardless, I'm rather excited to reach dry land. According to Mother, we should be docking in Celé, the famous site of Estègne's legendary battle against the continental navies all those centuries ago, later tonight. We'll stay a day or two in order to restock our supplies and regroup before heading out to the Bresennic Île to our west. There, I'll be able to perform the incarnation ritual with Estègne and have a chance to defeat Inoire.

I will admit that it has been nice to actually spend time with Mother. Obviously, just in the time since Isolde and I arrived in Unthern, the two of us haven't quite reached a typical mother-daughter relationship, especially given that, as the leader of Team MAGI (and also of the Unthern Pirates), our relationship isn't strictly personal. But now, with just the two of us plus Mother's small crew and no mission requiring our active participation at the moment, those walls have started to fall down.

Not that it's been all fun and games. Well, training is fun, but it's not really a game. Not when Mother's experience is enough to compensate for her somewhat fading power. Though I've called her out on it, she insists upon running me through a series of tests before our duels, which—yes, I suppose is useful training—I feel is largely an excuse to partially exhaust me to shift the balance of power toward her. “What? You think Inoire of all people is itching for a fair fight?” she had asked bemusedly. And so our mock battles have become rather serious, with victories split almost perfectly evenly between us. And any thesis not consumed by our fighting or scrying Isolde has been poured into my necklace, giving me a considerable amount, all things considered.

She and Estènné have also been teaching me much of the basics of the Thessian language. It serves as the foundation of all magical spells, so I knew a handful of words already, but simply shouting “Fire!” probably isn't the best method of casual conversation. It goes well enough, I suppose, but something tells me that I'll need help from Estènné and Mother in translation.

“We'll be arriving in Celé soon,” Mother says, walking up to where I stand leaning over the edge of the ship.

*Home of my proudest embarrassment*, Estènne says in my head. She's been surprisingly quiet as we approach her homeland, but now, her voice is dripping with a bittersweet tone. It makes sense: her fight was divisive, and her actions stopped continental attempts at annexing Thessia. On the other hand, they also led to much of the fear of therii that exists on the continent, and didn't exactly uphold the ancient Thessian principles of peace over war. Moreover, though her display of power also served to encourage many developments in the study of magic, it also gained her an equal mix of worshippers and enemies. And if and when people realize who I am (about to become), I'll likely inherit much of that controversy.

"It's about time." *How are you feeling about this, Estènne?*

She chuckles. *I've had several centuries to come to terms with my actions. You, on the other hand, she continues, are the one whose decisions are both critical and new.*

*Do you really think we'll be able to defeat Inoire?*

*You're the heroine of legend, Elena. You're the heiress to my power.* She smiles warmly. *And even without my power, you've grown quite formidable in your own right. You and Isolde both.* A beat, and she becomes a bit more serious. *It's not going to be an easy fight, but yes, I do believe that we will emerge victorious.*

I can see the island appear on the horizon, a green line of jungle behind the golden sand. Incerin doesn't have a lot of coastline, and what it does have is relatively far north, meaning it just doesn't have the same appeal as a subtropical island.

A few hours later, Mother has docked the ship, and we've descended into the shipyard. Up close, the city is bustling with energy, its flow rivaling that of Rædes. The buildings appear ancient, having not seen the abuse of war that has plagued many of Incerin's cities over the centuries, and the streets are

densely packed with shops, residences, and all other manner of constructions. From a way up the beach, I can hear children playing in the gentle waves. Celé really appears a peaceful city.

*It is. Thessia is, as a whole, with its cultural focus on community and simplicity, Estènne points out. Our goal is to keep it that way.*

Mother leads me down one of the wider streets leaving the docks. "I'll let you explore the city, of course, but there is someone whom you need to meet first." She leaves it at that until we reach a massive building which, I presume, serves official government business. Mother confirms my suspicion. "We're here to meet Elder Yves. Though many of Thessia's cities are run as oligarchies of Elders, Yves is the most prominent here in Celé." She goes over to the secretary sitting behind a large wooden desk, saying something in Thessian, which Estènne translates as her asking to speak with Yves urgently.

The secretary leaves and, a few moments later, gestures for us to follow him into the corridor behind the desk. Eventually, we reach a large wooden door, and we are quietly ushered inside an elegantly furnished room, nearly as nice as the Steilla's or Unthern's throne room. An old man, presumably Elder Yves, warmly greets us, shaking our hands in turn.

"Ah, Celaena!" he exclaims. Estènne continues to translate in my head. "It's been so long since we've seen you! Welcome back to Celé."

She smiles for a moment before reprising a neutral expression. "Thank you, Yves. I wish it were under different circumstances, but yes, I am glad to have returned." She pauses, her gaze firmly upon him. "Lýpto ís alíth ís otagí ís Yves ser," she eventually whispers, and a faint shimmering light appears over him for a few seconds. I recognize it as the same loyalty-check spell that Estènne had me cast on Mother when we arrived in Unthern.

*He's clear*, she tells me once her spell has run its course.

He shoots her a questioning glance, but holds his curiosity, turning first to me. "And who might you be?" he asks gently.

Even with my limited knowledge of the Thessian language, introductions are one of those things I can actually do by myself, thanks to Estènne's teachings. "Tísmata, Yves. Sým éklarí ser sí Elena bý, kori ís Celaena ser." Hello, Yves. My name is Elena, daughter of Celaena. "Arí sí atimí bý éklaro nanta." I am honored to meet you.

His eyes widen, and he spins back toward Mother. "Then she must be—"

Mother simply nods. "Indeed, she is the inheritor of Estènne's power and heroine of prophecy." She sighs and adds, her voice sad, "Again, I only wish that we were not on the brink of war with Elena at the helm." At his confused glance, she continues. "One of our agents, once Fair Princess of Incerin, is currently working to delay the nation's military response. However, even with those measures, battle against Corbelle and her agents, including one Akàné Verrader, is inevitable. And it's likely to be sooner, rather than later."

Yves begins pacing as he considers this. "As you know, we have known that this was a possibility." He frowns apologetically. "However, as you also well know, Thessia does not possess a standing army. And even with the knowledge of what chaos and destruction Inoire can cause, you will not find many Thessians willing to compromise our guiding principles and fight against her. Or an Incerin military, for that matter."

*Estènne*, I call out to her. *You said that you believe that we can win this battle. Then you believe that Team MAGI is sufficient in its own right?*

*Yes. Not that more help would not be useful*, she says quickly, *but*

*I do believe that you and I can overpower Corbelle. It is true that I have not seen Akàné's power, but Isolde should be able to match it, and I'm of the mind that Celaena and Ines can take on much of the Incerin naval forces.* She sounds strangely optimistic.

With Estènne's help, I relay this message to Yves. "We will certainly not decline any help that is offered," I say. "However, Estènne seems to believe that our forces are sufficient once Isolde arrives in a few days' time, and I'm inclined to trust her judgment."

Mother nods, turning to face Yves. "What we are requesting at this moment is your city's hospitality: a place for us to recover on dry land and to help us resupply for our journey to Estènne's resting place as soon as we are able."

Yves bows, saying, "Understood. You should speak with Etien Fau at the docks about provisions and Viola Pret at the tavern about lodging." He writes a few sentences on a piece of paper, then hands it to Mother. "Give them this, and they should be able to sort things out for you."

Now it is our turn to bow. "Thank you, Yves," Mother says as she leads me back outside. "Why don't you explore the city?" she offers. "It was important that you meet Yves, but there's no reason for both of us to have to worry about these logistics." I start to protest, but she insists. "We can't leave until tomorrow, so you might as well start to learn first-hand about the homeland you only recently learned was yours."

With that, I start wandering toward the center of town. Despite existing halfway across the world, it feels remarkably like Rædes, just... older. The buildings are organized, yes, but more organically than the reconstructed cities in Incerin. And even though I'm hardly able to communicate verbally with any of the residents without Estènne's help, I notice the same

underlying emotions running through them as they go about their daily tasks. All in all, strangely, Celé feels like home.

*I don't find that very surprising, Estènne says when I mention it to her. After all, many large cities are quite similar. Besides, Celaena and I each lived here in our own times. It seems reasonable, then, that it should seem familiar to you.*

Me gaining Estènne's familiarity does make some amount of sense given that she practically lives in my head most of the time, but I can't figure out how Mother having lived here is relevant. *Well, if you're so familiar with the city, Estènne, I say with a teasing grin, what do you recommend checking out?*

*She simply rolls her eyes. You do realize I lived here many centuries ago? As much as it appears to stand still against time, nothing is immortal.*

*Fine, I sigh dramatically. I'll just figure something out on my own, I guess.*

After a few moments, I find a long series of market stalls. Almost all of Rædes's shops are indoors, but given Celé's subtropical location, outdoor markets actually make quite a bit of sense. I let my gaze wander across the stalls, eventually taking particular note of what appears to be a small, deep purple fruit I've never seen before. Unlike most fruits, which are smooth in form, this fruit has sharper corners that seem unnatural.

*It's called "delornu", Estènne explains when I ask. It's a shortening of "delma is ornu ser", or "fruit of the stars". When Thessia had contact with the continent, it was known as a "starberry" in the continental tongue, but it has since faded from memory there.*

My interest piqued, I purchase one from the vendor, who takes note of my foreign clothing. With Estènne's help, I explain that, yes, I'm traveling from the continent. "I'm not going to be in Celé for very long, so is there anywhere you'd recommend



seeing before I leave?" I ask, hoping that he can help fill the rest of my day.

"It is not usual to see person from continent," he says in the shared continental tongue, much to my surprise. I wouldn't have expected anyone here to speak it, a sentiment which Estènne echoes. "You speak Thessian language well." I thank him for the compliment, even though Estènne is the one who's putting words in my mouth, and he continues. "I say you look at statue in park at south of city and museum or library." Of course Thessia, Celé in particular, would be proud of its history as the one thing to share with a foreigner.

I thank him again, paying for the fruit, and begin walking first toward the park he mentioned. As I walk, I notice Estènne start becoming slightly restless, though I can't pinpoint its cause, nor is she willing to enlighten me about it.

Shrugging—she'll let me know when she feels like it, and I won't be able to pull it out of her until then—I peel open the delornu, revealing a light reddish-pink flesh divided into pointed segments. Pulling apart one of these segments, I tentatively take a bite, and a powerful rush of flavor courses through me. Of course, Thessia is the world's source of magic, so it should be unsurprising, but it's immediately clear that the delornu has been bred by magical agriculture. There is no way that the mundane agricultural techniques of the continent could ever grow something that possesses such a literally puissant sweetness. Yet, despite that, it somehow also avoids being overbearingly saccharine, instead simply... pleasant.

*Because of our situation, Estènne explains solemnly, your magical training so far has been focused on those skills which are useful in combat and espionage. However, that is only a small fraction of a segment of what magic truly entails. Thessia is a*

*culture which strongly devalues conflict, meaning that the majority of development in the study of magic has been in improving daily life, whether that's rendering difficult tasks trivial or finding the small pleasures of life.*

*And the delornu is a testament to that,* I finish, and she nods. At first, it seems like such a foreign concept, coming from the continent. But the more that I think about it, improving quality of life is, at least indirectly, a goal that all but a small but prominent minority of people, even in Rædes, share. Yet, somehow, I've managed to find myself caught as the target of two of the most extreme of this same minority.

But I didn't come here to be philosophical.

Given Celé's size, it turns out that "the south side" of the city is actually not an insubstantial walk from the market, but I can hardly complain. As nice as Mother's ship is, nothing beats simply walking through a beautiful ancient city with the sun radiating warmly from a cloudless sky. Especially when you're not alone.

*So, what's it like being in Thessia, El?* Isolde asks with a lightly teasing tone.

I smile. *You know, even though it had always been my dream to come here, I'd learned to dismiss that as naïve fantasy. It just doesn't feel real yet.*

*So much has happened in so little time,* she says. *I'd always dreamed of giving up my title of Fair Princess, but I didn't think that would ever happen. That doesn't feel real yet either.*

My voice is a mixture of incredulous and wistful. *I never imagined I would ever find my Mother, least of all that she'd be the leader of a pirate clan.*

*Yet here we are,* she says matter-of-factly. As she says this, I find myself at my destination. A large park, dotted with trees,

what I presume are picnic tables, and a few structures that seem designed for children to play around. In the center of it all is a massive bronze statue of a woman upon a stone platform, though she faces away from me, so I can't tell who it is. I still sense that Estènne is on edge, and when I reach the base of the statue, I realize why.

ESTÈNNE CERVEILLE

348–402

*Heroïne of Celé and of all Thessia against the militant forces of her prior homeland. Significant contributor to advancement of modern magic.*

*Despite her many accomplishments, she was kind and genuine, never proud.*

*“To stand up was to stand against;  
now, it is to stand together.”*

*This statue was erected in the year 412.*

The plaque is obviously written in Thessian, but I can read the name myself without any difficulty. And Estènne's reluctant help in translating is enough to read the rest.

*It's beautiful*, I hear Isolde say. She must be looking at the statue with the scrying spell. I certainly don't disagree with her. The Estènne of the statue is standing tall, an open book in her left palm, a smile across her face; the Estènne in my head is shyly hiding in a corner, clearly uncomfortable with being the center of attention like this.

*Your battle against the continental navies isn't the only thing you're remembered for*, I tell her gently, trying to coax her out. *And we've been over this: even if it were, your mastery of your magic is a testament to the knowledge you obtained and shared. Plus, you*

*were defending your home. You've nothing to be ashamed of.*

*Perhaps, she admits quietly. Nevertheless, it is not something I would like to discuss at the moment, if that's alright.*

*I consider this for a moment until a question rises in my mind. If I may, Estènne, I do have one question that you can choose not to answer. She nods slowly. Legends hold, and you've told me this yourself, that the Battle of Celé resulted in a division amongst Thessians. You became loved and revered by some, feared and hated by others, essentially ignored by yet a third group. If this is the case, then why would they build such a prominent statue of such a controversial figure?*

*She's quiet a moment before she speaks, and her voice is quiet when she does. I can tell that she doesn't particularly want to answer at all. It wasn't built right away, of course. It was built a decade after my death and some thirty years after the battle. A beat. People had some time to cool off. And since Celé is where the battle occurred, it tended to be the least... hostile... toward me, regardless of whether that was out of respect or out of fear. Now that she has started speaking, her words flow with little hesitation, as if she just wants this off her chest. Fear that I could kill them just as easily, just as quickly, just as brutally as I had those Incerin soldiers. And, obviously, the answer was that I could. More easily, more quickly, more brutally, in fact. I wouldn't, of course, but my word was always little consolation to them. Her voice begins trembling as if she's fighting back tears. All that I did afterwards—the research, the teaching, whatever—was merely a service to make everyone forget what I'd done, they'd say. Sure, I had my supporters, who were thankful and trusting, but they were called naïve, incapable of thinking or fighting for themselves. She remains silent a few seconds until she eventually manages to get a few words out, her emotions no longer restrained. And*

*here I was, at best a decisive figure in Incerin who couldn't escape that fate here in Thessia either. Thessia had always prided itself on being a place of harmony, of community, of cooperation. And it was I, a continental, who managed to upset that balance.*

I start walking away from the statue, toward the pond in the center of the park. *And what would have happened if you'd done nothing?* I ask in as gentle a voice as I can. *We're here trying to stop a modern Incerin, and I've lived there long enough to know that the continent's policies haven't gotten markedly worse in the last few hundred years.* She remains quiet. Once I reach the pond, I notice a pair of Thessians board a small paddle boat with a tight mesh of rope.

As I approach, I take a closer look at the pair. They appear to be a brother and sister and around my age. Each is shirtless—a sight unthinkable in Incerin—and the girl seems to be observing my much more modest outfit with confusion. “Can we help you?” the girl asks in Thessian, her voice still bearing that same confusion.

“I am new to Celé, to Thessia,” I say. Estègne is at least present enough to help me translate. “I wanted to explore the city and its surroundings before we sail for another island tomorrow.”

The girl's laughter is soft and charming. “That would explain your clothes.”

The boy introduces the two of them. “My name is Dresni, and this is my sister Ikari.” The girl waves as he says her name, a wide smile on her face.

“Elena,” I say with a slight curtsy.

“Well,” Dresni continues. “Would you like to help us fish? It's actually pretty easy, but I bet you've never fished with magic before!”

He's right. Actually, I'm not sure that I've ever fished without

magic either. But this sounds like a fun experiment. We load up into the boat with Ikari holding the net and Dresni paddling into the center of the pond. Peering down into the remarkably clear water, I can see a number of fish, ranging from the size of my finger to tens of centimeters long.

As Ikari lowers the net into the water, she turns to face me. "Since you're here, Elena, I assume that you can use magic?" I nod. "Then what you do is cast a spell in the water, to gently incapacitate the fish in about a one meter radius. Then I'll pull them up with this net. Understand?"

I nod once again, placing my hand just under the surface of the water. "Sova lempéa," I cast, gently spreading the sleeping spell in the desired area before Ikari scoops the newly sleeping fish into the boat.

"Continue holding the spell on these ones," Dresni instructs, indicating the fish in the boat. I release the spell on those still in the water, enabling them to wake up. He whispers a few syllables I can't make out, then gestures for me to cut the spell entirely. "While you had them asleep," he explains "I gave them a painless death that they couldn't experience anyway."

I'm suddenly cast back to what Estènné said earlier: that Thessia uses magic in really mundane ways. Yet somehow, this mundane-ness is what I find the most amazing.

"You did a wonderful job, You're a natural, Elena!" Ikari says as she bounds beside me. We're each carrying a few fish, walking back toward the city. Dresni is much more calm than his younger sister, but he does smile toward me in agreement. By this point, Estènné has largely calmed down and regained her normal character. As we return to the city, we simply talk, with the two of them (mostly Ikari) teaching me about life in Thessia and how magic is used here and me telling them about

life on the continent. I don't tell them about my mission, but all in all, we're equally stunned about, well, just about everything in the other's life.

"Thank you Dresni, Ikari," I say when we reach what must be their residence in the city. "I've enjoyed talking with you. It's a shame I have to leave Celé in the morning."

The pair shake their heads in agreement. "Indeed," Dresni says quietly. More strongly, he adds, "Well, if you're ever back in Celé, you know where to find us." He gestures at the building behind them.

"I will," I promise, curtsying once more before we turn our separate ways. I continue mindlessly wandering the streets of the city, simply seeing what I can find, until I hear Mother calling in my head.

*Our lodging is settled, she says. You should come to the tavern. We need to work out our plan for the morning.*

*Understood.* I make my way toward the tavern, finding it surprisingly quaint amongst the other buildings near the center of town. Boasting a plain stone exterior, the inside is an equally simple wooden aesthetic that just seems to fit amazingly well. There are a few customers scattered across the room, though the tavern is far from busy. Mother stands at the bar, chatting with the barkeep, whom I assume is the Viola Pret that Yves mentioned.

As I enter, she turns to me with a smile. "How was your exploring?" she asks in the continental tongue, which catches me off-guard.

"It was great." I briefly describe the events that have played out since we separated earlier. "Did you get everything arranged for tomorrow?"

"Yes," she responds. "We'll be staying here in this tavern

tonight, and we'll be ready to leave for the Bresennic Île at sunrise. There are a few other details I need to tell you, but let's eat dinner first." I agree, and she turns back to Viola, ordering our food in Thessian.

The food, once it's ready, is nothing fancy, just a simple grilled fish laid over a salad with small slivers of delornu and thin strips of cheese, but it might well be the best-tasting meal I've had. I'm genuinely impressed, and I'm torn between eating it as quickly as possible and having the self-restraint to actually enjoy it.

But sadly, all good things must come to an end, and so too is this true tonight. Mother and I hash out the finer details of our preparations for the morning, then make an early retirement to bed. With any luck, Estènne and I will be able to perform the incarnation ritual tomorrow.



## Enemy in the Shadows

The problem with islands is that you can't walk from one to another. You have to take a ship. So, needless to say, I'm back on a ship.

Leaving Celé was uneventful, and with favorable winds, we should arrive late tonight, meaning that Estègne and I will be able to perform the incarnation ritual that'll make defeating Inoire substantially more possible. And so, once again on a ship, but newly encumbered with a fresh anxiety and eagerness for something so monumentally important to happen... well, there's not much I can do about that. Except wait. And it gets worse.

*I... hate to add to your list of concerns, Isolde says slowly some time in the mid-afternoon. But I have it on good authority that my parents—along with Inoire, obviously—are setting sail from the continent, a navy in tow, within the next few days. Ines and I should reach Thessia before them, but it does mean that our confrontation will occur sooner, rather than later.*

*That doesn't give us much time.*

She smiles, knowing that she's put me in a trap. *No, but I also*

*know how much you hate waiting.*

*True, but that doesn't mean that I'm particularly eager to fight Inoire, either,* I point out sharply.

*Would you rather fight someone else?* Somehow, she's maintaining her upbeat teasing, and it's clashing with my annoyance.

*I've sparred with Mother too many times, and you're a little too far away.*

She pretends to mull this over before saying, *Inoire it is, then,* a wide smile across her face.

Her positive energy finally breaks through my shell, and I hear myself giggle slightly. *Have I ever told you how much I hate you, Fair Princess?*

*A few times,* she admits, choosing to ignore my titling. *Though I seem to recall your hatred being, well... not really hatred at all.*

I simply growl playfully at her and change the topic. We continue chatting idly on and off throughout the remainder of the day, equally bored and tense as we're forced to wait between these short bursts of energetic climax of our adventure. It's nice to relax, yes, but it's also difficult when your mind is nagging you about that one next step that you can't accomplish yet.

Near sundown, however, Mother and I arrive on Bresennic Île. It's an uninhabited island to the northwest of Éfrinenne Île, where Celé is located, and is, perhaps, the smallest of all of the Thessian islands. It boasts a high cliff over the ocean on most sides, though it slopes smoothly down to sea level on the south side, showing off its grassy plain topography. High atop the island, on the northern end, a large stone castle-like architecture stands alone, dropped beautifully against the tree-lined silhouette. That marks our destination.

Just a few steps onto the island, Mother holds out her arm to block me. "There's something here that doesn't feel right," she

says quietly, looking sharply at me.

Nothing stands out on a quick survey of our surroundings, though. *Do you sense anything wrong, Estènne?* I ask.

*Celaena's observant*, she responds with amazement. *It's subtle, but I can feel a slight magical presence, and only when I'm looking for it. A beat. It's either a very weak presence or a much stronger one that's working to hide itself.*

That's not really what I wanted to hear. What should we do, then?

She considers this a moment. *It feels like a static spell that's set up as a trap, rather than a more active effect.*

I relay this information to Mother, who after a moment's pause, whispers, "Lýpto ís alíth ís éto thesís sÍ ulfolsí"—Reveal the true nature of this foreign thesis. At her command, a thin green fog manifests around us, thicker regions highlighting the pools of thesis that have been set up. *Estènne's right*, she says. *This is a trap. I'm not sure of its origins, but it doesn't appear to be very strong. I'm going to disable it, but be on the lookout for anything suspicious.* When I agree, she casts another spell. "Aniká ís éto thesís sÍ polémí"—Disable this hostile thesis.

As her own thesis expands, the thesis forming the trap appears to dispel, dragging the green fog with it. However, its motion allows it to coalesce briefly once more. I can feel Estènne panic inside my head and, before I can even process the situation, she takes over my body, forcing me to cast. "Spída! Spída!"—Shield. I feel the spell pass over this magical barrier that surrounds me just as the trap takes effect and incapacitates Mother.

She has collapsed on the ground and appears to be out of breath. As I step forward, I see that her eyes are unfocused and distant. *Mother!* I call frantically, my heart racing.

Her voice is slow and quiet when she does finally speak. *I'm... fine.* Speaking seems to be taking an immense amount of her concentration and effort, and she doesn't seem able to move. *The trap was... deceptively strong. Set off by my attempt to... disable it, ironically enough.* A few seconds pass in silence. *It's good you got that shield up.* She tries to smile.

*That was all Estènné's doing,* I tell her. *I didn't have time to react.*

*Either way.* A beat. *I'm fine,* she insists once again. *Just... bound by this binding spell.* She manages to chuckle. *A bit less ironic, that one.*

Glad that she seems to be alright enough to make a joke, I continue glancing around, trying to find the source of this trouble. Eventually, a lone figure begins approaching from behind the silhouette of a tree roughly a dozen meters in front of me. I adopt a defensive stance as she steps closer, stopping a few paces away, one eye on me, the other on Mother.

"Akàné." In hindsight, I suppose I shouldn't even be surprised. Sonya did tell me that she was coming to Thessia. And with Inoire and the Monarchs preparing to chase Isolde, the list of reasonable people to stop us here is quite short. Maybe some random Thessian who thinks that anyone intruding on Estènné's island is sacrilege (which, I suppose, also wouldn't have surprised me). But, no, it's Akàné Verrader, the woman who fooled Sonya and me well enough to allow ourselves to walk into her trap. Mother, too, if a moment ago is any indication. I'm not going to let that happen again. I can feel Isolde let out a small rush of emotion, indicating that she's likely invoked the scrying spell.

*This likely goes without saying,* Estènné informs me, *but I can confirm that Akàné is the source of that trap's magic.*

*Not that I'm blaming you, but how did she manage to set this up*

*without you noticing? I ask. The burst that you shielded me from seemed like a significant amount of thesis to hide.*

*There's a hint of regret and shame in her voice. I'll admit that I should have noticed. But I haven't been paying as much attention to my surroundings here. It also appears that she went to great lengths to conceal it, likely releasing it slowly over a sufficiently long period of time.*

The offender wears a cunning smile as if she's gloating once again, just as she was when she visited my cell in Steilla. "Elena. Or is it Mia? Or do you have some other name now?" I simply remain silent, and she sighs. "Well, Elena," she continues, placing significant emphasis on my real name, "I guess I have to applaud your efforts to escape your death in Steilla. You would have made a terrible rival if you'd failed on that front. Though I was hoping that you'd have fallen victim to my binding trap here, like this one did, just to make this easier." She gestures toward Mother, who is still stationary, though she seems to have fully stabilized now. "Your last-second shield makes this so much more hassle."

Something seems to click in Estènné's mind as she suddenly and excitedly speaks. *See if you can get her to say how she gained her magical powers.*

I indicate my understanding before speaking aloud in a direct, emotionless tone. "You're clearly one now, but the last time I checked, you weren't on the list of known non-Thessian therii." I cock my head as a show of curiosity. "I admit that you successfully lured us into a trap in Steilla, so your plan worked, but if you'd had powers at the time, it would have been far easier and far more reliable to take me out when I was in Catens. That, I feel, is what is causing you so much more hassle."

She hesitates before deciding to answer. "I suppose it does

no harm for you to know. Though I was born on the continent, it was of Thessian blood. Our True Goddess, Lady Inoire, unlocked my thesis some time since last you and I met.” She finishes with a tone and expression mixed torn between gratefulness and annoyance, perhaps that it had taken so long.

*That must be when she visited the Monarchs in Vasen, I exclaim. And Lance isn't the only one who calls Inoire the “True Goddess”.*

*Aye, Estènne replies. Akàné's clearly a proficient user of magic, but this means that she's limited in ways that you are not, Elena. Sensing my confusion, she carries on. I helped to facilitate it behind the scenes, but you unlocked your magical powers yourself. As a result, your access and control over your powers are significantly more natural and automatic.*

*But she was able to incapacitate Mother so easily, I insist.*

*Estènne stifles a sound in exasperation. Perhaps, but notice that Celaena was caught off-guard. Besides, you have won all of your sparring matches against her, so who's the stronger theria between you? She waits a beat for me to register the answer in my head. Just remember that your greatest strength, especially in this fight, will be your speed and ability to act responsively. Keep up the pressure.*

*Understood. Switching to an offensive stance, I speak aloud. “I suppose this is that point, however, when you attempt to stop me, by whatever means necessary, from joining with Estènne. Is that about right?”*

For her part, Akàné adopts a defensive position. As Estènne pointed out, she might be clever and creative, but she can't keep up with me at my peak. So, my strategy should be to try to overwhelm her and force her into a situation from which she can't escape. “With you out of the way, there won't be anyone with the power to rival that of Our True Goddess. So yes, unfortunately for you, this ends here.”

Akàné's remark is enough of a commitment to—and acceptance of—this fight for me. My goal is to force her to make a mistake. I launch two fireballs at her in quick succession and observe her reactions: she dodges left for the first, right for the second. Without hesitation, I repeat the process, noting the same reactions from her.

"What? You can't even hit me?" she taunts with a smile, launching a powerful wave of energy at me.

I simply smile and deploy a shield. Before she can get off a second attack, I launch a pair of fireballs: one straight at her, one to her left, where I predict her sidestep. "What? You can't even dodge?" I retaliate as the second fireball hits her square in the chest. Since my strategy relies on me making a multitude of attacks, each is relatively weak so as not to immediately consume my available thesis. As a result, I'll need to be able to hit her a number of times. By contrast, judging by her previous attack, she'll be prioritizing fewer, stronger attacks.

She growls and regains her composure. "You just got lucky," she insists, casting another attack at me.

Managing to escape her last offensive, I realize that there are two obvious ways to counter my original strategy: One is to maintain composure under pressure and retaliate between my attacks to punish my overcommitment; the other is to slow down my pressure by debilitating me in some way. Seeing how she rendered Mother completely unable to fight, it's reasonable that she will attempt the second of these. "Spíða éklarí lí iöné," I whisper as a preventive effort. Shield me from... "Iöné" is a difficult word to translate, but the spell will consume a small trickle of thesis while it's deployed in an effort. When it's triggered, this shield will consume another chunk of thesis in order to block any of Akàné's attempts to induce confusion,

disorient me, cause psychosomatic paralysis, bind me in place (like Mother still is), et cetera.

Actually, the fact that Mother is still bound means that Akàné is still maintaining her binding spell, further limiting her ability to use magical reactions to my attacks. My iöné shield is mostly passive, so it's not a huge concern here, but casting multiple spells at the same time requires a certain level of concentration and finesse, which should put her at an additional disadvantage.

Of course, by the time I've cast my iöné shield and made this realization, Akàné has prepared another attack. It comprises two strong arcs of energy, only slightly delayed from the other. They cover a wide enough area that I can't simply avoid them. "Spída," I whisper in annoyance. The delay on her second arc gives Akàné enough time to close the gap between us, launching another quick projectile from close range and knocking me to the ground.

I need to get back on the offensive and end this fight. "Kiasí!" I thrust my thesis forward as hard as I can, propelling her off and away from me. She lands awkwardly on the ground a few meters away from me. Taking advantage of this opening, I create two pools of thesis at her feet and, from each, let flow two strands which tighten around her wrists and ankles, physically binding her in place. These will fuel themselves by draining Akàné's thesis unless she can overpower my will, giving her yet another mental check.

That completed, I draw myself up to my full height. "Aïri sí alíd"—Sword of ice. At my command, a long blade of ice slowly manifests in my hands. It's fragile, yes, but that hardly matters when it is still as sharp as steel and Akàné can't fight back as she's busy maintaining her bind on Mother and resisting my own shackles. I walk slowly and purposely up to her. "Is this



the outcome you expected?" I ask, resting the tip of my sword against her neck, letting its frigid energy radiate against her skin.

She bares her teeth and growls, pulling unsuccessfully against her restraints. "You'll pay for this once Our True Goddess, Lady Inoire, comes to defeat you!"

I roll my eyes and press the flat side of my sword against her shoulder. She screams in pain, the burning sensation likely overwhelming much of her thoughts. As I expected, this frees Mother from the trap she triggered, allowing her to come fully to her senses.

Once she has, she walks over to stand next to me, looking down at my victim with a sharp, frightening gaze. "You tricked my daughter and her friend, handed them to their enemies. You came to Thessia with the aim of sabotaging her mission, incapacitated me, and engaged in magical combat against her. You may have scored some victories of your own, but looking at you now, I'd say you're hardly in a position to be making threats against her." She scoffs, then turns to me. "Elena, do what you want with her. I'll respect your choice. She's caused you more than enough trouble."

I see three options: kill her, capture her, free her. I'm torn. Killing her is the obvious choice so that she can't continue getting in our way and won't be a future threat—I beat her pretty handily just now, but who's to say that would happen again, especially if I have to fight Inoire at the same time? But I'm not sure that I feel comfortable killing another human, even one who has wronged me so much. Capturing her accomplishes those same goals more humanely, as well as punishes her by forcing her to live the consequences, but only insofar as she remains imprisoned—which I, myself, have proved, isn't trivial

to guarantee. And releasing her is, well... strategically, it's not the greatest idea, but Sonya's words and Isolde's self-doubts after her mission in Vasen flood my consciousness, and I'd rather not give the impression, however justified my actions may be, of being a monster.

*What would you do, Isa?* I ask, my voice quiet and uncertain in my head, even if I don't show that emotion on my face. I assume you've been watching?

*Yeah.* Beyond that, she stays quiet, equally unable to make the decision. Or at least equally unable to say it out loud.

"I accept my fate," Akàné says quietly, a tear running silently down her face. She's stopped struggling against her restraints and gone mostly limp. "You know it's the right thing to do. I... don't blame you and I would do the same in your shoes."

I draw my sword off her shoulder, surprised. "After everything we've been through, you're going to give in like this?" It doesn't seem like her.

Akàné looks down, her eyes closed. "Despite my efforts, I have failed in my mission, which is my shame to bear," she tells me. "Besides, fighting you here, in the shadow of Estènné's resting place, has granted me a new perspective. Even when it's hostile, your thesis feels so much brighter than hers." She pauses, another tear sliding down her face. "Please. It'll be so much kinder than anything she'd do to me."

*A quick death is a mercy not often enough afforded those who most need it.* That's Estènné's voice, slow and careful, dripping with apology for Akàné. What's more, those are the same words she told me on my way to Catens all that time ago, saying that I'd find out what she meant soon enough.

I know it's the smart choice, but that doesn't make it an easy choice.

I take a few deep breaths. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper, and she nods before I set my ice sword through her chest. The confidence and power I’d felt as I defeated her mere moments ago prove themselves to be merely adrenaline. Now that the fight is over and my enemy slain, I release all my outstanding theses—my iöné shield, the binding restraints, my sword—and fall onto my hands and knees, panting. Both out of exertion and out of guilt and fear and anger and disgust and... whatever other emotions are rushing through me too strongly to identify. Letting Ressen fall to his death back in Illondrès was bad enough, but this is different, more personal, more poignant...

The one thing that I can feel clearly is Isolde’s presence. *It’s okay, El. Let it out.* A further few seconds are all that it takes to break down the remainder of my defenses, and I can feel the tears rush down my cheeks as I hug my knees to my chest, rocking back and forth and pressing my consciousness as closely to Isa’s as I can. Especially compared to the storm of emotions in me, she feels soft and warm and soothing, and I almost lose myself in her. For her part, she just sits there, gently holding onto me while I straighten out my emotions.

*It’s funny,* I say after some time with a slight smile, *how much more intimate clasping consciousnesses like this is, yet what I’m craving is a physical hug. Not that this is bad,* I rush to add, *and I do really appreciate this. Thank you. I guess I just wish you were actually here.*

*Me too,* she says sadly. With a bit more positive energy, she adds, *Well, I’ll be there soon enough.* Of course, she doesn’t have to remind me that Inoire, the Monarchs, and the Incerin navy will be here almost as soon.

We remain like this for some time, long enough for the

already low sun to reach beyond the horizon. Looking around, I notice that Mother has taken Akàné's body and placed her on a makeshift funeral pyre. Now, she stands further up the island, watching me from the castle.

"How are you feeling?" she asks once I've made my way to meet her.

"Better, I think."

She nods. "I may not have been able to take part in the battle, but I was able to watch it." She places her arm around my shoulder. "And it was impressive. I've seen you in sparring matches, obviously, so I know firsthand just how capable you are. But it was something else altogether to watch it from afar. You should be proud."

"Should I be proud of killing Akàné?" My voice comes out more sharply than I intended.

Mother is quiet a moment, carefully choosing her words. "I think you should be proud of your victory. Your opponent was no pushover, yet still you prevailed, even though she had bested you once before." A beat. "She died in service of her mission, she accepted that, and you took the strategic and humane action in ending her life, unsavory as it was. I don't believe that you should wear her death with pride—" She looks me in the eyes with a startling intensity. "—but neither need you be stained by it." I nod, reluctantly agreeing. "Now, how about we go do something about her?"

As we walk back down to where the battle took place, where Akàné's body rests, I notice Mother glance backward toward the castle with a slight smile. We decide to give Akàné a proper funeral in the Thessian style since she was born of Thessian heritage and, well, we're currently in Thessia. The islands' culture, unlike the continent, features open-air cremation

for their funerals, hence the pyre that Mother built earlier. Mother leads the proceedings, with her and Estènne teaching me as we go. Her voice serious, even beyond it's normal regal range, Mother officiates in the Thessian tongue, with Estènne translating in my head:

"It is with great regret that we come here tonight to oversee the transferral of one of our own from this world, though our duty shall not be avoided merely by discomfort. Akàné Verrader, of Thessian blood but of Incerin born, is no longer an agent of the flow we call Life, as she was in battle slain. It is no secret that we discourage violence, but her fight was of great importance, for in the balance hangs the future of all the world. She accepted her mission and, the moment of death upon her, accepted her future with a noble heart, knowing it was a future she had hoped to avoid for some time yet. And though she stood in opposition of us, we cannot without a heavy heart claim her defeat. We do not celebrate her death, yet honor it, as we bind ourselves to do, even enemies as we were."

She motions for me to approach the pyre. "I would like you to do the honors," she tells me. "This was your first battle, your first kill therein, and I would like you to give yourself some closure over it."

I understand and take my place at the center of the structure. "Would it were not so," I cry out before placing my hand on Akàné's chest. "Ínar," I whisper, then step back. And as the flames eat away at their fuel, I allow myself to feel them eat away at my guilt as well.

## Born Anew

At sunrise the following morning, I find myself standing at the entrance to the castle at the top of the island. It's an elegant structure, though modest in both size and form. Being also centuries old, portions have fallen into disrepair. But this has been Estènne's home for those selfsame centuries.

It's bizarre, actually. It's been some time since I first heard Estènne speak to me in front of Sonya's house. It feels a lifetime ago, not the mere months of reality. And the heroine of legend has been somewhat residing in my mind ever since, revealing herself to be both remarkably human as well as that same heroic character I imagined she might have been. And here I am, standing at the entrance to her shrine, about to join with her. Despite the intimacy that goes along with sharing consciousnesses, I feel uneasy—not unwelcome, but also not at home, a guest who's not keen to intrude.

*Which is absurd*, and you know it, Estènne says with a teasing grin.

I'm left to just sigh. *Perhaps, but that doesn't change anything.* Besides, I point out, *shouldn't we wait for Mother before we begin*

*the ritual?*

*I have a strong suspicion that we won't have to wait long, she says. Turning around, I see Mother approaching from her ship. Sensing my surprise, Estènné points out, It's sunrise, you know. Not an unreasonable time to be awake.*

Yes, yes, I say dismissively.

"Good morning," Mother says when she reaches me. "How are you feeling?"

An innocent-seeming question that nonetheless possesses a deep, underlying concern. "I'll be alright," I say, intentionally vague. She picks up on this choice and flashes me a glance that says that I need to elaborate. Sighing, I add, "I'm still trying to figure out last night, but you were right that the funeral was good closure. I'll need some time to process it, but I think I'll be okay. And as for today," I pause, unsure. "Well, I'm a bit anxious, but Estènné assures me that I shouldn't be, so I suppose I'll be fine in regards to that as well."

"I can't believe this day has actually come," she says with a bittersweet smile. "The life I led here in Thessia, when Estènné foretold to me that you would be the inheritor to her powers, was so long ago that it feels like part of a different eternity."

*She just doesn't like the idea of you having grown up, Estènné quips with a wink.*

I smile. "Shall we do this, then?" Mother nods and, together, we walk into the castle. After walking through a short stone corridor, we find ourselves back outside, in a courtyard. Across this courtyard is the bulk of the castle; in its center is a beautiful white marble fountain in the form of an intricately twisting plant, the water flowing from its bell-shaped flowers that reach impossibly high from the base. Not only is it remarkably eye-catching, I recognize it from the dream I had the night before

I first used magic in front of Sonya's house. Once I notice this, Estènne gives a sly smile. *That was your fountain?* I ask in surprise.

*Yep.*

I wait, expecting an elaboration on that idea, but she isn't forthcoming. *...you're not going to explain?*

*Nope.* The way she's acting this morning, with a devilishly coy smile backing a overtly playful attitude, I double-check to be sure that I'm not just talking to Isolde without somehow realizing it. After a moment, she relents with a show of annoyance. *I told you that, behind the scenes, I facilitated you unlocking your thesisis and magical powers, yes? That dream was a brief mingling of our consciousnesses which helped to enable your actions the following day.*

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, seeing as I knew that she was already guiding me that day anyway. Even so, I am. *Is there anything else I should know about this fountain? Any secret magical properties I should be aware of?*

*It's pretty.* She's not wrong.

By the time I realize that I'd stopped walking when we entered the courtyard, Mother has reached the opposite end, and I rush to catch up with her. "If you aren't able to communicate telepathically with Estènne," I say once I have, "then you would have spoken to her in person here, right?"

"Well, 'in person' might be putting it a bit strongly," she says after a moment's pause. "But loosely speaking, yes. At the very least, I am familiar with this castle."

When Mother doesn't seem to explain any further, Estènne takes up the mantle. *I don't exactly have a physical form anymore. The avatar you see of me with the telepathy projection spell is a mere projection of what human form I had during my lifetime, which no*



*longer exists.*

*You know, the way you say that, it sounds like you aren't fully human.*

*Well, it's not unreasonable to argue that I'm not.* She pauses, and I realize that she's completely serious. *How many humans do you know of that can—broadly speaking—survive for centuries after their death?*

I can't deny that she has a point. *Just you and Inoire.* Yet you also claim not to be a spirit. What are you, then? But the only answer I get is silence. As strange as everything that has happened to me within the last few months has been, somehow Estènne possibly not being entirely human is the pinnacle of hard-to-internalize. Yet I also feel like this revelation should have been obvious. Deciding that it doesn't matter right now, I shake my head and focus on following Mother through the castle. Eventually, within its depths, we reach an large wooden door with elegant abstract carvings across its face.

Here, Mother finally stops, turning to me with a glance that conveys a bittersweet excitement. "This is it, Elena. Are you ready?"

I nod, unsure of what exactly that entails.

*Then place your hand flat upon the door, open your thesis, and repeat after me,* Estènne instructs, and I comply. The command she speaks contains a number of Thessian words I'm not familiar with, but she conveys with them their meaning in the continental tongue. With each of her pauses, I repeat the fragment out loud. I, Elena Vardis,... present myself as the... true successor to Estènne Cerveille... and heiress to her powers.... If I be judged worthy,... allow my entry such that... we may join as was foretold.

The spell completed, I open my eyes to see that the carvings

in the door are now pulsing with a bright yellow light powered by a weak flow of my thesis. A few seconds later, the doors begin to creak open slowly, and I feel myself strangely drawn forward into the chamber beyond.

It's a circular room approximately ten meters across. In its center, a wooden pedestal holds a massive light blue sapphire crystal. The pulsing light has spread along a ridge running the circumference of the room, near the ceiling, and I find myself memorized by how it interacts with the half-meter gemstone, from which I can sense a remarkably powerful magical energy radiating.

*Much like Aurore, Estègne explains while I'm still awestruck, my soul is now bound to a gemstone and contained within it. So this has been my home for the last... well, quite a while at this point.*

Finally coming to my senses, I notice that Mother has remained outside the room. *Let me guess*, I respond to Estègne with a wry smile. *You want to move house now.*

*With the threat of Corbelle's attack imminent, it's slightly more complicated than you make it out to be*, she replies. *But yes, I won't deny that you aren't entirely wrong.*

*Fine, fine. I concede. What do I need to do?*

*Approach the gemstone and place your hand upon it. Open your soul, and repeat after me once more.* Once I have gotten into position, I can feel Estègne's thesis flowing powerfully through the gem.

With her feeding me the necessary lines of the oath, I speak aloud, trying to hide the apprehension from my voice. "Arí, Elena Vardis bý, lýpto éklará sí éto astu sí alíth lí Estègne Cerveille ara írono lí volit éklará ser." This first part is the same as before: I, Elena Vardis, present myself as the true successor to Estègne Cerveille and heiress to her powers. "Estègne, arí

kalor éklaro”—Estènne, I call upon you. “Symé éklarèn, kerí ara íxi éklarí ser à étan éklaro ser”—Let us be joined, hand-in-hand, soul-in-soul. “Bý moír éklarèn ser”—As is our destiny. “Arí soriso staro”—I welcome you.

Once I’ve recited the oath, Estènne indicates her approval, then adds her side herself: *Arí, Estènne Cerveille bý, koma éklaro sí éta astu ara írono.* I, Estènne Cerveille, accept you as that successor and heiress. *Symé éklarèn, kerí ara íxi éklarí ser à étan éklaro ser. Bý moír éklaren ser. Arí soriso staro.*

With that, I feel a pleasant warmth permeate my body and my mindsoul, pulsing with the flow of theresis between Estènne and me. Overall, the process feels in some ways like the symesí bonding experience I had with Isolde and Mother, yet... different, somehow. Rather than a brief mingling of our souls as with those two, it seems as if our souls have coalesced, clearly distinct and distinguishable, yet attached and connected. And maybe it’s just me, but with the amount of theresis flowing within me now, I feel like I must be visibly glowing, even if that isn’t physically reasonable.

*We are now one, yet still two,* Estènne explains. It’s nice that her somewhat cryptic explanations aren’t going away. *Though our souls are somewhat merged, they remain distinct, as you correctly intuited. This means that you and I can effortlessly, almost implicitly share thoughts, as well as theresis. Over time, you will gain some of my instincts and intuitions, as I will yours.* She pauses a moment to make sure I understand. *One important thing, however, is that we still remain separate. Each of us can wall off our minds or a portion thereof, unreachable by the other. And your symesí connections remain entirely private.*

I’m still confused as to the purpose, then. *It doesn’t seem that much has changed between us, then,* I reply. *When I formed the*

*symesi connections, I gained the ability to communicate with Isolde and Mother, but you and I could already do that. You already had the ability to read my thoughts and provide your wisdom and experience without me even having to ask. And you've proven that you could share your instincts and power when you protected me several times—shielding me from the Vasennite military's arrows on our escape and from Akàné's trap here in Thessia. A beat. Not that I'm doubting you, per se, but what was the point of all this, Estènne?*

*She's quiet for a few moments, trying to determine how best to explain. Have you noticed that your connections with Isolde and Celaena have grown stronger over time? That you can more easily and clearly share thoughts and emotions, even extending to the capability to sense and discern emotions without conscious sharing?*

*Grasping where she's leading with this, I indicate my understanding.*

*So it is with us, she finishes. Our bonds do not change immediately, but grow slowly and progressively. A beat. Once she's sure I understand, she continues. As to your last point, about me taking control, she begins. When using Celaena's scrying spell, your ability to concentrate on other tasks is greatly hindered and often impossible. Saving you in those two cases was of paramount importance, else everything would have been for naught. So I expended a great deal of effort and energy to perform those two feats. With our new bond, it is significantly easier, almost trivial with your permission, to act of my own accord.*

*And that, plus your ability to lend me your thesis and mastery, is what will allow us to defeat Inoire? I ask for confirmation.*

*Yes, as she has granted rather similar powers to King Ennets, she says. From our brief confrontation with him in Vasen, my instinct is that you are more substantially powerful than he is; however, Inoire is more powerful than I am, having absorbed strength from the same*

*energy which catalyzed the growth of her desirous greed for power.*

*Then we must be prepared for her,* I say with determination. With that, I return to the hallway, where Mother awaits, a proud smile across her face.

"I trust that everything went well?" she asks.

I nod. With a slight laugh, I add, "Well, it feels a bit strange, and I can't say that I'm used to it yet. But yes, things seem to have gone smoothly."

I can feel Estènne gently pull backward on my consciousness. *Relax, and don't be alarmed,* she says quietly and soothingly. Unsure of what exactly she means, I nonetheless comply, relaxing my entire body. Her soul seems to come forward to displace mine, and I feel my body start to move of its own—or, rather, Estènne's—accord. My initial response is to tense up, but recognizing what's going on, I force myself to relax and give in. It's not easy, but I manage. "And I agree with her, Celaena," Estènne says out loud with my voice, though it does still contain a hint of hers. That's going to take some getting used to. "We will require some time to grow accustomed to this arrangement, but the ritual proceeded according to plan." She creates a small fireball in my hand, then smiles. "And, as you can see, transferring control seems to have been a full success as well."

"Wonderful," she says. Through our symesí bond, she speaks to me individually: *You're still there, right, Elena?*

*Yes, I'm still here,* I tell her. *I gave Estènne physical control, but I am very much still present and paying attention at the moment.*

She nods slightly. "Estènne, is there anything else we need to do here, or should we return to Celé?"

"As eager as I might be to leave this island after these few hundred years, there is one further thing I'd like to test:

combining our powers for a single spell.” *If that’s alright, Elena, then I am returning control*, she adds to me privately.

I indicate my agreement and return focus to my body, Estènne retreating to the containment of her soul within me. Sensing her plan, I lead Mother back into the courtyard, taking my place in front of the fountain. She, on the other hand, clearly has no idea what we’re about to do.

“What’s the plan, Elena?” she asks as I reach the edge of the fountain.

I smile. “You’ll see soon enough.” *Ready, Estènne?* She agrees and hooks into my thesis flow, providing me with access to hers as well. “Ídor, rí nanta lí sora ara rí péli lí yfloní éklaré ser!”—Water, rise into the sky and reflect its light!

Sure, I could have done this myself, but it’s definitely significantly easier with Estènne’s help, and I’ll be able to achieve a more impressive result than I could have on my own. At my command, the water from the fountain’s basin rises up to a few hundred meters into the sky across the courtyard. A moment later, after I’ve set up shields around Mother and me, I let it fall in droplets, emulating a gentle rain. The key, however, is that the weather remains brightly sunny: as such, the individual droplets create a huge array of beautiful rainbows above our heads.

A wide smile crosses Mother’s face as she watches in awe of the display. “It’s lovely,” she whispers.

“Now we just need to put the water back in the fountain,” I laugh. The issue with our marvelous display is that the fountain’s water ended up falling just about everywhere in the courtyard. Fortunately, it’s not too hard to refill the fountain and, once that’s done, we’ve completed the last objective Estènne had planned before we can return to Celé.

*It's a lot like using the scrying spell, actually, I tell Isolde later that afternoon after we've set sail. When Estènne took control, I could feel my body move without me directing, in much the same way as I can feel yours move without my input when I scry you. The main differences from that are that I can retake control when I want and that I can sense the flow of magic around me.*

*She takes a second to parse this information. I would have scried you this morning to observe what happened, she says slowly, but I was afraid that I might interfere. Even if my soul isn't physically present during the spell, with something as delicate as a soulbinding, I wasn't willing to take that risk. She perks up, a sweet smile across her lips. Besides, now I have an excuse to talk to you about it.*

*I let out a small giggle. Well, after we'd confirmed that we could pass physical control, she wanted to test that we could properly share magical power as well, given how paramount that is to our victory. I smile, remembering the image, conveying it to her as best as I can. So we launched the water from the courtyard's fountain into the sky to make it rain and create rainbows.*

*That sounds beautiful, El. She pauses. When she speaks again, her voice betrays her sadness despite her efforts to hide it. I just wish I was there already. You wouldn't believe how terrible of a traveling companion Lieutenant Ines is.*

*I would, actually. I give a dry laugh. You forget that we traveled together from Vasen to Unthern, then to Illondrès and back. He was so bad that you shoved him into a wall at some point, as I recall. When she remains quiet, I add, Besides, didn't you tell me last night that you would be arriving in Celé soon?*

*Yeah. Ines estimates that we'll reach the island within the*

next few days.

I do my best to comfort her, passing along what solidarity I can. Same here. And we'll have a couple days from then before Inoire and the Monarchs arrive. So it's not all bad, right?

\* \* \*

A day and a half later, early in the morning, Mother and I arrive in Celé once again, and Isolde arrives later that evening. Isa had set some thesisis traps along her journey. Weak enough that they should escape detection, they've enabled her to get a rough sense of our enemies' progression. Inoire and the Monarchs are expected to arrive in the morning of the second day following, meaning we have one full day beforehand.

As before, I spend my time wandering the city and the surrounding area, but this time, I can bring Isolde. Our first destination outside the city is the same park where Estènne's statue and where I met Dresni and Ikari. I consider finding the two siblings, but ultimately decide against it, preferring to catch up with Isolde alone. We'll find them later, after we've dealt with Inoire.

Our conversations range across the full spectrum between the mundane and innocent to the serious questions of how we'll handle the next few days, but without any further information, our theory-crafting comes up short, so we go back to the fun, innocent topics where we can simply enjoy each other's company. It's a remarkably nice change of pace from our last couple of weeks, when we left Unthern.

But by that second morning, with our enemies near our doorstep but not yet quite here, our anxiety grows. And not just Isolde and me, but Mother is wearing her emotions on her face



much more clearly than usual, and I can feel Estènne stirring with discomfort within me. But Isolde's sensor traps indicate that they'll be here in just a few hours, so it's just a matter of time.

We've told Elder Yves about what is about to happen, of course, but we've kept it a secret from the other inhabitants. It's another one of the reasons I didn't want to find Dresni and Ikari yesterday. Regardless, when the ships from the continent finally arrive, it's the large flagship carrying the Monarchs which leads the way, the rest of the naval forces a fair distance behind it, yet still menacingly close by.

As the lead ship approaches the docks, Yves, Mother, Isolde, and I stand in wait while minor confusion sweeps through the handful of people nearby. The ship docks, and the Monarchs—King Lance and Queen Riviera—descend from its deck to stand and stare at us.

"W-Welcome, guests from the mainland!" Yves rushes to say in the continental tongue, his pronunciation and accent betraying his lack of familiarity with the language. The remaining five of us (seven, if we count Estènne and Inoire) remain stationary, still staring at the other party.

It's the Queen who finally speaks first. "Isolde." Her voice is cold, distant, condescending. Appropriate given the situation, but very contrary to what one would expect from a mother addressing her daughter after a long time separated.

I can feel the former princess tense up beside me, but her voice is unwavering. "Queen Riviera." Unsurprisingly, this interaction does nothing to ease the pressure of the situation. "Am I correct to assume that this is not a rescue operation for your once-beloved princess?" She scoffs as she finishes, highlighting her perceived ridiculousness of that title. "I was

under the impression that my disappearance was being ruled a kidnapping, especially with Elena's flight from Vasen that same night."

*Oh, Isolde, I reach out to her with a slight chuckle. You're playing games.*

*Always, she responds. I've told you before how much I hated being a princess. Nothing I say is going to change anything now—they're already upset with us—so I might as well say it.*

It doesn't seem like angering them any more than they already are is the best idea at the moment, but I simply sigh. *You know them better than I do.*

When Isa mentions my name, I notice both Monarchs focus on me, and I freeze momentarily. "In Steilla," Lance says with a gravelly voice, "you confessed, Miss Vardis, to a long list of crimes, including being a theria." I nod, not entirely sure where he's going with this. "Since that time, you have violated the terms of your sentence, fled to Vasen, attacked several members of the Royal Front, impersonated a noblewoman to gain false entry to our study, attacked our person, kidnapped our Fair Princess, bewitched another of the Front to aid in your escape, and then had the audacity to destroy the stockpiles in several of Incerin's coastal military bases."

That's mostly true. I notice that my attacks on Ressen and Akàné weren't mentioned, which gives me an idea. I smile. "I am not guilty of all those things. Though, even supposing I were, those actions account for how many deaths, I ask? Even in those 'attacks' you mention, the most egregious act I performed was putting your precious soldiers harmlessly to sleep. Yet what is your mission here?"

He's clearly displeased by my words. "I call upon you, True Goddess, as I am your vessel!" Somewhat surprisingly (though

perhaps it shouldn't be), his call to Inoire is in Thessian. Its beginning—*Arí kalor éklaro*—is also found in the oath I made during the incarnation ritual. I notice that Mother has been translating our conversation to Yves throughout, but although she makes no move to translate this line, Yves's eyes widen in recognition.

Lance glows a deep red, then it is Inoire who speaks in his voice. "Mortal one, bound to my enemy, we are met again."

I nod slowly. *Estènne, does she know that we've bonded, or is she just guessing?*

*She likely knows, but I can't be sure,* is her response. *I felt a minute shift around the time you left Steilla, which was probably her bonding with Lance, though I couldn't confirm it at the time.*

"This subject of mine, the one whom you know as King, wishes me to confirm the truth of your previous statement, ludicrous as it seems."

I nod once again. "I consent on the condition that you agree to have a civil, truthful discussion with us."

Inoire is quiet for a few seconds, likely discussing my offer with King Lance. Eventually, she speaks again, though her voice is hesitant, acquiescent. "Very well." She casts a spell to determine whether I was lying, and I begin to faintly glow white for a few seconds, which seems to anger Inoire. "She is telling the truth," she says bitterly.

Isa takes half a step forward. "It was I who asked Elena for her aid in my escape from Vassen, and Sir Brangaine sacrificed himself against our wishes to buy us the time to do so."

Isolde retakes her position, and Yves leans in toward me, speaking in Thessian. "Inoire consented to our discussion. You should cast the same truth-detection spell on them."

I nod, facing the King. "Corbelle Inoire, she who calls herself

the True Goddess: With your consent, I seek to cast the same spell on you that you have on me, as to verify to all parties involved that this is, indeed, a fair conversation. I seek to do the same to Queen Riviera and give our consent to allow the same on the remaining three of us. Will this be acceptable?" When the Queen quickly objects, I calmly add, "I assure you, Your Majesty, that it will do no harm to you, nor will you even be able to feel it."

After another few seconds, Inoire gives her approval, and the spells are cast.

*You've more experience with this type of thing, Isa, I tell her. I think you and Estènne should handle this.* After a similar line to Estènne, I hand over control of my body to her.

Isolde nods, taking a step forward once more. "If we may ask the first question: What is Incerin's objective in launching a military offensive against Thessia, and what do you hope to gain from assisting them, Inoire?"

It's the Queen who speaks. "Thessia has long been an enemy of the continental nations," she says. "We have long sought a casus belli against them. Fortunately in that regard, the Incerin government has been attacked by no fewer than three agents of the islands." That would be Isolde, Estènne, and me.

"This is a crusade," Inoire continues, her voice sharp and pointed. "I seek to lead a charge against those in Thessia who reject me as their welcome member and rightful leader." Both of them remain glowing a faint white, indicating that they are speaking the truth, though I suspect that Inoire's answer is incomplete. "You, on the other hand, oppose this."

Estènne, in my voice, speaks next, her voice sad. "Oh, Corbelle..." Drawing herself up, she addresses Lance. "I would prefer the King answer this one: King of Incerin, a nation I

once called home, what is the nature of your relationship with Corbelle Inoire, she whom you call the True Goddess, and how did it come to be such?"

The King's (Inoire's?) eyes grow glassy for a moment while he regains control of his body. Once he has recovered, he stares at Estènne (me?) with piercing eyes. "Estènne Cerveille." Her name escapes his mouth in a biting tone, full of hatred—to put it mildly. "I had heard whisperings from Her from approximately one month before our tour of the nation began," he explains. With a jolt, I realize that this lines up almost exactly with my first contact with Estènne. "She introduced herself as the True Goddess of this world, exiled and sealed long ago by a band of ungrateful Thessians led by a certain Estènne Cerveille. Her soul was preserved over the centuries, though the mortal body she inhabited had passed away." He glares sharply at her/me/us once again. "She sought a new vessel to inhabit, to empower to regain Her rightful position in this world and to reward in service to Her."

"And it is due to the distaste of my actions centuries ago, carried down in Incerin legend, along with what hatred Corbelle bears the whole of Thessia's citizenry and me that Incerin now marches to war?"

"Tensions had existed between Incerin and Thessia well before your birth, you know, Cerveille," Riveria says. "But those tensions were exacerbated immensely by your actions and, in our own times, those of your vessel, Elena Vardis."

Estènne stands silent a moment, looking from one Monarch to the other. "King Lance, how did you finalize your bond with Corbelle? Was there an incantation or oath involved?"

He nods. "What of it?"

"May I ask what it was?" She turns to Yves and adds, in

Thessian, "Listen, Elder Yves. I believe you will understand this."

Lance hesitates a moment, possibly asking Inoire for clarification. After a moment, he says, "Arí Lance Ennets bý. Corbelle Inoire, arí kalor éklaro. Symé éklarèn. Arí isté éklará staro."

Estènne smiles slightly, and I sense a similar reaction from Isolde and Mother. "King Lance, Queen Riviera: Are either of you proficient in the Thessian tongue?" Estènne asks. They indicate that, no, they are not. She turns back to Yves. In the continental tongue, she speaks slowly and clearly. "Elder Yves, could you translate that for them?"

He nods, speaking in broken continental. "Is Thessian language oath: 'I am Lance Ennets. Corbelle Inoire, I call upon you. Let us be joined. I forfeit to you.'" Most importantly, Yves is still glowing white: truthful.

While the Monarchs have frozen in shock, Estènne takes advantage to continue her advance. "Were you two aware that Corbelle's powers are also Thessian in origin? In fact, Corbelle," she adds with a confident smile, addressing the self-titled goddess, "I wonder if you ever told your vessel that you were born in Antière, a city on the south side of the island on which we now stand. I wonder if they mark the irony of our current position: that my vessel and I, both foreigners, must defend Thessia from a foreign invasion by one of her own subjects." Inoire appears to have angrily retaken control of the King's body, though she manages to keep herself in check for the moment. By contrast, Estènne's smile never fades.

"Rumor has it," Isolde says, taking the lead, "that you and Estènne were once good friends. How is it that you grew to be such bitter rivals?"

"Will you tell the story, or shall I?" Estènne asks. She hasn't

shared much about her past, so it's a story I'm quite curious to hear. Inoire, on the other hand, doesn't seem to want to tell it. "Very well, though you discredit yourself by allowing your self-appointed rival to control the narrative."

"Who's to stop you from simply fabricating a series of lies?" Riviera asks, heated.

Estènne turns to the Monarchs, the smile still across her face. "Corbelle is stopping me. Mark well the color of my aura." She draws herself upright as she prepares her story. "You all know about my past: how I was born in Incerin but was exiled as a heretic on account of my powers, which were Thessian in origin. So I fled here, to Thessia. I traveled the islands, studying everything I could about the cultures they hid, about the language which fueled our magic. I worked to share what I learned about the different-yet-not-disparate cultures here and how they compare to those on the continent. I found a home here." For the first time, her smile falters. "But I suppose it wasn't allowed to last. Incerin ships formed the frontal fleet in a continental navy desperate to annex the islands for their own purposes, whatever they might have been. It was here in Celé that they made their advance, and it was here in Celé that I repelled them. Of course, such an act does not go unnoticed. Its effect on the continent is well known, but it also caused a large split here in Thessia." She pauses, taking a deep breath. "My show of power was divisive. Not everyone cared, but those who did generally fell into one of two camps: those who took no issue with me for it and were often appreciative or awestruck and those who came to see me as a threat and were jealous or fearful or who saw me as violating proper Thessian and magical conduct."

"Let me guess which group Inoire belonged to," Isolde says.

“Not the first one.”

Estènné nods. “Corbelle was born in Antière, approximately a decade younger than me. I encountered her several times along my travels through the city. She was well-liked, if somewhat aloof, and well-respected for her magical prowess, as she was, perhaps, the most powerful spellcaster of her generation. Whenever I would find myself in Antière, I made sure to find time to spend with her, discussing whatever new discoveries the two of us had made, and we became friends. The issue came in the aftermath of the Battle of Celé.” Her expression darkens as she takes another deep breath. “Following the battle, she was assuredly in that second group. While I do have some lingering regrets about the scale of my actions, Corbelle extended that beyond my imagination. Perhaps she’d seen me as a rival the entire time. I’m not sure. Regardless, she made it her duty to lead any and all opposition against me, spreading across all of Thessia her anger, jealousy, and fear toward me and the continent as a whole.” She pauses to gauge the reactions of those around her. The King/Inoïre appears furious, though restrained, while the Queen seems to have softened her expression. Isolde is listening intently, while Mother is still translating for Yves, the two of them unfazed by the story as if they’re already familiar with it. “Some time later, this crusade of hers came to a head—and perhaps she may now recognize the irony of her assertions—accusing me of attempting to present myself as a divine guardian of the islands, protector of the citizens, when I was truly nothing more than any other of those selfsame citizens. She launched an attack on me. As we were both of nearly equal strength, neither was able to completely defeat the other without nearly perishing themselves. Of course, both of us had discovered and,



indeed, workshopped together, a spell which could preserve our soul until a new host vessel could be found. Champions of our respective sides, we sealed ourselves away for the last few centuries, only finding those vessels some months ago.” She breaks into a sly smile once again. “In that time, she appears to have grown ever more resolute in her stance toward me, believing herself that True Goddess who would vanquish the arrogant Estènne Cerveille and establish a perfect world of her own design and domain.” Her story completed, she simply watches the Monarchs.

*Did you know that about Estènne and Inoire?* I ask Isa.

*No, she admits. It doesn’t surprise me though, knowing what little the legends say about Estènne here in Thessia.*

*I consider this a moment. It’s strange. I feel like, deep down, I always knew this was the case, even if I wouldn’t ever have been able to realize it without Estènne telling the story.*

Riviera is the first to speak aloud, turning toward her husband’s body. Her voice is soft yet remarkably piercing. It reminds me unpleasantly of the tone she used during my hearing in Steilla. “Is this explanation true, Inoire?”

“It does match what records we have uncovered from the era,” Yves says.

This just causes Riviera to repeat her question to Inoire, more intently this time.

“Of course it’s not,” Inoire says sharply but smoothly. The aura around her turns subtly and almost imperceptibly red, though I notice that she has finally started to combat my lie detection spell, muting the effect of the color shift. Calling upon Estènne’s help, I redouble my efforts, asking Isa to clarify the story to force Inoire to keep talking.

“If Estènne’s story is false,” she says, “then what did happen?”

Inoire falters a moment before speaking. “You claim that I am the one who is mistaken, who is trying to make herself goddess of the world. But, Estènnè,” she glares at her/me/us, “surely you and Elena are the real monster, given your history of the Battle of Celé and your recent murder of Akàné Verrader.”

She doesn’t mention Henry Ressen, the journalist I killed in Illondrès. I’m not sure how she and I compare in this—though I suspect that she has outpaced me in such villainous acts and is escaping the lie on a technicality—but I can defend myself against her accusation regarding Akàné. Retaking control, I speak up. “Miss Verrader was waiting in ambush for us, and she struck first, her trap incapacitating Celaena before I could even move,” I say, gesturing toward Mother. “Her intention was, at the very least, to ensure my death. And when I had finally secured a position of victory, Akàné accepted her death, even forcing my hand when I may otherwise have relented and spared her.”

“And we gave her a proper funeral afterward,” Mother points out.

“Besides,” Isa lights up with her characteristic playful smile, only just containing her taunting. “You never answered my question, you know.”

Inoire suddenly drops her resistance. Instinctively—though whether the instinct is mine or Estènnè’s, I’m not sure—I release the spell and, in its place, cast a shield large enough to enclose the four of us.

Barely a moment later, Isolde and I are hit with a powerful blast of magical energy, which I let dissipate around the shield.

## What We've Prepared For

The reaction doesn't take long to manifest. That's not a surprise, seeing how Inoire just returned our diplomatic attacks with a proper magical one. Sure, we may have provoked her, but she is still the first to physically strike, and she did it with essentially zero indication; what little she did give was only accessible to me.

"We're done here! You'll pay for this, Estènne!" she roars. Turning toward Queen Riviera, she barks at her to retreat to the safety of the ship, then magically raises her voice to command the approaching navy to attack the city.

What had been a relatively civil discussion quickly devolves into chaos as the full group—all six of us—spring into action.

*Mother, take Ines and deal with the incoming fleet.* She nods, understanding the situation, and runs off to her ship, where Ines is waiting in his. *Isa, you and Yves protect the city. Find Dresni and Ikari if you need more hands.*

*What about you?* she asks, the concern in her voice proving that she already knows the answer.

*I'm going to keep Inoire here to keep her out of your way,* I respond.

Noting her continued disquiet, I offer her a tender smile. *It'll be easier for me to focus on her if I know that everyone else is safe. But if you're that concerned, you can come back me up when you're finished.*

She hesitates a moment, clearly unhappy with how the situation has progressed, but she also knows that I'm right. With one final glance in my direction, she rushes off with Elder Yves toward the rest of the city. Inoire tries to fire an attack to stop her retreat, but I cut her off before she can quite manage.

"I don't think so," I tell her, taking a defensive stance. "If you want her, then you're going to go through me. Simple as that."

Inoire laughs in disbelief. "Estènne must have also given you her fatal optimism if you seriously believe you can stop me."

I simply smile. "If I were to give up, I certainly wouldn't stand a better chance than I do now."

*She's confident, Estènne tells me. Part of it is an arrogance: she genuinely believes that she ought to effortlessly overpower you. With a slightly more optimistic tone, she adds, But Isolde and I cornered her well enough in that discussion to prompt her attack, indicating that she feels threatened, which means that at least part of her confidence is merely a façade.*

*So, we need to call her bluff and catch her off-guard.*

Her words are slow, apprehensive. *Well, anger does not often lead to rational behavior, so she's likely to be the unpredictable one, rather than you.*

*I'll just have to make up for that, then.*

During this conversation with Estènne, I form a weak iöné shield around myself. I'll be able to strengthen it on the fly if necessary, but I won't be able to cast it instantaneously, so it's good to have now before I might need it. This does give Inoire an opportunity to act while I'm engaged, but it could end up

being worth it.

I have two goals for the fight: to protect the city of Celé and its inhabitants, as well as Mother and Isolde, naturally, and to defeat Inoire, prioritized in that order. In particular, as with my fight against Akàné a few days ago, I would like to overwhelm Inoire with an unstoppable flurry of attacks all at once, rather than a long slough of chipping away at her. To that end, I need to observe her, to figure out her movements, to predict her vulnerabilities, to seize those openings before she can defend against them. So, I need to play a mostly defensive game until then.

Of course, she does take this opportunity that I've given her, putting me at an immediate disadvantage as she dashes forward with a quick thrusting attack. To my surprise however, she's choosing to do so with a magically-summoned sword, in much the same way as my ice sword from a few days ago. It appears to be a fully metal sword, which is terrifyingly impressive. Elements are one thing, but fully-steel swords are outside my range of summonable objects. As unorthodox as it is, given my inability to match her in a sword fight (not least because I don't currently have a sword), this might actually be her best play.

I dodge the attack with a hasty retreat, covering my movement with a thin semicircular wall of fire. It's not enough to stop her, but it slows her down long enough for me to regain my footing. I narrowly avoid her next swing by a hair's breadth, and I can feel my heart subsequently pounding through my chest.

I need to do something about this sword of hers. I don't necessarily mind being on the defensive, but I'm ill-equipped to deal with a long blade like this with no proper weapon of my own. Taking another look, however, I notice that Inoire's

sword doesn't seem to be projecting any thesis of its own, implying that it's not actually a magical sword. In that case, it's probably Lance's. Either way, disarming her becomes an even more valuable idea, seeing as I can take the sword without her destroying it by releasing the binding energy.

It's still a difficult proposition, and not one that I'm confident in executing. Besides, with my skills in swordsmanship, I'm not sure that me being the one with the pointy bit of steel is really going to help that much. The important thing is just creating some space to breathe. Close-quarters combat isn't really my speciality.

As I deflect another attack with a magical forcefield, I quickly run through my options. A fire sword, being made of fire, doesn't really have a strong, physical core, and would pass through Inoire's sword; water is much the same; ice is just too fragile to survive that hit without being too heavy to easily swing; that leaves just rock as a fundamental element that I could use, but again, it's heavy and wouldn't do me much good anyway, seeing as she, possibly using Lance's familiarity with the weapon, seems far more capable in a sword duel. My only physical weapon option, then, is my bow, which is hardly the weapon to use when you're being rushed with a sword.

Even so, I have an idea, but I'm only going to get one chance at this. I get what distance I can from her, and time creating a dome of ice around my body, a few meters in radius, as she drives her weapon through where the ice will form. With this temporal precision, I'm able to freeze the sword in place, though I still flinch and close my eyes, expecting the blade's impact against my skin. Inoire curses loudly in frustration, unable to immediately pull her sword free, and I can soon feel her competing fire-laden thesis attempting to melt my wall.

*Estènne*, I call out, *help me hold this!* With her added strength, I'm able to funnel enough *theresis* to maintain my defensive shell while also channeling some up the length of the sword itself. It being a normal, nonmagical weapon, Inoire would have to project *theresis* through it, and she's too busy trying to overwhelm me with her devastating power—or maybe she's just trying to burn everything in anger—to notice the one important point in my armor. Regardless, I use the blade as a portal, which allows me to extend my power outside the confines of my ice wall.

I take a deep breath and weaken the wall behind me, instead directing that energy forward: “*Kiasí lí Inoire ara to lí aírí éklaré ser!*” Again, I'm relying on *Estènne's* power, but together, we're sufficient to propel Inoire backwards about halfway across the shipyard while keeping her sword in place, ripping it out of her hand in the process. Next, I release my energy in the entire wall and shatter the section holding the sword, letting it fall into my hand as I smile toward Inoire. With another quick motion, I create a circular pen of fire around her to keep her in place for a moment.

Earlier, I'd thought it convenient that she couldn't simply desummon the sword by dissolving its binding energy, but I've realized the important point is that she almost certainly can't resummon it. Staring directly at her as she's recovering, I yell “*Sarkéa!*” and watch the blade shatter into tiny pieces in my grasp. I couldn't use it, and now, she can't use it either. We're back on a relatively even playing field, forced to fight with magic rather than her underhanded, “normal” attacks that I ironically wasn't prepared for.

*We've just about finished evacuating the areas immediately near the shipyard*, Isolde tells me. *And a few volunteer therii are creating*

*shields around the most vulnerable remaining areas.* A short pause. *There's some minor panic, but overall, we have an easier job than you do.* I can hear the annoyance and frustration still dripping from her tone and her vaguely passive-aggressive phrasing, even as she does her best to conceal it.

*I'm fine, Isa,* I assure her. *I've gotten rid of Inoire's advantage, so our fight should go a bit more smoothly from here.*

Isolde grumbles, but doesn't put up any further resistance, likely deciding that it isn't worth the risk of distracting me.

While Inoire fires a series of fireballs at me, easily blocked with a shield, I sneak a look to my left, toward the coast where Mother and Ines are fighting the navy. Mother's not nearly as powerful as Estènne was, but she seems to be holding her own pretty well so far.... That gives me an idea, actually. I quickly get Estènne's approval, as I'll be using her help once again to handle the setup without me having to even think about it, then relate the plan to Mother so that she can do her part. The small amount of *theresis* that Estènne will be using will be easy to mask among the comparatively massive amounts that I'll need for the rest of the fight, so it's relatively safe to assume that Inoire won't detect it.

With this happening passively—from my sole perspective, anyway—I'm free to focus all of my attention on Inoire. She manages to dissolve enough of my fire pen to escape, so I let the remainder fall as well and adopt a defensive stance once again. We stand apart, approximately ten meters between us, cautiously tracing the circumference of a large circle in the ground as we revolve around its center, watching each other for the smallest hint of an opening.

I notice that she seems considerably more wary of me since my last attack. I intentionally dart my eyes away momentarily,



hoping to lure her into attacking. Perfectly on cue, she responds by directing a powerful shockwave into the ground, causing a localized miniature earthquake and resulting in meter-high spikes of rock emerging from the ground toward me like a series of knives sprouting violently from behind a thin cloud of dirt and dust.

Though I was prepared for an attack, I underestimated its strength and the size of the area that would be affected. Even as I attempt to dodge her terrestrial blades, I'm knocked off-balance, causing one to viciously scrape across the outside of my left leg while another tears at the right side of my torso, cleanly ripping the fabric of my shirt. Instinctively, without thought, I curl up in pain, tears venturing unbidden down my face as the light from the mid-day sky above me is blocked by the still-growing spikes.

A few moments pass, with whatever sounds that might exist inaudible over the blood pulsing through my head or my heart against my ribcage or simply masked by the blinding pain I've suddenly found myself in. I can't tell if the world is newly full of light or of darkness. The shortest time feels an eternity; any eternity feels like a single moment.

Suddenly, I feel myself flushed with a warmth which I initially believe to be another attack from Inoire. I quickly come to realize, however, that it's different: a pleasant warmth; internal, yet not mine. With its coaxing, I extend a hand against the rough pavement and use it to pull myself up, grimacing as the motion stretches my side and puts weight on my injured leg. Yet this time, with adrenaline now coursing through my veins, I use this pain to my advantage, fueling my power and frustration, violently shattering my stone enclosure and sending its fragments flying in every direction.

I feel a small, gentle hand upon my shoulder. Isolde. In the aftermath of my escape from my enclosure, it seems that at least one of the fragments hit Inoire as she approached. At some point, Estènne projected a shield to protect both Isa and me.

Isolde smiles up at me. *I told you so.* Her touch gives me a clarity of mind, and her spells grant me a reprieve from the pain. *Now you're fine,* she says, emphasizing the first word. Noting my confusion as to how she got here, she adds, *I'll explain later. For now, we have a fight to win!*

I return her smile. *Thank you, Isa.*

"You couldn't win one-on-one, so you brought along a friend to tip the odds?" Inoire taunts as I return to the center of the arena.

I feel my anger start to rise in response to her provocation, but I suppress it, chuckling instead. "Oh, don't pretend that this wasn't already two-on-two." She raises an eyebrow. "With physical weapons, you prefer daggers, not full-length swords, so that had to be the King's skill earlier," I explain, the information coming from Estènne. *(In all the years I knew her, she refused to even touch a sword,* she says. *"They're just unwieldably long daggers," she would tell me time and again.)* "Besides, Isolde came of her own accord. In fact, I told her to stay away."

With a sudden conviction, I know that now's the time for our secret attack. On my signal, Estènne hits Inoire in the back with a cannonball launched from above. Distracted by our conversation, Inoire didn't notice the small amount of foresight necessary, as I'd predicted. The plan was for Mother to direct some of the shots fired at her over the shipyard, where Estènne would collect them and keep them in the air. Because who would expect to be attacked by a rain of cannonballs from above? After the first successful hit, she lowers them to

form a cylindrical vortex around Inoire, occasionally sending a random one inward. Despite Inoire's efforts to push them away, Estènne manages to score a few strikes.

Part of that is that Inoire's efforts are split: Isa is creating a large, powerful sleeping spell across the entire area so that she can't escape it, while I bind her in place with a few ropes of thesisis. As she struggles, she simply uses more energy, subsequently causing her defenses to weaken, especially when Estènne lessens her attacks to be able to funnel more energy into my binding spells. Eventually, Inoire succumbs, falling limp in her bindings.

Keeping Inoire under wraps, I turn my attention over to the city—which seems entirely undamaged, barring the shipyard itself—then the water, where most of the Incerin ships have been sunk. Raising my voice, I call out to those remaining: “Attention, Incerin navy. Your leader has been defeated. You are hereby ordered to halt your attack and stand down. Or...” I raise my arm to punctuate my sentence with a bolt of lightning from above them, careful not to hit anyone. “Don't make me aim that more precisely,” I warn.

A few seconds later, a group of soldiers from one of the ships nearest the coast simultaneously launch flaming arrows in my direction. I notice sadly that my bow, which had been stashed on my back, was broken during my fight with Inoire, the wood likely snapping when I landed on it as a result of her pillar-of-rising-blades attack. I'd have liked to catch the arrows with magic then return fire using the bow, but I'll have to settle for raising with my hand once again an invisible wall, off of which the arrows simply bounce and fall harmlessly into the sea.

Before I can retaliate any further, the Incerin flagship, led by Queen Riviera herself, raises its parley flag and lowers its

cannons, causing the remainder of the ships to slowly follow suit one-by-one. Of course, not having to attack them suits me just fine, so I acknowledge her request and invite her back to the shipyard, impelling Mother and Ines to do likewise. Though I notice that Ines's ship, the *Katas*, stays put to keep an eye on the remaining hostile fleet.

*Well done*, Mother says to me as she disembarks with a smile. *I'm proud of you, you know.*

I flush at the compliment and attention, especially with the Queen's eyes also paralyzing me before she glances over to Lance/Inoire, a frown growing across her face.

"Don't worry," I say hurriedly. "They're both still alive, just asleep." Isolde nods in confirmation. Riviera, suspicious and uncertain, walks over to them, her piercing gaze back on me, to check his/her/their pulse before nodding to herself and returning to stand in front of me. I notice my left hand starts subtly yet uncontrollably shaking, whether from nerves or adrenaline or something else, and Isolde wordlessly takes it in hers. Deep breaths, El.

Riviera weakens her gaze and sighs, placing a hand on her forehead. In an exasperated tone, she asks, "Why does it always have to come to this, Miss Vardis? That you and I should come face-to-face in judgment?"

"I don't seek your approval. You have plenty of reasons to dislike me. " I shrug. "But Estènne and Corbelle fought in their own time, and prophecy dictates that so too must their inheritors: your husband and me. Being friends with your daughter doesn't make it any less likely, either." I pause a moment. "Though I will admit that I did not know your husband was Inoire's inheritor when you and I met in Steilla. I'd only recently learned about her myself. What I wanted

at the time was just to save my friend, Sonya Nederai—you may remember her—from the life she had in Rædes and to come here to Thessia where I could learn to harness my power without causing trouble on the continent. Ironical, in hindsight, I suppose.”

*You’ve certainly learned to harness it*, Estènne tells me with a smile.

*I couldn’t have done it alone*, I respond, lightly squeezing Isa’s hand and doing what equivalent I can with Estènne’s incorporeal form inside me.

The Queen is quiet, clearly emotionally torn. “Officially, when it came to light that she is a theria, Isolde was disowned by the royal family and the Front. But her powers had to come from somewhere, right?”

It’s Isa who speaks. “They’re not yours, if that’s what you’re asking.” She sighs. “No, they’re from the King. His power—both magical and legal—is what attracted Inoire to make him her vessel. She, however, branded their magical powers as coming from divine sources, claiming that she is the True Goddess of this world and that the King is her chosen prophet and ambassador.”

“If he realized the truth about the source,” I add, “the irony of such an individual so strongly opposed to the existence of therii being one himself can really only lead to one of two outcomes. Suddenly becoming uncharacteristically tolerant of them, or...”

“

“... vowing to wipe them out, then himself,” Riviera finishes darkly.

Isolde nods. “And that matches Inoire’s objective as well. Dissatisfied with the treatment she’s received, she’s attempting to force people to respect her, which cannot end well.” A pause.

"An established monarchy is one thing, but enacting a violent vendetta five hundred years later..."

"I had a suspicion that something was awry of late, but it was neither strong nor clear enough until it was far too late," the Queen admits. "Or perhaps I was simply too blind to see it."

"Notice the difference in the oaths that El and the King each took during their bondings: 'Let us be joined, hand-in-hand, soul-in-soul. As is our destiny. I welcome you.' and 'Let us be joined. I forfeit myself to you.'"

At her gentle prodding, I hand Estènne control. "These are properly binding oaths," she explains. "I'm not sure what Corbelle's oath to Lance was, but his is clearly not indicative of them being equal partners, as are Elena and I."

"It also shows that this isn't entirely his normal personality," Isa points out. "Inoire has corrupted him."

I suddenly notice a subtle shift in the magical energy of the area. *Isa, how's your sleeping spell holding up?*

She looks at me in confusion. *I don't notice anything strange about it. She's not resisting it, and she should still be asleep.*

Mother shakes her head when I ask her. *I don't sense anything unusual.*

*I'm not imagining things, am I?* I ask Estènne.

She's quiet a moment. *I trust you.*

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes at the unhelpful answer and instead retake control and solicit her help in forming a large shield around the four of us, just in case.

And just in time.

Looking over to Lance's body, it has started releasing a cloud of dark purple energy. A few seconds later, this energy explodes outward, posing a serious challenge to both my shield and Lance's bonds, but I do manage to hold everything together

with Estènne's added power. However, it does manage to tear through some of the shields the city's volunteers created, causing several of the nearest buildings to collapse.

*You were right, Estènne points out unnecessarily. That's a lot of power.*

*I fall onto one knee as I catch my breath. Any ideas for how to deal with it?*

*I'm not sure what Inoire has done, so the first order of business is just to scout her.*

I take a deep breath and draw myself up to my full height. Everyone looks at me expectantly. "Mother, take the Queen and keep her safe."

She reluctantly nods. "Be safe." Turning to the Queen, she adds, "This way, Riviera. Let's get you away from here," and the two make their way away from the fight, both of them glancing behind them for one last look at their daughter.

I turn to Isolde, but she has already taken my other hand and is staring intently into my eyes. "I'm staying this time, El. I don't care what you say."

I wrap her in a tight embrace as I redouble my efforts on Inoire's bonds to keep her at bay. "Then as is our destiny, I welcome you." All three of us focus our attention on Inoire, who is still wrestling with her bonds, though I'm not sure how much longer I can keep them in place. She's putting up a vicious fight, and it's draining my thesis quite quickly. "Isa, you're not still fueling your sleeping spell, are you?"

She shakes her head. "She's clearly not asleep anymore, so I didn't see any purpose in continuing to expend the energy."

"But you never felt her resisting it?" She shakes her head again. "So how did she manage to break free of it? And why didn't she also break free of her bonds?"

Something suddenly clicks in Estènne, and recognition flashes across Isolde's face a few seconds later. "In some sense," the former princess says to me, "you are both Elena and Estènne. By contrast, that"—she points to our opponent—"is no longer both Lance and Inoire, but solely the latter."

*Isolde's spell was targeting Lance and lost its aim when Inoire consumed him, Estènne explains as she begins providing me extra strength to sustain Inoire's bonds. Yours was against Inoire, so it was maintained.*

Emotion floods me. *Is there any way to save him?* I ask. *He's not really our enemy, is he?*

She sighs. *Maybe? It might be theoretically possible, but I don't know how it could be done in practice.* A beat. *Besides, even without Corbelle, he has stood against you before.*

I shake my head. "Isolde, he's your father. How should we handle this?" She looks away and stays quiet. With an exasperated sigh, I briefly explain the situation to Mother and ask the Queen's opinion. But it's not particularly forthcoming either. Well, if that's how it's going to be, I walk confidently up to Inoire, ignoring Isa's protests and attempts to stop me. Lifting her chin to look in her eyes, I ask in as serious a tone as I can muster, "What did you do to the King?" If I concentrate, I can still detect two slightly different *theresis* signatures, indicating that Lance still... kind of exists?

Gritting her teeth, she strengthens her resistance, simply saying, "He honored his oath."

I can no longer hide the frustration from my voice. "By choice? Or did you force his hand, you manipulative, entitled narcissist?" I sense a nearly imperceptible fluctuation in the second signature. An idea flashes inside my head, and I delicately reach out toward this small thread of *theresis*.



“Corbelle Inoire, arí kaskéa éklaro: Rí isté ís éto thesís ís Lance ser ara rí aniká ís éta afière éklarèl ser!”—Corbelle Inoire, I command you: Forfeit Lance’s thesis and dissolve the oath between you!

As I finish, a faint white glow starts radiating from my body. When Estènne realizes my plan, she provides me with her full strength to enforce the spell, causing the radiance to brighten considerably. Inoire fights with her full force, competing both against her bonds and my demands. Despite my best efforts, I can feel my power fading, having been nearly fully consumed by the day’s exertions, and Inoire shows no outward signs of giving in. But perhaps more importantly, I feel Lance’s power likewise fade, but his fades all the way to extinction. And instinctively, I know that the process cannot be reversed.

I suppose it’s convenient, as it means I can stop splitting my energy between these two spells, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t disheartening. The light I’m giving off dims as I let the spell wane, and I take this time to summon a sword of ice, dumping my entire emotional state into its frozen core, hesitantly and exhaustedly holding it over Inoire’s head.

Once more, I feel a hand on my shoulder, but it isn’t Isolde’s this time: it’s Riviera’s. Mother stands beside her, a bittersweet smile on her face. The Queen looks into my eyes for a few seconds, looking for something that I can’t quite determine. Nevertheless, she eventually takes the sword from my hand and, with a deep breath, runs it through Inoire’s neck.

The instant Inoire’s life is extinguished, without the dire need to stay conscious and fueling spells, I find the world around me going dark as I pass out, utterly and completely drained.

## The King is Dead, Long Live the...?

I'm not entirely sure what happened. All I know is that when I wake up, I'm disoriented, confused, and have a headache. I suspect that I've been out for quite some time, as my throat is dry, and there's a general heaviness to my body. Opening my eyes, I see one reason for the weight on my chest: Isolde's sleeping form, her head resting on my shoulder. She's preventing me from sitting up and investigating the faint darkness of the unfamiliar room I find myself in, but if she's comfortable sleeping here, I expect that things must not be too bad. A quick glance around the room shows that no one else is here, and Estènne is also asleep, so I guess I'll have to wait for answers. I just wrap my arms around Isa, pulling us even closer and run my hand through her hair and along her back and gaze up at the ceiling while I wait.

Slowly, my thoughts clear up, and I run through what events I can remember. I'm fine up until when I pulled an ice sword on Inoire, but after that, everything's blank. Regardless, I don't let it bother me. After all that chaos, I let myself lie here and listen to Isolde's quiet and calm breathing in my arms, the situation

more than enough to remove all the worries from my mind.

Eventually, just as the sun begins peeking through the window, she lets out a soft groan and curls up, pulling her knees up into her chest. “Aro sí kaí bý, Isa,” I whisper, giggling and gently brushing a strand of hair out of her face.

Hearing my voice, her eyes flutter open. “El, you’re alright!” I nod. “I mean, of course you are. I knew you would be. I just—”

I stop her rambling with a finger on her lips and a smile on mine. “Shh... Yep, I’m fine. Sorry to keep you all worried.” More softly, I ask, “What happened?”

“You missed a day: it’s the second morning since the fight with Inoire,” she says, propping herself up on her elbows until I grimace about the pointed extrusions burrowing into my stomach. She quickly apologizes and lowers herself back down. “What do you remember?” After I recapitulate the fight, ending with the Queen taking the sword from my hand, Isolde nods. “That’s when you fell unconscious. That was the end of the fight, though, so you’re not missing much.”

I’m not sure that it’s the moment for facetiousness, but I can’t help myself. “That must have really ruined the mood.”

“A bit, yeah,” she chuckles. “Once Estènne told me how much energy you’d used during that fight, it all made sense, though.” She looks up to me in marvel. “Even after I came back to support you, I didn’t realize how strongly Inoire was resisting your spells until Estènne said something, and yet you held them in place.”

I blush, grateful that the room is still fairly dark, though she can probably feel the heat radiating from my cheek. “You held the sleeping spell on her. Don’t discredit yourself.”

She shakes her head. “For a mere fraction of the time you were fighting her, and only when her attention was split three ways. You kept up her bonds against her strongest efforts, even

while she grew ever stronger, doubled your efforts with that amazing reactionary shield that saved all of our lives, and then had the audacity to give yourself something else to keep track of: enforcing your demands on her. I'm surprised you didn't collapse far earlier. I would've." She scoffs, then smiles. "Don't discredit yourself? Heed your own advice, El."

I want to point out that she's saved my life plenty of times—including during that battle, at least indirectly—or that I could only have done what I did because of Estènné's help, but I can tell she's not in the mood for tallying scores. She knows what she's done, and she's content with the role she's played. Besides, I don't take compliments well, so I just want to move on. "Anyway, what happened after I fell unconscious?"

I notice a slight frown cross her face momentarily, though she hides it almost as quickly. "Estènné said that you fainted just after Riviera killed Inoire with your sword." Ah, that would make sense. Now that she says it, I do remember that, vaguely. "You definitely defeated her, but Riviera didn't want the King's blood on your hands. That's what she says anyway," she says with a wink. "I've known her long enough to know that isn't the whole truth, noble as it might be."

I raise an eyebrow. "What did she want, then?"

"Two things," she admits. "One's the glory of stealing your kill and claiming that she defeated Inoire. Judging by how she's been acting since then, though, that actually hardly seems relevant." She pauses, her words slow when she continues. "As much as I hated being their Fair Princess and as tense as my relationship with them has always been, the Monarchs genuinely loved each other, even if they didn't always show it well. The Queen wanted revenge on Inoire for killing her husband."

"I didn't want to kill her," I say blankly.

She rolls her eyes. "I know. I remember Illondrès and the Bressenic Île. Besides, you didn't kill her. Riviera made sure of that." More seriously, she continues. "You've made it clear to everyone around you—Sonya, me, your Mother, Ines, whomever—that you don't want to kill anyone, even your greatest enemy. Celaena had already been directing her ship back to shore when you reached out to her, and even though you (and Estènne, technically) were the only one who knew that Lance was dead, when you held Inoire at swordpoint, we all knew that things had gotten serious. Or, you know," she smiles, lightening the mood a bit, "more serious than before, at least.

"Anyway," she continues. "Celaena and Yves wanted to keep an eye on you, but all of the adults"—Once again, I'm reminded of just how young she is—"have been too busy working to clean up the mess, so we brought you here, to Dresni's and Ikari's place. They were two of the volunteers we found, and they were quick to offer for you to stay with them. Either way, I've been there off-and-on as well, mostly as a vector for Estènne to take part in the discussion. But I like it better here, away from all of that." Right, the former princess hates politics.

"Anything I should know?" I ask. It's a rhetorical question, as I'm sure that important things have happened, but something tells me I'm going to have to pry the information out of Isolde.

"A few things." She sighs, proving my assumption. "Much to my surprise, there's a political vacuum in Incerin now. Technically, Lance inherited the throne and Riviera merely married into it, making her officially Queen Consort, though she has a firm claim to the throne on her own merits regardless. With the lack of an heir, she's the best candidate. And even if I were still Fair Princess, Riviera would be the lead candidate to

act as my Regent until I came of age anyway.”

I smile. “Well, I seem to recall hearing a rumor that the King had an illegitimate daughter that threatened the established line anyway,” I say, not the least bit serious. But, incomprehensibly, Isolde stays silent. “No...”

Before she can respond, I hear a knock on the door, followed by Ikari poking her head between it and the wall. Seeing the two of us awake, she adopts a wide smile and exclaims, in Thessian, “I’m glad you’re alright!”

It takes me a moment to make the language shift, as Isa and I have notably not been speaking Thessian, but I manage to get out a sensible response. “Thanks for letting me stay here.”

She bounds over to me, wrapping me (and Isolde because of the way we’re lying on the bed) in a tight embrace. “Of course! We saw your fight firsthand, and hearing your friend here tell us the details, there’s no way we could refuse.”

“They offered,” Isa says in the continental tongue. “Before anyone could even ask, in fact.”

Ikari, unable to understand Isa’s words, looks confused, but I just smile and thank her again.

She’s flustered a moment before shaking her head and speaking way too fast for me to catch more than every third word. Fortunately, Dresni soon appears in the doorway, flashing me an apologetic smile. “Ikari...” he says calmly. “Don’t you think you’re overwhelming our guest?”

She jumps back, caught off-guard before quickly apologizing as well. “I heard you two talking, and I got excited that you were finally awake.”

I wave my hands out in front of me in an effort to assure her. “No, no, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” I offer her a smile. “I’m sorry for not saying anything about this the day we met. I didn’t

know how to bring it up without sounding ridiculous, though I suppose that waiting until the fight had already started wasn't the right time either."

Dresni, still standing in the doorway, chuckles. "Maybe not, but we're glad to help." He looks over to his sister. "The day we met you, I remember Ikari saying that you were such a natural when we went fishing. Seeing your true power the other day, I feel almost embarrassed to have asked for your help with such a menial task."

"Nonsense," I tell him. "It was a lot more fun than fighting Inoire, believe me. I'd love to do it with you again sometime."

While her brother quietly smiles, Ikari jumps back into the conversation. "Is it true that you inherited Estènne's power and her soul?"

Isa smirks and speaks once more in the continental tongue, solely to me, "What? Does she not believe me?"

I can tell that she's having fun with this language barrier, but Ikari doesn't seem to be sharing her enjoyment. "You're playing games, Isolde," I reply in Thessian, hoping to assuage Ikari's concern that Isa might be bad-mouthing her. Regardless, I turn my attention back toward her. "It's a bit more complicated than that, but yes. More or less."

Ikari lets out an excited squeal, much to her brother's annoyance as he shoots me another apologetic glance on her behalf. "You know the controversy surrounding her, but she's a bit of a local deity," she says. "You saw the statue in the park where we met, right?" I nod. "And given what happened two days ago, it seems more and more appropriate. You'll likely join that rank, but I know that Dresni and I would both be honored to speak with her as well sometime." By the end of her request, she's completely turned character, becoming a shy little girl

who can't look me in the eyes. "If it's no trouble, of course," she hastens to add.

The ancient heroine has been quietly listening to the conversation since she woke up a few minutes ago, but she freezes up as Ikari finishes, clearly less than thrilled about the prospect. And to be honest, I can't say I blame her. Neither of us love being in the spotlight, which is a touch problematic given our positions. "Perhaps another time," I cautiously offer. "We're both still recovering, and she can be a bit shy," I say, winking. "Though you didn't hear that from me." I can feel her grumble about the extra unnecessary comment. *Oh, come on, Estènne. Don't deny that it's true. I'm the same way.*

*Hmph.*

"Of course! Of course!" Ikari says quickly, using the same wild hand-waving gesture I did just a moment ago. "I wouldn't want to impose or anything!"

"Is this what it was like being Fair Princess?" I ask Isolde in the continental tongue. "Why you asked me to treat you as a friend rather than the heiress to the throne?"

"Yep." She rolls her eyes. "It's been happening to me here, too, just because of what we did."

"Sorry," I let out meekly before smiling. "I suppose I shouldn't have teased you so much about it, Fair Princess."

"I gave up that title," Isa responds, false annoyance clear in her voice. Ikari giggles as she watches us, completely unable to follow along with our words.

We gently extricate ourselves from the conversation with the siblings and make our way toward the city hall where Mother and I first met with Yves. A number of people on the street recognize us with hushed whispers and not particularly discreet glances. *Ignore them*, Isolde tells me with a sigh. *It's not worth*



*dealing with.*

Somehow, I'm not ready for yet another round of excitement at the fact that I'm awake and alright. *Isolde aside, her being Isolde, no one seems to have believed me when I told them you would be,* Estènne complains in my head. *They seem to have forgotten that you and I share a body.*

*I appreciate their concern, but I'm starting to get annoyed too,* I tell her as I exasperatedly say something similar aloud, if a bit more politely. As I materialize Estènne's avatar for the discussion, I notice that the Queen stands alone on the opposite wall, ostracized, perhaps by choice, from the rest of the conversation. I walk over to her, and I can feel several pairs of eyes drilling through me. I'm not sure what they expect me to do, but I take a deep breath and kneel before the Queen, lowering my head. "I am sorry," I say slowly, "that I could not save him."

Riviera falters a moment before she recomposes herself. "Rise, Miss Vardis, and carry yourself with pride." I do as she says, and she looks at me solemnly. "I, too, wish that things could have been different. I wish that all this," she gestures around her, all-encompassingly, "might have been avoided." She sighs. "But if the fault lie with any one surviving individual, then it is with me," she admits. "You, Miss Vardis, have fulfilled a duty bestowed upon you without your consent, and you have performed better than anyone here might have expected." She looks around to a room full of agreement. "I hold no quarrel with you, and, rather, apologize for the experiences my husband and I forced upon you in Incerin, as well as his folly that led to Inoire's grab at power."

I blush once again, uncomfortable in the Queen's praise. "You are too kind, Your Majesty."

"I underestimated you," she continues. "However, with

the help of your mother, Isolde, and Estènne, I have learned much about your character. I wish that we could have met in better circumstances, that this entire scenario need not have happened.”

“Likewise, Your Majesty.” I offer her a smile. “It would have made this week of my life a bit easier. And to think that the second time we met was for you to watch over my execution. How things have changed.”

“And how things will continue to change,” Mother says, drawing everyone’s attention back towards the center of the room. “Isolde, how much did you tell her?”

Isolde, already disliking the proceedings, snaps back into focus. “We didn’t get very far,” she admits. “I refreshed her on how the battle ended, how we transferred her, unconscious, to Dresni’s and Ikari’s, and how we had all been in discussion. I told her that there would be a power vacuum in Incerin, but the siblings interrupted before I could explain.”

Mother nods, content. “That’s plenty, Isolde.” She turns back to me. “As she explained, with Lance dead, that leaves Incerin without a ruling Monarch. Riviera and Isolde would be the primary candidates, but what with Isolde’s age and state of exile, that leaves only Riviera.”

“The exile, we’ll remedy,” Riviera says behind me. “It’s only one of a number of changes we’ll be implementing. But,” she says emphatically, “it doesn’t solve the problem of her being too young to take the throne.”

“Nor am I particularly eager,” Isolde points out with a smile.

“Yes, there’s also that,” Riviera agrees, Isa’s smile spreading onto her face as well. “So we’d need to solve the question of a regency, which is the same set of options: just me.”

I’m confused, since this seems to solve the issue, though my

earlier conversation with Isolde runs through my mind. “But...?”

Riviera lowers her head. “I don’t want the throne either. Don’t get me wrong,” she continues, “I’d take it if I were forced, but I believe I’ve found a better solution.”

“Which is...?” I ask, turning on the spot to see who will respond.

“Me.” It’s Mother who speaks, much to my surprise. Suddenly, Isa’s silence earlier makes sense. “After seeing all of these events unfold, Riviera wants to change the entire landscape of Incerin politics and, in particular, the relationships between the continent and Thessia. And what better way to improve these relationships than to put a Thessian on the throne?”

To be honest, her explanation makes me even more confused. “How do you resolve the fact that it was Thessian magic that caused these problems? That killed the King? Besides, with continental attitudes toward magic, surely this is going to be an unpopular choice?”

Riviera smiles. “Yes, it will be unpopular. But, Estènne, where do you call home?”

“No offense, but Thessia.”

“None taken. Celaena?”

“Thessia.”

“Isolde?”

“Well, since I’m still officially exiled from Incerin, I guess I also have to choose Thessia.” Always playing games, she is.

“Elena?”

*You’re still officially exiled as well,* Isa whispers in my head.

I see Riviera’s point. “It was Thessian magic that solved these problems.”

“And not only that,” Isolde adds, “but it was therii with Incerin

connections: the three of us”—she indicates herself, Estènne, and me—“were born there...”

“... and my relationship with the nation is complicated, but I married an Incerin man,” Mother finishes.

“Celaena has proven her leadership skills and knowledge of politics by leading the Unthern Pirates,” Riviera continues. “Unknown by many, we do have a protocol for naturalizing foreigners as Incerin citizens, and she does satisfy the necessary conditions.”

“Besides,” Mother explains with a smile, “Riviera has consented to work as a chief advisor, so I’m not entirely lost all the time.”

Somehow, I’m having more trouble keeping up with this conversation that I did with Inoire. “And everyone is content with that?” I ask the room as a whole. Everyone gives their agreement.

Having noticed my struggles, Isa walks up to me and takes my hand. “It’ll be far easier for Thessian relations to improve,” she quips, “when a leader on the continent speaks their language.”

Yves has had a translator through most of this conversation as well, the role being split between Mother and Estènne. When he hears this line, he nods in full agreement. “Far easier,” he smiles.

I have to grant them that, but there’s still one thing (well, a lot, actually, but...) that’s still bothering me. “But what does this mean for Isolde and me?”

“Both of your exiles are revoked,” Riviera says. “But with your mother the Queen, that makes you Fair Princess, Miss Vardis, heiress to the throne.”

“I seem to recall hearing a similar rumor anyway,” Isa laughs, squeezing my hand. “It came from a pretty reliable source, I’d

like to think: the girl herself.”

“The lie was that I was the daughter of the King, born out of wedlock, making us half-sisters,” I retort, still very confused. “I don’t see how this is the same.”

Isolde is trying her best to stay composed, but she’s definitely enjoying this too much to accomplish that. She puts on a cute pouting face and a whining voice. “Sylvia, you don’t remember your little sister, Clarissa?” Those are the names we used on our mission to Illondrès, and we did pose as sisters. “She was the one who got you your first date.”

I’m surprised that no one else in the room is stopping our ridiculous badgering. I’m tempted to retort that the so-called “date” that Clarissa got me was the one whom I killed soon thereafter, but... *Does Riviera know about what happened on that mission?* I ask.

Yes, she tells me. *We gave her a rough outline of everything that happened since you left Rædes.* “Anyway, Big Sis, there’s something else that you need to know.” She looks from Mother to Riviera and back again. When neither of them pick up the thread of the conversation, she sighs. Just ruin the whole mood and pacing, why don’t you? “Well, I suppose that I gave it away already, anyway.”

“That’s right,” Mother says. “Elena Vardis-Koraxi and Isolde Ennets-Koraxi will be the nation’s two princesses, each with new, fancy double-barrelled names.”

Isolde readopts her characteristic teasing tone. “Don’t worry, El. The names are there to make the new royal family look a bit more organized and coherent.”

“Because that was the part I was worried about.” I don’t even bother trying to hide my sarcasm. With a sudden realization, I whip around to face her. “But you’re okay with this, Isa? I

thought you hated being the princess! And you didn't appreciate my teasing about it this morning, either."

"That last part is just that you didn't appreciate the irony," she says, looking away. "You didn't realize that I was, in fact, princess once again, and that made it less funny." I'm not sure if that's entirely true, but it's certainly an in-character response. "And... I think so. Things are going to be different with Celaena in charge. For one," she brightens up with a sly smile. "I won't have to go to meetings in person."

Mother lifts a hand to her forehead and shakes her head in mild, unsurprised disappointment. "Oh, Isolde." She sighs. "That does remind me, however," she continues, returning to her more neutral, authoritative voice, "that your primary political role for the foreseeable future will be to travel around as ambassadors. Primarily to Thessia, but we may also have you visit the other continental nations in time."

"And continuing this journey of ours, El," Isa says, squeezing my hand as she looks up at me, "is something I look forward to, as princesses or not."

\* \* \*

Those ideas haven't gotten any more sensible in the last couple of weeks, yet they have become more true. Mother and Riviera returned to the continent to handle the transfer of power, Ines returned to Unthern to take charge of the pirates, and that's left Isolde and me here in Celé.

We'll be traveling around the entire chain of islands, but Isa and I have decided that Celé will be our semi-permanent home. Something that the locals are all too happy to facilitate, grateful for our intercession against Inoire. "We're just grateful to still be

alive,” we’d say, but the citizenry would hear none of it, calling us overly modest. I think most of them have forgotten that I literally fainted at the battle’s conclusion, but they don’t really seem to care when I’ve corrected them.

With their permission, Dresni and Ikari were appointed our attendants, a role they (especially she) were eager to take, though they insisted, much to Estènne’s chagrin, to get their conversation with her. And so we’ve kept busy, helping repair the damage the edge of the city sustained and learning what we can about the city and its culture. And, you know, taking a break after saving the world.

Much to my surprise, Estènne has been fairly quiet since the battle, apart from her somewhat-forced conversation with the siblings. *Elena*, she says to me out of the blue, a few days everyone left for the continent. *What do you think of our present relationship?* When I’m inevitably caught off-guard and unable to answer immediately, she backs up and clarifies. *Are you somehow not bothered by a second soul intruding on your body and thoughts?*

Of course, she knows how I feel about this. *It was weird at first, but I’ve gotten used to it in the past couple months. Besides, I smile, it proved quite useful against Inoire. And Isa and I share thoughts and emotions all the time. That doesn’t bother me.*

I can still feel her disquiet. *“Useful”, you say now that no such use still exists. You might well be the strongest living theria on your own merits. And you and Isolde choose which ones and when, while I am constantly here.*

I sigh. *What? Do you want me to say “Yes, it bothers me. You’re not welcome here anymore. Please get out of my head”? That hardly sounds like the oath we took: “Let us be joined, hand-in-hand, soul-in-soul.”*

She's quiet for a few moments. *What if I could give you the best of both worlds? The connection and bond that we share and the privacy of a typical symesí connection?* To be honest, that seems like a contradiction. The power of the bond I share with Estènne is precisely that it's far stronger than a symesí connection, that we're able to share thoughts and energy more readily than I ever could with even Isolde. *You gave me an idea during the battle, something I'd never considered,* she continues. *I'd never thought of our connection being temporary or malleable by magic, but you actually would have split Corbelle and Lance apart if she hadn't resisted the way she did.*

*And you want to split us apart?* I ask, still confused.

*It's slightly more complicated than that, but yes.* She pauses. *I remember when I first told you of the ritual, back in Isolde's bedroom in the Catens palace. And I believe that you were right, then, to be hesitant about the idea.* Her words flow more freely now. *I admit that I always found it equally unsettling that we should so closely coexist without a full sense of private self, but with the success of our mission depending on it, we were both forced to accept it.*

I'm still confused. *Isn't that still different from the promises we made?*

*Do you consider yourself bound to Aurore?*

Yes, I admit. *In a much different way, but yes.*

Once again, she's quiet a moment as she takes a deep breath. *Then my proposal maintains our bonds with you as my successor and heiress, each of us able to share the thesis. What would be different,* she continues, *would be where my soul is housed. Rather than in your body, where our physical and mental connection is continuous, constant, and effectively permanent...*

It takes a few seconds before I realize she wants me to finish the sentence. *We bind you to another physical object, like Aurore*



*and her necklace?*

*It is essentially how our relationship was before the ritual, she explains, but we'd also remove the constant implicit mental connection so that we would become no different on a day-to-day basis than you and Aurore or you and Isolde. When I still hesitate, she adds, However, I've come up with a way to do it that would, at a moment's notice and little effort between us, reverse the effect and temporarily return us to this present state, should the need ever arise.*

*Now it's my turn to be quiet. And you're sure you want to do this?*

*She nods, decided. With your age, it seems hardly fair for you to live your entire life with another person inescapable inside your thoughts, however welcome I might be now. The way she's acting, it seems more that she's the one uncomfortable, and I notice that she tenses slightly once I come to that conclusion.*

*I quickly run the idea by Isolde, who hesitantly agrees. Okay, I acquiesce. Tell me what we need to do.*

*My first task is to find a vessel, parallel to the necklace that Aurore is bound to. Fortunately, that isn't a particularly difficult task, and soon I've found a silver bracelet dotted with pale green gemstones bound at regular intervals, which I place around my wrist. It's strange to think that this will be Estènne's new home, though I suppose the thought of Aurore inhabiting a necklace still seems strange to me as well. The bracelet's gems aren't large enough to house her entire soul and power, but since the large gemstone in her castle's center still exists, she assures me that everything will play out just fine.*

*With that accomplished, next comes the spellcasting. She runs me through the full spell beforehand, and... it's complicated. I can trace out the logic behind her choice of words, and I notice that she was right. This doesn't change the true nature*

of the bond between us at all. And yet, somehow, it changes almost all of the day-to-day effects. And yet, somehow, it's all entirely temporary and reversible. I'm still Elena, "the true successor to Estènne Cerveille and heiress to her powers", and we still share the same unique connection and abilities.

*Everything worked, right?* Estènne asks once we've cast the spell.

*Yep. I hear you loud and clear.*

*And yet I can't read your thoughts without you sending them to me.*

"Estènne, ari kalor éklaro! Syme éklarèn!" I hear her voice echo in my head before we're returned to the previous arrangement and I can feel her energy flow through me. I love how we can rejoin using part of the same oath as before. "Let us be apart, our eager heartbeats maintaining our bond!" And once again, Estènne's back in the bracelet, though I can still feel her current of *theresis* flowing around my wrist. I'm legitimately impressed by this entire situation.

But that isn't the end of my amazement: I don't hear the spell, but I do feel her *theresis* start to flow more chaotically. And a few moments later, a small green *fayish* apparition appears floating above the bracelet. Despite its miniature size, I recognize it as the same form that appeared when I cast the telepathy projection spell for her. "This form is impractical to maintain indefinitely," she says aloud, "but I thought it might be of interest to show you."

\* \* \*

Today marks a special day. This evening is the first speech by the new Queen to her subjects and the first speech by the new

princesses to the Thessians. Thanks to the telepathy projection spell, however, they're actually the same speech. The fact that I attended a similar speech recently—that one performed by Isolde and the previous Monarchs—doesn't ease my nerves at all.

When Mother and I set sail from Unthern, we brought all of the stuff I'd taken there, as well as the clothes collection she'd given Isolde and me. Accordingly, the two of us still have those fancy dresses we wore to that first dinner, the night we met Celaena. As Isolde and I help each other get ready, fixing each other's hair and makeup, I'm cast back to Vasen, when she was helping me get into the character of Lady Hestia Holden. I can tell she's noticed the similarity as well.

"Fair Princess Vardis," she says, bowing as she finishes braiding my hair, "you are ready for your appearance and I would, if you are not overly preoccupied, that you may assist me."

I smile at her ridiculousness despite myself. "Of course, Princess Ennets." She turns around and takes the chair as I stand behind her and begin braiding her long blonde hair. Combined with my inexperience, my shaking hands are doing us no favors.

"Why are you nervous, El?" she asks after a moment, her voice completely devoid of her usual teasing, though it maintains its soft tone. I make to answer, but she cuts me off. "Nuh-uh. I don't want to hear it." I think that defeats the purpose of asking, but I can tell she's trying to make a point. She sighs. "You are Elena Vardis-Koraxi, First Ambassador to Thessia, Fair Princess of the Realm. Heroïne of prophecy, true successor to Estènne Cerveille, vanquisher of Darkness. You escaped Death itself so that you might accomplish your goals. And you mean to tell me that you're nervous about talking to a few people?"

It's more than a "few" people, I want to say. She downplayed it on purpose, and we both know that. Now, it's my turn to sigh. She's right: I am being silly. I've faced far worse than what's to happen tonight. Yet...

She turns around, and her eyes are soft. Her voice, quiet. "Okay, fine. You know that I was brought up in the court, that I've plenty of experience with public and political speaking. And I don't like these speeches either." She lifts her eyes to meet mine. "But you've nothing to be afraid of. Here, you're already seen as a heroine. Back in Incerin, well, Celaena and Riviera are doing the heavy lifting. Nor will you be the only person on the stage."

I smile as she turns properly back into the chair. "Thank you, Isolde Ennets-Koraxi, First Ambassador to Thessia, Princess of the Realm. Heroïne of prophecy, flower to empower the Sunlight." I can hear her giggle as I list her full titles, official and otherwise. We both know that they're patently ridiculous, but it's not like we chose the official ones. My mind much more at ease, I manage to get back to the task at hand.

Eventually, Ikari comes in to let us know that the time has arrived. The three of us make our way to the shipyard where the battle occurred, newly repaired. We take our place, backs to the shore: Isa and I stand next to near the center, and Ikari takes a spot next to her brother a meter or two to our left. In front of us stands a crowd of Thessians, eagerly cheering. Though she has no explicit role in the speech, Estènne adopts her fay form throughout.

Are we ready? I ask Mother. When she confirms, I take a deep breath. "Maisu récon ís Celaena. Arí kalor éklaro." Her silver form appears to my right, and I see the crowd before her in Rædes. Before she left for the continent, I performed the setup

to enable her scrying spell. My father sits to her right, Sonya one seat further down. She'd been released from her sentence and brought on as a primary attendant. I can't help but smile when I see her. Beside her stands Brangaine, having been captured by the Vasennite guards, not killed, and subsequently released as well, reinstated as a royal guard. A moment later, shimmering versions of Isolde and me appear in front of Mother. As she looks forward, I see Riviera standing downstage in her crown, ready to speak. As she does, I return my attention to Celé.

"Citizens of Incerin, of Thessia," Riviera exclaims. "We have gathered today to exchange some... interesting news from the Royal Front." Since Mother can hear her, Riviera's voice is projected from Mother's avatar here in Celé. However, her words are incomprehensible to our audience here, so she pauses to allow time for me to direct my avatar forward to stand next to her and translate, my translation similarly audible in Rædes. As expected, the crowd there seems confused, but I carry on. "Although we stood before you not long ago, you may notice that we are a different group of Monarchs today. Or, rather, they"—she continues with a smile, emphasizing the pronoun—"are a different group of Monarchs today." The crowd erupts into a disquiet murmur, which Riviera calls back into attention. "You know of our long-held distrust of the islands beyond the continent's shores, and some of you may know of our recent attempt to subjugate them. These efforts were vainly conceived, deceptively implanted into the consciousness of our society, and the offender would have been the sole to benefit. I do not count myself amongst the innocent." Riviera gestures behind her. "However, thanks to the efforts of those whom we have long shunned and scorned and may otherwise have continued to do so, this did not come to pass.

"The nation of Incerin will be undergoing some political changes, especially pertaining to the question of Thessia and our relationship with the islands. We have long held our grudge, dating from even before the likes of Estènne Cerveille centuries ago. But these grudges end today," she says triumphantly. Mother stands up and moves downstage, kneeling in front of Riviera, who takes the crown from her head and places it upon Mother's. Father and Isolde soon follow, taking their place on opposite sides of Mother and me. "I present to you your new royal family!" Riviera exclaims, clapping as she takes a seat behind us.

Mother takes a moment to survey the audience. "I know that there is a lot of confusion amongst you all, as much has happened behind closed walls on the opposite side of the world that you were not privy to. Nor do any of us expect that all of you might accept this on our whim without questioning. Your questions will be answered." She pauses. "The first question might be who we are." Gesturing to Isolde, she smiles. "Well, you might know who this is, but..." She surveys the audience once again. "I am Celaena Koraxi, newly Queen of Incerin. Though I was born in Thessia, it was here in Incerin that I found my home with this man and this daughter of ours." As she speaks, she gestures to Father and me in turn. "And it was here in Incerin that I came to feel threatened by the anti-Thessian sentiment that plagues the continent. And it was here in Incerin that my daughter, as well as Princess Isolde, came to be persecuted by those same sentiments, finding themselves exiled from their home." She pauses. "The two are on the ground, currently still in Thessia to begin to heal the wounds between our two nations."

I settle my racing heart as it's my turn to speak my own words

in the Incerin tongue, only to have to awkwardly translate them into Thessian immediately afterward. “I am Elena Vardis-Koraxi, daughter of these two our new Monarchs. It is possible that some of you know my name as the theria who was captured in Steilla some months ago and sentenced to death for the heresy of my crimes, who then escaped and kidnapped Princess Isolde on my flight to Thessia.” As I expect, anger and outrage erupts in both crowds, though it is most noticeable here in Celé.

“All of that is true,” Isolde says bluntly. “Yet none of it is that simple. As newly-Præceptor Riviera announced, there was a dark power brewing amidst the Royal Front, rival to Incerin’s own Estènne Cerveille, resurfaced in our modern day.” I notice that Riviera and Isolde are both careful to avoid explicitly mentioning that Inoire was of Thessian origin or that it was Lance who was deceived by her power. “It was Elena, along with the selfsame Estènne, who succeeded in eliminating this power, though not before formerly-King Lance lost his life in the ensuing battle. Long may he rest in our hearts.”

“Though it was not alone that we made our stand,” I say with as much confidence as I can muster. “Even with prophecies what they might be, I was not the one who dealt the final blow against this Darkness. That was Præceptor Riviera.” She rises as I say her name, then curtsies. “In a life-and-death battle of magic of unimaginable power on both sides, one in which her husband had only moments before been killed, it was Præceptor Riviera who struck last. But neither shall we diminish the contributions of Queen Celaena, Princess Isolde, and the entirety of the citizenry of Celé, without whom no victory could have hoped to be achieved.” I pause for effect, gesturing for Riviera to rejoin us downstage. She takes Mother’s hand in hers, raising them into the air before she and I finish the speech together, alternating

in opposite languages. "Let our two nations be joined, hand-in-hand, soul-in-soul."

"Symé éklarèn, kerí ara íxi éklarí ser lí étan éklarèl ser."

"As is our destiny."

"Bý moír éklarèn ser."

"Incerin, we welcome you."

"Thessia, arén soriso starèl."



## [Isolde] What We've Prepared For

Something seems off. At first, I'm not sure what happened. Looking over at Elena in panic, I notice that she's emitting a huge magical shield. Based on the flow of the thesis that I can feel, it's large enough to encompass our entire group. And to be honest, she probably just saved our life.

"We're done here! You'll pay for this, Estènnè!" Inoire roars after a moment. I'm almost offended: I was the one who delivered the final taunt before her attack, but I guess you can't have everything. Inoire turns to Riviera, ordering her to return to their ship, then commands the fleet to attack the city.

Chaos ensues as Celaena and I each look to Elena for direction. Between her and Estènnè, they're the ones with the plan, and they'll know how we can best help. A moment later, Celaena nods and runs off to her ship, likely being charged with handling the fleet. *Isa, you and Yves, protect the city. Find Dresni and Ikari if you need more hands.*

*What about you?* I ask, trying to hide the concern from my voice. I know her. The answer's plain as day, but that doesn't mean that it's any easier to hear.

*I'm going to keep Inoire here to keep her out of your way,* she responds. I'm quiet, unable to say anything. Still holding the shield to allow this conversation, she smiles. *It'll be easier for me to focus on her if I know that everyone else is safe. But if you're that concerned, she insists, you can come back me up when you're*

*finished.*

I pause, looking her straight in the eyes, trying to prove to myself that she's telling the truth. You know I'm coming back for you, El. The thing is, I know she's right. Both El and Inoire are leagues stronger than I am, and defeating Inoire but allowing the city to be destroyed still isn't a victory condition for us. So I grab Elder Yves's hand and begin rushing toward the city with one fleeting glance behind me. El has moved between Inoire and my retreating form, adopting a defensive stance. "I don't think so!" is all I hear before I'm out of earshot.

With the approaching ships and ensuing cannon shots, those citizens near the shipyard where the battle is unraveling are starting to panic, forcing me to drive Elena's plight from my head for the time being. "I'm going to get Dresni and Ikari," I tell Yves. "Start evacuating this area." He nods, and I run toward the building El showed me the other day. Fortunately, it's not too far, and adrenaline makes the run easily manageable.

Despite the advice I gave her back in Unther, I can't help but worry about Elena, but I don't dare distract her. "Elena, arí kalor éklaro!" It's risky, as the scrying spell requires a fair amount of concentration, but thanks to the adrenaline, I somehow manage to balance the two worlds in my head. Of course, I don't know what I expected, but the images I see are not calming my fears. Inoire rushes at Elena with a sword that I know El is poorly equipped to handle, armed only with her magic and her bow, the latter of which will be of essentially zero use, and Inoire is too powerful to simply overwhelm.

When I arrive at my destination, I knock on the door, trying to convey as much urgency as I can. A young girl opens the door a few seconds later, likely confused by my non-native attire. "Can I help you?" she asks. I'd be confused too if some strange,

foreign girl suddenly came frantically knocking on your door.

"Yeah." I take a second to catch my breath. "Are you Ikari?" She nods, my question not helping her confusion. "You met Elena the other day, right? I'm her friend from the continent. We need your help. The city's under attack!" That's... mostly true, I guess? In any case, now isn't the time to argue semantics. Fear flashing across her eyes, she calls inside for her brother, who appears moments later. "Do you two know any other really strong therii here in Celé?"

"Apart from the Elders," Dresni tells me, "we're two of the strongest."

I give them the best smile I can manage at the moment, which isn't much. "Perfect. There's a fight occurring at the shipyard, and we need your help to protect the edge of the city." Seeing the understandably incessant confusion on their faces, I add, "I'll explain when we get there." and start running, the siblings close behind me.

We get some strange looks as we sprint through the city's streets, but we don't have the luxury to pay them any mind. When we get back to the shipyard, Yves is standing at the area's opening. "What's the situation?" I ask, worry dripping from my voice.

"This area's being evacuated, as you asked," he responds, and I'm jealous of his calmness, if a bit annoyed in the heat of the moment. "People are moving away from the shipyard, toward the center or other end of the city."

I nod, grateful. I turn back to the siblings, who have noticed Elena fighting and start to rush to help, but I hold out my arm, stopping them. "You don't stand a chance in that fight," I tell them bluntly. "None of us do."

"But—" Ikari protests.

"You know the history of Estènné Cerveille, right?" They nod. "Then if I tell you that El's opponent is Corbelle Inoire, are you still sure you want to rush headfirst into that fight?" Didn't think so. I raise my arm. "Spídal!" The surface of a shimmering blue sphere expands away from my hand, encompassing as large of an area as I can. "She gave us a job: to prevent any attacks from reaching the city. Anything that comes near us has to have gone through El, so we're going to need your help."

They nod, finally understanding the seriousness of the situation, and each project a shield of their own. "Why didn't she say something about this earlier?" Dresni asks, concerned.

"We were trying to avoid panic," I respond. "She's also careful and humble, to a fault." I force a dry chuckle. "It's one of my favorite things about her, but she takes it too far sometimes." My emotions are torn between fear and worry, and the happiness I'm trying to inject by listing El's positive qualities feels more like nostalgia in the moment. "She didn't want you to worry about her." Of course, that's not stopping me from worrying about her anyway, but...

As I say this, I notice that El is kneeling on the ground as far from Inoire as she could get. She doesn't move as her opponent rushes toward her. I want to call out to her, but I can't. I can't physically yell that loudly, and she's blocked off her mindsoul from me, so I can't reach her that way either. I can't tear my eyes away from her.

Just as Inoire is about to reach Elena, a dome of ice appears from nowhere, fully enclosing Elena while Inoire remains outside of it. A few seconds later, Inoire starts bathing the ice dome in a sea of fire, desperately trying to melt it. And, suddenly, the fire is extinguished and Inoire is sent flying halfway across the shipyard before Elena stands, shattering

the front section of her wall and enclosing Inoire in a small ring of fire. Next, she raises her arm, and I notice that she's holding Inoire's sword—which must actually be Lance's, or else Inoire would have just released the energy binding it—which she shatters into thousands of small metallic pieces. My cheers join with the others' as we watch, frustrated that we're forced to stand as spectators.

I take advantage of Inoire's distraction, however. *We've just about finished evacuating the area near the shipyard*, I tell Elena, her mindsoul open to me once again. *And a few volunteer therii are creating shields around the most vulnerable remaining areas.* Despite my best efforts, my emotions start seeping into my words. *There's some minor panic, but overall, we have an easier job than you do.* El knows what I mean. Not that we have an easier job, but that she has a harder one, an impossible one, one that...

*I'm fine, Isa*, she assures me, her voice soft. *I've gotten rid of Inoire's advantage, so our fight should go a bit more smoothly from here.*

I want to complain about it, but from her cage of fire, Inoire starts launching her own fireballs at El. She easily blocks them with a newly-reformed shield, but I don't dare distract her any more. "This is ridiculous," I mumble. I force myself to concern myself with something else for a moment. *The edge of the city is evacuated, and we've got a few therii projecting shields*, I tell Celaena. *How are things out there?*

*It's not as elegant as the legends tell of Estènne's battle against the fleet, but we're holding our ground. Plus*, she adds with a sly smile, *Elena has an interesting plan for how to proceed.*

That's intriguing, but she doesn't elaborate. *What is it?*  
*Just watch.*

Annoyance flashes through me at her lack of an answer, but

she draws my attention to a pair of cannonballs that were launched at her ship, stopped by her wall. But rather than falling downward like the others, they're sent flying upward, high above the fight. And, in particular, they come to rest a few tens of meters above Elena, held in the air by her *theresis*. If I understand correctly, that's actually clever.

The siblings are speaking in rapid-fire Thessian between each other, but it's too fast for me to grasp the meaning. It's hard to imagine that it's about anything else but the fighting, and the tones of their voices support that idea. Two middle-aged men come walking by, apparently oblivious to everything that's occurring—least of all, the evacuation. They're easy enough to deal with, but how do you miss something like that coupled with the cannon shots from the water and the roars from some of Elena's and Inoire's spells?

Turning back to the fight at hand, Inoire has escaped her pen of fire, and the two are staring each other down, revolving around in a circle about ten meters across. I can feel the tension from here, but I can't make heads or tails of the situation—I can't imagine what thoughts are passing through either's head, nor do either have a tail to make sense of.

Suddenly, the ground starts trembling, even all the way over here. Knife-like extrusions emerge from the ground near Elena, unimaginably powerful in both size and scope. Even assuming she was paying attention and reacted immediately, there's not much chance that El could avoid those. She does her best, but she's knocked off-balance, and I can feel the sharpness of her pain through our link as they rip into her. The spikes only continue to grow, expanding until they've completely surrounded Elena in a cone of darkness.

There's a collective gasp around me, and Inoire begins

gloating. I can't tell whether my heart has stopped or if it's beating uncontrollably, but Estènné's comment doesn't make it any better. *Isolde, get down here. Now.*

*On it.* I turn to Dresni and Ikari, my voice sharp and commanding. "Stay here." Running off before they can stop me, I feel my mind empty of everything except getting to the battleground.

*She should be okay,* Estènné assures me, her voice thin, possibly trying to reassure herself as well. *But she's out of it, and I can't get through to her.* A beat. *I've set up a shield, though, so we're safe for the time being.*

I nod, sliding under an attack launched to stop me. Soon enough, though, I'm inside Estènné's shield, and I allow myself to breathe. Deep breaths, Isa. Reaching out to Elena, her mindsoul is chaotic and jagged, far from her softness I'm used to. She's physically conscious, but I don't think she's aware of anything that's going on. I do have an idea, however.

Gathering all the positive energy I can physically muster, I package it with all of my confidence in her. With my full mental strength, I let loose against Elena's mindsoul, forcing myself through the barrier she's subconsciously set up. Once I've reached her, I share every scrap of hope that I can find.

Soon enough, I can feel a change from within her. She still feels sharp, but no longer is she messily and chaotically jagged. There's an angry focus driving her now. "Sarkéa!" she screams, her stone cage shattering around her, the pieces flying violently through the air.

As terrifying as the display is—and I'm surprised that she isn't physically glowing from the ferocity of the flames stoking inside of her—I can't help but smile, placing my hand upon her shoulder. *I told you so.* I cast a short suite of spells to ease

her pain, and her demeanor changes back to her signature cool tenderness. *Now you're okay*, I say, making sure to emphasize the first word and allowing my exasperation to seep through. I can tell that she's confused about how and why I'm standing here, but this isn't the time for that. *I'll explain later. For now, we have a fight to win!*

She smiles, and I can feel the tenseness in my chest suddenly release. *Thank you, Isa*. As El retakes the center of the arena, I take a few steps backward, still maintaining the spells I've cast on her.

Inoire laughs. "You couldn't win one-on-one, so you brought along a friend to tip the odds?"

Well, it was actually Estènné who called me in, not Elena. I scoff. El wanted me as far away as possible.

For her part, she simply chuckles, adopting a teasing tone as well. "Oh, don't pretend that this wasn't already two-on-two." Inoire seems confused, intrigued. "With physical weapons, you prefer daggers, not full-length swords, so that had to be the King's skill earlier," El explains. I think back to before El had shattered the sword. An unskilled person would still be a threat, yes, but I did get the impression, even from my brief glance, that she was not particularly unskilled. Plus, I know quite well that King Lance is experienced with his weapon, having won several duels in his youth as a Prince. "Besides," El continues, "Isolde came of her own accord. In fact, I told her to stay away." Close enough.

I notice a sudden, almost imperceptible tenseness from Elena, and, a second or two later, Inoire is hit in the back with a falling cannonball. It turns out that I was right about the plan, and Inoire certainly doesn't expect it. After the first hit, the cannonballs are lowered toward the ground to form a spinning



cage around Inoire; occasionally, one is launched inward at random as an extra form of attack. Actually, it occurs to me that the cannonballs must be handled by Estènné. Otherwise, they would have fallen when Elena did, since there was no way she could have maintained the effort to hold them in that state. At the same time, El casts a spell to bind Inoire in place with a few ropes from her thesis. Sensing our advantage, I press forward, seeking to divide Inoire's forces. "Sova lempéa ís éton iel bý sísal kerí ís Lance ser!"—Make fall asleep those within Lance's body! I blanket my thesis around her. Eventually, the three of us are able to overpower her, and she collapses, limp.

El and I both look around, inspecting our surroundings. I'm sure those on the city's edge are cheering once again, but we can't hear them. El turns her attention to the sea, magically enhancing her voice for a thunderous and authoritative sonority. "Attention, Incerin navy. Your leader has been defeated. You are hereby ordered to halt your attack and stand down. Or..." she pauses, raising her hand. A single bolt of lightning appears over the sea, harmlessly striking its surface. "Don't make me aim that more precisely," she warns.

If they had been paying any attention at all to her fight or were even cognizant of the fact that they've collectively done no real damage against even Celaena and Ines, they'd know to take Elena's threat seriously. And yet... A few soldiers from one of the ships launch flaming arrows at us only for them to be stopped in midair by Elena's wall, only to fall pathetically into the sea. I shake my head at their stupidity. If Elena or her mother were any more inclined, these soldiers would all be dead.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one to realize that, as the flagship's parley flag is raised. It seems that the fleet is still

loyal to their Queen as all of the ships lower their cannons. Elena agrees to Riviera's request, and the two groups' leaders' ships make their way to the shore. Ines's, however, stays out on patrol.

Both leaders disembark, though with entirely opposing expressions. Celaena approaches her daughter with a wide smile, causing the latter to blush, while Riviera paralyzes her with her signature sharp eyes. The Queen glances over at Lance and Inoire before a frown appears on her face.

"Don't worry," El says hurriedly. "They're both still alive, just asleep." I nod in confirmation. I mean, it's my sleeping spell. Even if I wanted to, I don't think it's even theoretically possible to kill someone with it. Riviera, of course, seems unsure, so we walks over and checks Lance's (... Inoire's?) pulse before straightening up and returning in front of us. Faced with the Queen, I notice El's left hand start shaking, and I take it in mine, strengthening the soothing spells I cast earlier.

But Riviera weakens her gaze and sighs. Exasperated and exhausted, she asks, "Why does it always have to come to this, Miss Vardis? That you and I should come face-to-face in judgment?" Always? That's just Riviera and her flair for the dramatic. It's only happened once or twice before.

El holds firm, saying aloud the things I've wanted to say to the Queen for some time. "I don't seek your approval. You have plenty of reasons to dislike me." She shrugs. "But Estènne and Corbelle fought in their own time, and prophecy dictates that so too must their inheritors: your husband and me. Being friends with your daughter doesn't make it any less likely." I smile up at her as she pauses. The problem is that the Queen, by the very nature of her position, stands against someone whose enemy is the Incerin royal family. It's just that simple. "Though, I will

admit that I did not know your husband was Inoire's inheritor when you and I met in Steilla. I'd only recently learned about her myself. What I wanted at the time was just to save my friend, Sonya Nederai—you may remember her—from the life she had in Rædes and to come here to Thessia where I could learn to harness my power without causing trouble on the continent." She chuckles. "Irony, in hindsight, I suppose."

Looking back, it's almost funny how innocently her journey began, just wanting a better life for herself and Sonya. She'd never complain about the chance for adventure, but her whole life turned when we met in Catens. Possibly reading the rough shape of my thoughts, she gently squeezes my hand.

After El finishes, the Queen stands there, quiet. She's obviously torn. When she does speak, her voice is slow and hesitant. "Officially, when it came to light that she is a theria, Isolde was disowned by the royal family and the Front." Seeing as I begged El to help me escape that same royal family and Front, I'm not that upset about what probably should be unpleasant news. "But her powers had to come from somewhere, right?"

"They're not yours," I put forward, a slight bite to my tone. "If that's what you're asking." I sigh, softening my voice. "No, they're from the King. His power—both magical and legal—is what attracted Inoire to make him her vessel. She, however, branded their magical powers as coming from divine sources, claiming that she is the True Goddess of this world and that the King is her chosen prophet and ambassador." It's the only way that she could be accepted, and I'm still surprised it worked.

"If he realized the truth about the source," El adds, "the irony of such an individual so strongly opposed to the existence of therii being one himself can really only lead to one of two

outcomes. Suddenly becoming uncharacteristically tolerant of them, or..."

"... vowing to wipe them out, then himself," the Queen finishes, having suddenly realized the depth to the situation.

I nod, continuing the explanation. "And that matches Inoire's objective as well. Dissatisfied with the treatment she's received, she's attempting to force people to respect her, which cannot end well." All it will do is force resentment and fear. "An established monarchy is one thing, but enacting a violent vendetta five hundred years later..." I trail off, the conclusion clear.

"I had a suspicion that something was awry of late," the Queen admits, her voice sad, "but it was neither strong nor clear enough until it was far too late. Or perhaps I was simply too blind to see it."

I can't help but feel sorry for her, which may actually be her ploy. It's so much more complicated than she's letting on. Inoire is clever and knows how people operate. As much as I've never gotten along with them, I can't deny that the Monarchs genuinely love each other. Coupled with Inoire's deceptions, it's not hard to see how Riviera found herself in this position.

Whether it's an act of explanation or consolation, I'm not sure. "Notice the difference in the oaths that El and the King took during their bondings," I say. "'Let us be joined, hand-in-hand, soul-in soul. As is our destiny. I welcome you.' and 'Let us be joined. I forfeit myself to you.'"

"These are properly binding oaths," Estènne explains. Though it's Elena's voice that she uses, it's somehow different enough to distinguish. "I'm not sure what Corbelle's oath to Lance was, but his is clearly not indicative of them being equal partners, as are Elena and I."

"It also shows that this isn't entirely his normal personality," I point out. "Inoire has corrupted him."

Out of nowhere, El tenses slightly. *Isa, how's your sleeping spell holding up?*

I don't understand the point of the question. As far as I can tell, nothing's changed. Since she's asleep and not resisting, I've lessened my energy output, but that shouldn't be enough to cause Elena worry. *I don't notice anything strange about it. She's not resisting it, and she should still be asleep.*

On the other side of Elena, her mother shakes her head toward her. I guess she asked her as well.

A few seconds later, I notice Elena panic, retaking control and creating a shield large enough to encompass all four of us. She's torn between annoyance and paranoia. Estènne hasn't said anything to me about it either.

El was right, though. A fog of deep purple energy pools around Lance's body, and just seconds later, explodes outward. Even with it passing over the surface of the shield, I can feel its power. Yet El manages to hold both the shield and Inoire in place, taking a knee to catch her breath. On the other hand, the shockwave overpowered the therii on the city's edge, and several of the nearby buildings collapse.

I re-strengthen my efforts on the sleeping spell, but there's no effect. She's not even resisting it, yet it doesn't seem to do anything. Instead, I release it, focusing instead on those spells I cast on Elena.

She draws herself up, drawing the attention of all three of us. "Mother," she orders, "take the Queen and keep her safe."

Celaena hesitates a moment, but she eventually nods, taking the Queen's hand. "This way, Riviera. Let's get you away from here." The two take their leave of the battleground, each turning

back to face us one last time.

By the time El turns to me, I have already grabbed her other hand in mine, and we stand facing each other, my eyes drilling into hers. "I'm staying this time, El. I don't care what you say." There's no lenience to my voice, and I won't be talked down.

But she makes no effort to do so, instead pulling me into a tight embrace. "Then as is our destiny, I welcome you." I'm tempted to roll my eyes at the dramatic line, but I somehow can't bring myself to do it.

Instead, we turn our attention to Inoire. Elena is clearly having trouble maintaining the bonds she's keeping on Inoire. "Isa," she says to me, "you're not still fueling your sleeping spell, are you?"

I shake my head. Maybe I should be, but: "She's clearly not asleep anymore, so I didn't see any purpose in continuing to expend the energy."

"But you never felt her resisting it?" she asks, to which I shake my head again. "So how did she manage to break free of it? And why didn't she also break free of her bonds?"

Those are rhetorical questions, but Estènne's is not. *What, exactly, was the spell you cast?* Once I've told her, it clicks in her head. That's not Lance's body.

Suddenly, I get it, though it doesn't look like Estènne has explained to El yet. "In some sense," I say to her, "you are both Elena and Estènne. By contrast, that—" I point to Inoire—"is no longer both Lance and Inoire, but solely the latter."

Dismay flashes across her face as she has an internal dialogue with Estènne. I don't need to be part of the conversation to know that El wants to save him, though. She shakes her head, turning toward me. "Isolde, he's your father. How should we handle this?"

I don't know, El. I honestly don't know. I'm not sure how you'd do it or if it's even possible, but even supposing that you could... It's an extra thing to deal with, and we're not even sure we can win as it is. It's deeper than that, though. It's why she asked me, rather than make the decision herself. "He's your father," she'd pointed out. Is he still my father after we've mutually renounced each other? That hardly seems fair. What about before I was disowned but I still had every hope of running away? Does that still count? We've always stood opposed, never seeing eye-to-eye. Though it's certainly not a state I'd wish upon him, him being dead precludes having to deal with that ever again. And I'm ashamed to admit even to myself that the thought crossed my mind. So I don't answer Elena's question, instead averting my eyes. Of course, it's not like she can't figure out what that means.

I'm forced back to the conversation she and I had in Unthern, after she spoke with Sonya. Her friend had expressed concern about her turning into the monster she was trying to defend against. And I'd assured her that doing bad things in the right circumstances doesn't make you a bad person. I wonder who I was trying to convince. Just as quickly, however, I remember that that wasn't the only time this advice has surfaced between us. She repeated it back to me, word for word, after my reinvasion of Vasen.

She starts walking up to Inoire, apparently having made her decision one way or the other. I try to hold her back, knowing that's a delicate, vulnerable position to put herself into, but she doesn't listen, and I know once again that she's right. She lifts Inoire's chin to stare into her eyes, asking in an emotionless tone, "What did you do to the King?"

Inoire simply grits her teeth. "He honored his oath."

*His mindsoul is extremely faint, Estènne tells me, but Lance is still technically alive.*

Elena adopts a truly terrifying voice. “By choice? Or did you force his hand, you manipulative, entitled narcissist?” A second later, she lifts her right hand in front of her. “Corbelle Inoire, arí kaskéa éklaro: Rí isté is éto thesisis is Lance ser ara rí aniká is éta afière éklarèl ser!”—Corbelle Inoire, I command you: Forfeit Lance’s thesis and dissolve the oath between you! I’d thought that these bonds were permanent, but given El’s flaring determination—physically manifesting as a bright white glow—at the moment, it wouldn’t surprise me if she actually could do the impossible.

A few seconds later, the glowing around her fades. On the other hand, even with Estènne’s help and power, with the mind-numbing amount of energy she’s put out today, I’m surprised she still has anything left to give, yet she still manages to hold Inoire’s bonds in place while I can’t do much more than simply stand here, watching. Celaena and Riviera come up behind me as Elena summons a dark blue blade of ice, holding it above Inoire’s head.

I’m not sure that the two queens know about Lance, but it’s immediately clear to all three of us that the battle has taken a serious and irreversible turn. We walk up to her, and Riviera places her hand on her shoulder, Celaena putting on a sadly bittersweet smile. El and Riviera stare at each other a few seconds before the latter takes both the sword and a deep breath.

Reaching out to her, I feel the edges of El’s mindsoul blur. As soon as Riviera slices through Inoire’s neck, the sword evaporates into a shimmering cloud of ice crystals, and El collapses, her mindsoul entirely blank.

I rush forward to catch her. The three of us look back and



forth amongst ourselves, none of us quite sure how to feel, nor are we entirely sure what just happened. On the one hand, we just succeeded in defeating our opponent; on the other, it hardly feels like the time to celebrate.

“Maisu récon ís Estènne,” I cast at her request, and her silvery form appears in front of me. Riviera’s eyes grow wide. Even after seeing Inoire in her full power and experiencing Estènne speak through Elena earlier, she’s somehow caught off-guard by her.

The ancient heroine seems momentarily out of breath. After a moment, she says, “I can assure you that Elena and I are both fine. She has merely overexerted herself, though by an impressive amount. She simply needs time to recover.”

I nod, somehow unconvinced despite the fact that she and Elena literally share a body, making her a reliable judge. As Celaena picks Elena up and begins walking toward the city, I release my spells, and Riviera and I follow in the pirate queen’s wake.

Yves, Dresni, and Ikari are waiting at the edge of the shipyard, and all of them exclaim when they see Elena. “She’s fine,” Celaena assures them. “She just needs to rest.”

After a moment of deliberation, Ikari offers for El to stay at their house while she recovers. “You all have important things to work out, politics to settle,” she says, insistent. “Let us take care of her.”

Her brother nods. “It really is no burden.” In a more teasing voice, he adds, “And when Ikari sets her mind on something, you’ll never convince her otherwise.”

Celaena hesitantly agrees, handing Elena over to Dresni. “Isolde,” she says, turning to me, “go with them. Make sure that Estènne rests as well.” Next, she turns to Riviera. “You

should deal with the fleet over there.” Finally, she turns to Yves. “You and I have some things to talk about. Otherwise, we’ll all meet tomorrow afternoon to discuss our futures?”

She makes it sound so dramatic... Though, to be fair, it probably will be. I hate those kinds of discussions, and I can’t help but feel like it’s going to be the same sort of torture I regularly experienced as Fair Princess. But that’s tomorrow, so I force it out of my head and agree before following the siblings back toward their house.

As we walk, they speak to each other in the same rapid-fire Thessian that I can’t make out, but it’s clear that they’re not expecting me to take part in the conversation. I hear our names a couple times, so I’m guessing it’s about logistics?

Once we arrive, I discover that I was right. “We’re going to put her up in my room,” Ikari says. “You’re welcome to stay with us as well,” she offers with a bright smile. “Make yourself at home, okay?”

She rushes inside, leaving me alone with Dresni, who shakes his head with a smile on his face as well. “Ikari’s an energetic one,” he says. “She can come off as pushy and aggressive, but don’t let that overwhelm you. She’s actually really sweet.”

“You’re both really nice,” I respond. “I can see why El considers you her friends. Thanks for letting us stay here.” Well, I probably could have worded that better and in a less awkward fashion, but I’m just going to use the excuse of being tired and having to speak in a foreign language.

He nods, blushing slightly before leading me upstairs towards his sister’s room, placing Elena gently down upon the bed. “Let me know if you need anything.”

I thank him again before crawling next to Elena, wrapping her as tightly in my arms as I can, her slow, peaceful heartbeat

pulsing through me. "I'm sorry, El..." I whisper before I, too, fall asleep.

## A

**ætheria** /aˈtɛɾ.i.ə/

*n.* (archaic): ⟨1⟩ an immensely competent magic user (see *theria*)

plural: *ætherii* /aˈtɛɾ.iː/

**afîèra** /aˌfiˈɛɾə/

*v.*: ⟨1⟩ to promise, to vow

Used in its bare form, this verb means simply "to promise"; drawing from surrounding context, it may mean to promise the relevant assertion: *Arí spída éklaro ser bý. Arí afîèra.* = "I will be your protector. I promise." However, it is more common to see the noun used in this context: *Arí spída éklaro ser bý. Afîère.* = "I will be your protector. (It's a) promise." Used transitively, it allows for a specification of a promise: *Arí afîèra ís spída éklaro ser bý.* = "I promise to be your protector." *Arí afîèra Isolde ís spída éklaré ser bý.* = "I promise (that) Isolde will be her protector."

[Tessí *afîère* "promise" (n)]

**afîère** /aˌfiˈɛɾ/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a promise, oath

[Gk *aphiérōma* "vow" (n)]

**agas** /agaːs/

*conj.*: ⟨1⟩ but, except

**aidono** /ˈaɪ.do.no/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to lock ⟨2⟩ to close ⟨3⟩ to fasten

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a lock or latch

[Gk *kleidóno* "lock up"]

**aĩri** /aˌiˈriː/, /aˌiˈriː/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a tool ⟨2⟩ a sword, knife, or other bladed weapon

[Gk *machairi* "knife"]

**alíd** /aˈlid/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ ice, or a crystal thereof

[Ar *jalid* "ice"]

**alletai** /aˌl.lɛˈtai/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ insulted, offended

[Gk *prosválletai* "insulted"]

**alva** /ˈaˌl.və/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a minor feylike creature which is usually created as a magical machine

[Sw *älva* "elf"]

**aniká** /ˌa.niˈka/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to disable, to stop or prevent from working or existing as usual or intended ⟨2⟩ to break or dissolve (as in a promise or oath)

[Gk *kathistó aníkano* "indispose, disable"]

**alíth** /aˈliːθ/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ truth

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ true, factual ⟨2⟩ valid

[Gk *alitheia* "truth"]

**ara** /ˈaː.ra/

*conj.*: ⟨1⟩ and

**aré** /aˈreɪ/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns: see *arí*

**arèl** /aˈrɛːl/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns: see *arí*

**arèn** /aˈrɛːn/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns: see *arí*

**arèna** /aˈrɛːn/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns: see *arí*

**arés** /aˈreis/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns: see *arí*

**arí** /aˈri/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns

Person	Singular	Plural
1st	<i>arí</i>	<i>arèn/arèna</i>
2nd	<i>aro</i>	<i>arèl</i>
3rd	<i>aré</i>	<i>arés</i>

Note: *arèn/arèna* are both first-person plural pronouns. The difference is clusivity: *arèn* is used to include the listener; *arèna* is used to exclude the listener.

**aro** /aˈroː/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the six nominative personal pronouns (see *arí*)

**astu** /asˈtu/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ successor, next in line ⟨2⟩ prince, princess

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to follow, succeed

[Cz *nástupce* "successor"]

**atimí** /aːtiˈmi/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ honor, respect[Gk *timí* "honor"]**aví** /aˈviː/*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to leave behind, abandon[Gk *aphinoun píso* "leave behind"]**avisí** /aˈviːsi/*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ lonely ⟨2⟩ alone ⟨3⟩ only[Tessí *aví* "to leave behind" + *sí* (attr. marker)]**B****bý** /bi/*v.*: ⟨1⟩ to be

Depending on usage, this can be stative—ex. *Elena sí lempéa bý* ("Elena is gentle")—by including a state, usually with *sí* + (state). Without this, this is considered existential—ex. *Elena bý* ("Elena exists", perhaps "Elena is here").

[Hu *býc* "to be"]**C****corisse** /koˈrisːs/*conj.*: ⟨1⟩ without ⟨2⟩ unless, except if[Gk *chorís* "without"]**D****daria** /ˈda,ri.ə/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a lock or latch[Gk *kleidariá* "lock" (n)]**delma** /ˈdɛl,mə/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ fruit[Fn *hedelmä* "fruit"]**delornu** /ˈdɛl.or.nu/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ starberry: a very sweet but insaccharine small fruit native to Thessia with reddish-pink flesh divided into pointed segments

Its name is a shortening of *delma is ornu ser*, meaning "fruit of the stars".

**E****ékl**— /eɪkl/

*aff.*: ⟨1⟩ a prefix added to the six nominative pronouns (*arí*, etc.) to render them in the accusative (i.e., direct object) case: for example, *arí* = 1s nom.; *éklarí* = 1s acc.

(See also *ís*)**elà** /ɛlˈaː/, /ɛlˈlaː/*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to live ⟨2⟩ to exist[Fn *elää* "to live"]**érotis** /ˈeɪ.ro.tis/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a question*vtr.* ⟨1⟩ to question, to interrogate ⟨2⟩ to investigate*vrefl.*: ⟨1⟩ to wonder[Gk *erótisi* "question" (n)]**éta** /ˈeɪ.tə/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the determiners, used to define a particular reference to a noun

plural: *étan* /eɪ.tən/

<i>éta kirya</i>	"that book"
<i>éto kirya</i>	"this book"
<i>étan kirya</i>	"those books"
<i>éton kirya</i>	"these books"

**éto** /ˈeɪ.to/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ one of the determiners, used to define a particular reference to a noun (see *éta*)

plural: *éton* /ˈeɪ.ton/**F****fi**— /fiː/

*aff.*: ⟨1⟩ a prefix added to the six nominative pronouns (*arí*, etc.) to render them in the vocative (i.e., mark of address) case: for example, *arí* = 1s nom.; *fiarí* = 1s voc.

In Thessian, these vocative pronouns can also be used to invoke the imperative mood—ex. *Aro kalor ís Isolde* = "You call Isolde" (declarative); *Fiaro kalor ís Isolde* "(You,) call Isolde" (imperative). However, in practice, these pronouns are rarely used and are often considered archaic. It is more common to employ the construction <nom>, *rí* <verb> to invoke the imperative. Hence, the earlier example would be *Aro, rí kalor ís Isolde*.

**ficèrn** /fi:'sɛɾn/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to identify ⟨2⟩ to determine the true identity or nature of an object or person

[Du *identificeren* "to identify"]

**flýt** /fli:t/

*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to move ⟨2⟩ to go in a specified direction or manner

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to move (something) ⟨2⟩ to cause to go in a specified direction or manner

[Da *flýt* "to move"]

**G****gía** /'ʒi:ə/

*adv.*: ⟨1⟩ already ⟨2⟩ a grammatical particle used to denote the past tense of a verb

[It *già* "already"]

**H**

<no entries>

**I****ídor** /i.dɔɾ/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ water ⟨2⟩ more generally: sea, ocean, river, etc.

[Gk *ídor* "water"]

**iel** /i'ɛl/

*pron.*: ⟨1⟩ who, that: a relative pronoun used to introduce a clause giving further information about a person or object previously mentioned

Example: *Isolde sí éta bý iel kalor ís Elena* = "Isolde is the one who calls Elena"

[Fr *iel* "he/she" (gender-neutral 3s-nom)]

**ikrèle** /'i:.krɛl/

*n.* (archaic): ⟨1⟩ a sword, knife, or other blade ⟨2⟩ a swordsman or other fighter

[Xh *ikrele* "sword"]

**ínar** /'i.naɾ/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ fire, combustion, burning ⟨2⟩ a great (usually unpleasantly so) warmth or burning sensation

[Ar *nar* "fire"]

**iöné** /i,o:'neɪ/, /jɔ-/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ disadvantage, restriction ⟨2⟩ inhibition

[Gr *meionéktime* "drawback"]

**írma** /'iɾ.ma/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a female family member, especially sister or cousin ⟨2⟩ a female friend, associate, colleague with whom one is close ⟨3⟩ a female member of a close-knit female-only group, such as the nuns of a church, used primarily by the women of the group

[Galician *irmá* "sister"]

**íro** /i:ɾo/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ the number two ⟨2⟩ a pair

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ numbering two

[Tessí *írono* "inheritor, successor"]

**írono** /i'ɾo:.no/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ inheritor, successor ⟨2⟩ prince, princess

[Gk *klironómos* "inheritor"]

**ís** /i:s/

*part.*: ⟨1⟩ a grammatical particle that denotes the direct object of a verb

Example: *Elena kalor* = "Elena calls"; *Elena kalor ís Isolde* = "Elena calls Isolde". This particular is absorbed by the accusative pronouns: *Elena kalor éklaré* = "Elena calls her"

**isté** /'is.teɪ/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to lose, misplace, mislay ⟨2⟩ to forfeit, give up claim to

[Da *miste* "forfeit"]

**ithía** /'iθ.i.ə/, /--jə/

*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to help, to give aid (to)

[Gk *voítheia* "help" (n)]

**ívos** /'i.vos/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to conceal, hide ⟨2⟩ to cause to disappear

[Gk *krivo* "hide" (v)]

**íxi** /'i:.ksi/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ soul, spirit ⟨2⟩ self-esteem

[Gk *psychí* "soul"]

**iya** /i:jo/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ the number one ⟨2⟩ someone, a generic third-person single grammatical character (*Iya kalor ís Elena* = “(Some)one calls Elena”)

[shortening of *Fr il y a* “there is”]

**J**

<no entries>

**K****kaí** /'ka.i:/, /kaɪ/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ cute ⟨2⟩ affectionate ⟨3⟩ more generally: caring, warm (of a personality)

*kaikai* /kaɪ:kaɪ/: ⟨1⟩ cute, affectionate, etc.: often to a very high degree ⟨2⟩ てえ てえ (*tētē*), Japanese internet slang of 尊い (*toutoi*)

[Ja *kawaii* “cute”]

**kalor** /ka:'lor/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to call out to ⟨2⟩ to cry out toward in an effort to attract attention ⟨3⟩ to call upon, rely upon

[Gk *kaló* “I call”]

**kaniso** /ka'ni:so/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to repair, fix, rebuild ⟨2⟩ to improve, ameliorate

[Gk *anakainízo* “to reform, rebuild”]

**kaskéa** /,ka:s'keɪ.ə/, /-jə/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to command ⟨2⟩ to demand

[Fn *kāskeä* “to command”]

**katí** /kati/

*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to be able, to have the ability

This is most commonly used in the *katí* + <verb> construct, which indicates that one has the ability to <verb>.

[Gk *ikanós* “able” ?]

**kerí** /keɪ'ri:/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a hand ⟨2⟩ more generally: an appendage

[Gk *cherí* “hand”]

**—kí** /ki/

*part.*: ⟨1⟩ a grammatical particle written as a hyphenated suffix that is used to indicate that the attached verb is considered a passive verb.

In general, *X* <verb>-*kí* *is* *Y* is translated as “*X* is/was <verb>ed by *Y*”. For example, *Elena kalor ís Isolde* = “Elena calls Isolde”; *Isolde kalor-kí ís Elena* = “Isolde is called by Elena”.

**kiasí** /'ki.ə:si/

*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to give a push or shove ⟨2⟩ to cause to move (usu. away) with substantial force

[Ja *tsukidasu* “shove” ?]

**kirya** /'ki:r.jə/, /-jə/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a book

[Fn *kirja* “book”]

**koma** /'ko.ma/, /-mə/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to accept

[Gk *apodéchomai* “to accept”]

**kori** /ko'ri:/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ daughter

[Gk *kóri* “daughter”]

**kun** /ku:n/

*adv.*: ⟨1⟩ when ⟨2⟩ at the time of

[Fn *kun* “when”]

**L****lempéa** /,lem'peɪ.ə/, /,lam-/ , /-jə/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ gentle, mild, kind, tender ⟨2⟩ soft, having a pleasant or soft characteristic ⟨3⟩ quiet

*adv.*: ⟨1⟩ gently, delicately ⟨2⟩ without force

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ something gentle, mild, etc.

[Fn *lempeä* “gentle”]

**lení** /leɪ'ni/

*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to approve, agree ⟨2⟩ to consent

[Gk *léne* “say” (imp.)]

**lí** /li:/

*part.*: ⟨1⟩ a grammatical particle that denotes the indirect object of a verb

Example: *Aré spída* = “It shields”; *Aré spída lí Inoire* = “It shields against Inoire”. This particular is absorbed by the dative pronouns: *Aré spída staré* = “It shields against her”

**liara** /li'a.rə/*conj.* ⟨1⟩ because, since, as[Tessi lí (dative marker) + ara "and" ~ "from the and"  
Ar lí'ana "because"]**lýo** /'li.o/, /-jo/*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to unlock ⟨2⟩ to open ⟨3⟩ to unfasten ⟨4⟩ to solve, resolve*n. (fig.)*: ⟨1⟩ a key, solution

[Gk lýo "solve, unfasten, unlock"]

**lýpto** /'lip.to/*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to disclose, reveal ⟨2⟩ to cause to appear

[Gk apokalýpto "disclose"]

**M****maisú** /'mai.su/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a word, phrase, or other particle of language  
⟨2⟩ an expression (linguistic or otherwise)

[Fn ilmaisú "expression"]

**moda** /'mo.də/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a style or manner of appearance of doing  
⟨2⟩ fashion, design

[Gk móda "fashion"]

**moír** /mo'ir/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ fate, destiny ⟨2⟩ inevitability ⟨3⟩ the passage of time

[Gk moíra "fate"]

**N****nanta** /'na.n.tə/*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to make acquaintance with ⟨2⟩ to join or connect

[Gk synantó "to meet"]

**né** /nei/*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to make, create ⟨2⟩ to give birth to ⟨3⟩ to raise or parent

[Fr né "born"]

**O****ornu** /'or.nu/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ star

[Ic stjörnu "star"]

**otagí** /o.ta:'gi/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ loyalty, allegiance ⟨2⟩ faithfulness

[Gk ypotagí "allegiance"]

**P****péli** /'si.sa:l/*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to reflect, to refract

[Fn peili "mirror"]

**pliro** /'pli:.ro/*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to tell (something) to someone, inform someone (of something)*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to tell or inform of, communicate information about*pliro* (is A) (lí B) = "tell (A) (about B)"

[Gk plirophoró "inform"]

**polemi** /po'le.mi/*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ hostile, belligerent ⟨2⟩ aggressive

[Gk empólemos "belligerent"]

**Q**

&lt;no entries&gt;

**R****rafale** /ra'fa:l/*n.*: ⟨1⟩ wind, a breeze, a gust of air ⟨2⟩ more generally: air

[Fr rafale "gust"]

**récon** /rer'kon/*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ within oneself ⟨2⟩ of, or relating to, the psyche  
⟨3⟩ of, or relating to, telepathy

[Ja reikon "soul"]



**reíta** /ˌrei.i.ta/, /ˈrei.ta/, /-tə/

adj.: ⟨1⟩ excluded, ignored ⟨2⟩ left out

[Gk *exaireítai* “excluded”]

**rí** /ri:/

part.: ⟨1⟩ a grammatical particle that denotes the imperative mood

Example: *Elena kalor* = “Elena calls”; *Elena, rí kalor!* = “Elena, call!”. Should they be used, this particle is absorbed by the vocative pronouns: *Fiaro kalor!*, though in practice, it is more common to see (<nom>,) *rí* <verb>.

**sí** /si:/

part.: ⟨1⟩ a grammatical particle that denotes attribution (but not possession: see *ser*)

Example: *Elena sí lempéa bý* = “Elena is gentle”. Its use with adjectives is apparent, as they are often used in the construction *sí* <adj> *bý*, but this construction can also be used with nonadjectival lexemes (usu. nouns) to attribute the lexeme’s quality to another noun: *Arí sí atímí bý* = “I am honored”. In many cases, Thessian adjectives derive from nonadjectival lexemes in precisely this way, gaining their adjectival sense over time.

**sísal** /ˈsi.sa:l/

prep.: ⟨1⟩ inside, on the interior of ⟨2⟩ within, contained by ⟨3⟩ small

[Fn *sísalä* “inside”]

## S

**sal** /sa:l/

n.: ⟨1⟩ interior

[Tessí *sísal* “inside, within” – *sí* (attr. marker)]

**sanasé** /ˈsa.na.sei/

vintr.: ⟨1⟩ to give healing, to cure ⟨2⟩ to give or make improvements ⟨3⟩ to recover

[L *sana* “heal” + Gk *se* “you”]

**sarkéa** /ˈsaɪr.kei.ə/

vtr.: ⟨1⟩ to break, smash, shatter, etc. ⟨2⟩ to destroy

[Fn *sárkeä* “smash, shatter”]

**sarto** /ˈsaɪr.to/

adj.: ⟨1⟩ whole, entire ⟨2⟩ unbroken

[Tessí *sarkéa* “break, smash” + *to* “not”]

**sekana** /ˈse.ka.na/, /-sei-/

vintr.: ⟨1⟩ to forget vtr.: ⟨1⟩ to cause to forget

In the intransitive case, *Arí sekana lí X* would be translated as “I forget X”; in the transitive case, *Arí sekana ís Y lí X* would be translated as “I make Y forget X”

[Gk *xéchna to* “forget it”]

**séna** /se.na/, /-nə/

n.: ⟨1⟩ a wall ⟨2⟩ more generally: a boundary ⟨3⟩ a line drawn as such a wall or boundary

[Fn *seinä* “wall”]

**ser** /seɪr/

vtr.: ⟨1⟩ to belong to

Example: *kirya ís Estènne ser* = “Estènne’s book”. Note that the word order can play a large role in emphasis and agency: *kirya ser ís Estènne* = “The book belongs to Estènne”.

**síya** /si.ja/, /-jə/

adv. ⟨1⟩ in the same way (as), ⟨2⟩ just as

Example: *Elena sí symé lí Isolde bý síya aré sí symé lí Celaena bý*. = “Elena is joined with Isolde in the same way as she is joined with Celaena.”

[Tessí *sí* (attr. marker) + *yja* “one” ~ “as one”]

**sora** /ˈsoɪ.ə/

n.: ⟨1⟩ the sky

[Ja *sora* “sky”]

**soriso** /soˈriːso/

vintr.: ⟨1⟩ to give welcome to ⟨2⟩ to accommodate ⟨3⟩ (rare) to embrace, to hug

[Gr *alosorizo* “to welcome”]

**sova** /ˈsoɪ.va/, /-və/

vintr.: ⟨1⟩ to sleep ⟨2⟩ to dream

[Sw *sova* “sleep”]

**spída** /ˈspiː.da/, /-də/

n.inan.: ⟨1⟩ a shield ⟨2⟩ protection ⟨3⟩ safety

n.anim.: ⟨1⟩ protector ⟨2⟩ guardian

**spída** [ís X] **ser** [lí Y]

vphr.: ⟨1⟩ to protect [X] [from Y]

This construction creates a verbal form. Depending on context, the phrase *Arí spída éklaro ser bý* may mean “I’ll protect you” or “I am/will be your protector”.

[Gk *aspída* “shield”]

**st—** /st-/

aff.: ⟨1⟩ a prefix added to the six nominative pronouns (*arí*, etc.) to render them in the dative (i.e., indirect object) case: for example, *arí* = 1s nom.; *starí* = 1s dat.

(See also *lí*)

**sým** /si:m/

n.: ⟨1⟩ name

[Hu *címke* “name”]

**symé** /ˈsi:.meɪ/

*vintr.*: ⟨1⟩ to tie, bind ⟨2⟩ to join, connect

[Gk *symmetochí* “to join”]

**symési** /ˈsi:.meɪ.sɪ/

*adj. (usu. figurative)*: ⟨1⟩ joined, connected ⟨2⟩ of, or relating to, the mindsoul

*n.* ⟨1⟩ mindsoul: the representation or manifestation of a person's mind and soul ⟨2⟩ the internal representation and understanding thereof

[Tessi *symé* “to tie, join” + *sí* (attr. marker)]

**tísmata** /ˈtɪs.ma:.tə/

*interj.*: ⟨1⟩ hello, greetings ⟨2⟩ a general, polite greeting

**tísma** /ˈtɪs.mə/

*interj.*: ⟨1⟩ a more informal greeting commonly used among friends and family

[Gk *chairetísmata* “greetings”]

**to** /to/

*adv.*: ⟨1⟩ no ⟨2⟩ not ⟨3⟩ a grammatical marker of general negation

## T

**téda** /ˈteɪ.da/, /-də/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to render, make visible ⟨2⟩ to draw or otherwise create artistically

[Fn *tehdä* “render”]

**theresis** /ˌtɛrˈi:.sɪs/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ the magical energy that fuels spells ⟨2⟩ (uncommon) energy in general

**theria** /ˈtɛr.i.ə/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ one who can practice magic ⟨2⟩ (rare) an inhabitant of Thessia

plural: *therii* /ˈtɛr.i:z/

**thima** /ˈθi:.mə/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ emotions, emotional sensations ⟨2⟩ (uncommon) physical sensations

[Gk *aísthima* “feeling”]

**thio** /θi.o/, /θi.jo/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ the number zero ⟨2⟩ none, not any

[Gk *thío* (*dúo*) “two” ?]

**tiéta** /ˈti.ɛi.tə/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to know ⟨2⟩ to understand

**tiéta <verb>**

*v.*: ⟨1⟩ to know how to <verb> ⟨2⟩ to know the necessity, duty, or obligation to <verb>

Notice that, in this construction, <verb> is not considered a direct object due to the lack of the accusative marker *ís*. Rather, *tiéta <verb>* is understood as one verb composing multiple words.

[Fn *tietää* “to know”]

## U

**ulfolsí** /ʊl.fəlˈsi:/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ foreign ⟨2⟩ unfamiliar ⟨3⟩ distant

[Boelgana *Xaulfæl* (Boelana capital) + Tessi *sí* (attr. marker)]

## V

**vardisi** /ˌvarˈdi:.si/

*adj.*: ⟨1⟩ of, or relating to, the color pink ⟨2⟩ great, bountiful

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a rose or other such flower ⟨2⟩ a great harvest

[Ge *vardisperi* “pink”]

**vetí** /vɛˈti/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ the Earth ⟨2⟩ world, planet ⟨3⟩ a large area of land, such as a nation or continent ⟨4⟩ (figurative) experience, history, story

[Cz *svět* “world”]

**volit** /voˈli:t/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ magical powers or abilities ⟨2⟩ more generally: skills or abilities ⟨3⟩ the rights and privileges afforded on account of one's station or powers

[Es *volitusi* “powers”]

## W

<no entries>

**X**

<no entries>

**Y**

**yfloní** /,i.floˈniː/

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ a bright light ⟨2⟩ more generally: any light  
⟨3⟩ anything which produces such a light

[Gk *typhlós* "blind"]

**yoserí** /joˈseɾiː/

*vtr.*: ⟨1⟩ to embrace, to hug

*n.*: ⟨1⟩ an embrace, hug

[Ja *yōsuru* "embrace"]

**Z**

<no entries>