

AN END, AND A BEGINNING

*“Some say the Queen was frightened
In her last moments
But I like to think that she was angry”*

—*The Word of the Prophet*

The queen stopped screaming just after midnight.

Simon had been hiding in her closet, fingers jammed into his ears to block out the noise. For hours, he had crouched there, knees drawn to chest, head bowed.

For hours, the queen's rooms had shuddered in tandem with her screams.

Now, there was silence. Simon held his breath and measured the seconds, like counting after a lightning strike until the thunder rolled: Is the storm fading, or is it coming closer?

One. Two. Three.

He reached twenty and dared to lower his hands.

A baby cried out into the silence. Simon grinned and scrambled to his feet, a wave of relief crashing through him.

The queen's child was born—*finally*. Now he and his father could flee this city and never look back.

Simon pushed past the queen's gowns and stumbled out into her bedroom.

"Father?" he asked, breathless.

Garver Randell, Simon's father, turned to face him, his eyes weary but his smile broad. And behind him lay Queen Rielle, her wild, dark hair plastered to her pale skin, her bedsheets and white nightgown stained red. She held a fussing bundle in her arms.

Simon crept closer to the bed in wonder, even as the sight of the queen made angry heat bloom in his chest. His kingdom's new princess was a small thing—scrunched red face, skin slightly darker than her mother's, wide brown eyes, a mop of wet black hair.

Simon's breath caught in his throat.

The baby looked very much like her late father.

Rielle stared at the child, then gazed up at Simon's father in bewilderment.

"I thought I would kill her," said the queen. She laughed, wiping her face with shaking fingers. "I dreamed I would. And yet here she is, after all." She fumbled to adjust the baby in her arms. She didn't seem to be very good at holding babies.

It was strange to see the queen like this—small in her nest of pillows, looking hardly more than a girl though she was twenty years old. This queen who had allied with the angels and helped them kill thousands of humans.

This queen who had murdered her husband.

"Audric would have loved her," Rielle whispered, her face crumpling.

Simon's small fists clenched at his sides. How dare she talk about King Audric, when she was the one who had killed him?

He had learned only a few things about the night the capital fell. King Audric had fought Queen Rielle on the broad veranda attached to the castle's fourth floor. The king's sword had blazed with the light

of the sun, his diamond- and mirror-studded armor glinting brighter than the stars.

But not even King Audric the Lightbringer, the most powerful sun-spinner in centuries, had been strong enough to defeat Queen Rielle.

The queen had carved a sword out of the air, a blinding weapon forged from the empirium itself. Rielle and Audric had fought blade to blade, but the fight had been brief.

And when Rielle plunged her glowing hand into Audric's chest to tear out his heart, there had been nothing but bloodlust in her eyes as she watched her husband fall to ashes at her feet.

Simon wasn't a violent child, but all the same, he thought that if he looked at the queen for one more second, he might strike her.

So he uttered the Sun Queen's Prayer in Audric's honor—*May the Queen's light guide him home*—and turned to his father instead.

That's when Garver Randell went rigid and whispered, "He knows," then fell gasping to his knees.

Simon rushed to his side. "Father? What is it? What's wrong?"

Garver clutched his head, his body jerking. "He knows, God help us, he *knows*," he moaned, and when he looked up, it was with eyes gone gray and cloudy.

Simon's heart sank to his feet. He knew those eyes, and what they meant.

An angel was inside his father's mind.

And from the terror on his father's face, Simon knew it must be Corien.

"Father, listen to me! I'm right here!" Simon grabbed his father's arm. "Let's go. We can leave now! Please, hurry!"

Simon heard the queen behind him, singing softly to herself: "This is how you hold your child. This is how you murder your husband." Her laughter was thick with tears.

"He knows what I am," Garver rasped.
Simon's growing dread turned his body to stone.
Corien knew—that his father was a marque, and Simon was too.
Neither angel nor human, but with the blood of both inside them.

Suddenly, the markings hidden on Simon's back beneath his tunic felt like flares that would alert everyone in the conquered city to where he was hiding. For years, he and his father had lived secretly in Celdaria's capital, concealing their marked backs and their forbidden magic. They had been healers, honest and hard-working, sought out by commoners and temple magisters and even the royal family.

And now...now, Corien *knew*.
Simon shoved his father toward the door. "Father, move, please!"
Garver choked out, "Get away from me! He'll find you!" He seized Simon by the collar and shoved him away.

Simon's head smacked against the queen's four-poster bed, and he slumped to the floor, dazed. He watched his father turn, laugh a little, clutch his head. He watched him mutter angry, foreign words in a voice that was half his and half Corien's—and then run, limping, to the terrace window.

Then, with a strangled cry, Garver Randell threw himself off the queen's tower.

Simon lurched up, grabbed the bed-curtains for support, stumbled forward, and fell. Head throbbing, fighting back the urge to be sick, he crawled across the floor to the terrace. At the railing, the mountain wind slapping his cheeks, he couldn't bear to look down. He pressed his face against the cool stone, wrapped his arms around two posts. Someone or something was making an awful choking noise.

"Simon," said a voice behind him.
He realized, then, that the awful noise was coming from him.
He jumped to his feet, rounding on Queen Rielle.

"You did this," he cried. "You killed us all! You're a monster! You're evil!"

He tried to say more: she had betrayed everyone in the kingdom of Celdaria, everyone in the world. She was supposed to be the Sun Queen, their savior and protector. And yet she had become the Blood Queen. The Kingsbane. The Lady of Death.

But Simon's tears blocked his voice. The wind whipping down along the mountainsides carved shivers from his skin. His small body heaved; he could hardly breathe.

He folded his arms tightly around himself, squeezing his eyes shut as the world tilted. He could not stop seeing the image of his father running out onto the terrace and flinging himself over the railing.

"Father," he whispered, "come back, please."

The queen settled gingerly on the settee across from him, her baby still in her arms. Her feet were bare and bloody, her nightgown soaked through with sweat.

"You're right, you know," said Rielle. "I did do this."

Simon was glad the queen didn't try to apologize; nothing she could say would make anything better.

"I think," Rielle continued slowly, "that he will kill her."

Simon sniffed, wiped his mouth. His teeth chattered; he could not stop crying. "What do you mean?"

Rielle turned to look at him, her lips chapped and cracked. Once, Simon remembered, he had thought the queen beautiful.

"My daughter." Rielle's voice was hollow. "I think Corien will kill her. Or he'll try to."

Simon bit out, "He should kill you instead."

Rielle laughed at that, and kept laughing, hysterically, and Simon could only stare at her in rage and horror—until she brought her child to her face, nuzzled her cheek against its own. The baby cooed and sighed.

"This is how," Rielle whispered, "you hold your child." She made a soft, sad noise. "Audric would have loved her."

Then the queen's face contorted, and she cried out in pain. She clutched her baby to her stomach and doubled over, gasping.

The stone shuddered beneath Simon's feet. The walls of the queen's rooms shifted in and out, like they were breathing along with her.

Rielle's skin glowed, changing, and for a terrible moment, Simon thought he could see through her flesh to the blood and bone beneath—and to the light beneath even that. She was outlined in shimmering flecks of gold, a luminous creature of sparks and embers.

Then the light faded, and Rielle was dim and human once more.

Simon's blood roared with fear. "What was that?"

"It won't be long now." Rielle turned her glittering gaze up to him, and Simon recoiled. The skin around her eyes was dark and thin. "I can't hold myself together for much longer."

"Do you mean...you're dying?"

"I've tried so hard for so long," Rielle muttered, and then she screamed once more, went rigid. Blazing bolts of light shot out from her fingers and streaked into the night, arcing over the dark city. The light left behind charred streaks, jagged across the terrace floor.

Rielle looked up, her face slick with sweat. Light moved in shimmering waves beneath her skin. Simon could not look away; she was at once the loveliest and most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

"Are you...hurting?" Simon asked.

Rielle laughed, a surprised little gasp. "I'm always hurting."

"Good," Simon replied, but not without a twinge of shame in his chest. She was a monster, yes, but a barefoot, exhausted monster with a child held tenderly in her arms.

The queen, his father had always told him whenever Simon stewed in his hatred, was once just a girl. Remember that. Remember her.

Then Rielle went very still.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "He's coming."

Simon backed away, alarm ringing in his ears. "Corien?"

Rielle used the wall to pull herself up, her shifting face tight with pain. "I cannot allow him to find you. Garver hid you well, but if he realizes you're here now, and what you are..."

Simon touched his back, as if that could hide the markings there. "You...you know about us?"

Rielle's face flickered with something Simon couldn't read. "A friend told me. Just in case...well. In case I needed to know."

"I don't understand—"

"And I don't have time to explain. Hide with her, stay out here. I'll distract him."

And with that, Rielle pressed her daughter into Simon's arms and hurried back into her rooms.

Simon stared down at the baby. Her dark, serious eyes locked onto his face as if he were the most interesting thing in the world. Despite his aching head, and the horrible hollow pain in his gut, Simon allowed her a small smile.

"Hello," he said, and touched her cheek. "I'm Simon."

"Here, take this." Rielle reappeared, holding in her hand a necklace—a flat, gold pendant with a winged horse in flight carved onto its surface. On the horse sat a woman with streaming dark hair and a sword raised victoriously. Rays of sunlight fanned out behind her.

It was an image that had taken over Celdaria during the last two years, since the Church had declared Rielle to be the foretold Sun Queen.

How they had all loved her, once.

As the queen tucked the necklace into her baby's blanket, Simon watched her quietly. "Are you sorry for what you did?"

"Would it make you feel better if I was?"

Simon had no answer.

The queen kissed her daughter's brow. "He won't have you," she whispered. "Not you, my precious one."

Then she turned to Simon and, before he could protest, brushed aside his ash-blond hair and pressed a kiss to his forehead. His skin smarted where her lips had touched; tears gathered behind his eyes. He felt like he stood on the edge of a swaying cliff, like a terrible thing was about to happen and he could do nothing to stop it.

"Go to Borsvall," Rielle told him. "Find King Ilmaire and Commander Ingrid. Show them this necklace. They'll hide you."

The doors to Rielle's outer rooms slammed open.

"Rielle?" Corien roared.

Rielle cupped Simon's cheek and met his eyes. "Whatever happens, don't let him see you."

As she turned to go, Simon grabbed Rielle's hand. Without her, he would be alone with this child, and he suddenly wanted nothing more than to hide his face in Rielle's arms. Monster or no, she was now a parent, and that was a thing he craved more than anything.

"Please don't go?" he whispered.

She gave him a tight smile. "You're strong, Simon. I know you can do this."

Then she hurried back inside, and met Corien in the middle of her bedroom.

"Where is it?" came Corien's voice, low and dangerous.

Simon shifted slightly, peeking through a small sliver between the terrace curtains. His heart jumped in fear to see the leader of the angels—a beautiful man, pale and chiseled, hair gleaming black, lips full and cruel.

"She," Rielle corrected him. "I have a daughter."

Corien's gaze was deadly still. "And where is *she*?"

"I've sent her far away. With someone so powerful you'll never find her."

Simon's heart lifted. Was someone coming to help them?

Corien laughed unkindly. "Oh yes? And who might that be?"

"You can try and find the truth," said Rielle, "but you'll soon discover you're no longer welcome inside me."

With a snarl, Corien struck her hard across the mouth. Rielle stumbled, her lip bloodied, and Simon's gaze found hers. Her flaming-gold eyes were hard, triumphant. There was a strength on her tired face that he'd never seen before.

I've sent her far away. With someone so powerful you'll never find her.

You're strong, Simon. You can do this.

And suddenly Simon understood: no one was coming to help them.

He was the powerful someone.

And it was up to him alone to save the princess.

He would have to use his magic—his half-blood marque magic, the traveling magic that had doomed nearly all of his kind—to send them both hundreds of miles away, to Borsvall and to safety.

Rielle turned back to Corien.

"You shouldn't get so angry," she told him. "You make mistakes when you're angry. If you hadn't been so blinded with it, you'd have stayed with me, grabbed her the moment she was born, and slit her throat right then and there."

Corien smiled coldly at her. "You might have killed me for that."

The queen shrugged. "Perhaps I'll kill you now anyway."

Simon turned away, his heart tight with fear. How could he possibly do this? He was only eight years old. He had read his traveling books over and over, of course, but he still didn't understand everything inside them. And from what his father had taught him about the old days, before the marques were hunted down by both

humans and angels, most of their kind didn't attempt traveling until adulthood.

You can do this, Simon, came a voice. A woman's voice—but not the queen's. Familiar, but...

He whirled, searching the darkness, and found no one.

You must do it, said the voice. *You and the child, Simon, are the only ones who can save us. Quickly, now. Before he discovers you. Your father hid you well, but I can't protect you any longer.*

A thick, fleshy sound came from inside the queen's bedroom. Glass crashed to the floor. The queen cried out, and Corien muttered something hateful.

The castle groaned. The wall against which Simon hid rumbled, like something deep underground was awakening. A hot burst of air erupted from inside the bedroom, shattering the windows. Simon ducked low over the baby. She squirmed against his chest with a muted, angry cry.

"Hush, please," Simon whispered. The air vibrated around him; the terrace rocked beneath his feet. Sweat rolled down his back. A thrumming bright light from within the bedroom swelled, growing ever more brilliant.

He closed his eyes, tried to forget the strange woman's voice and concentrate. He searched his mind for the words in his forbidden books, now abandoned beneath the floorboards of his father's shop:

The empirium lies within every living thing, and every living thing is of the empirium.

Its power connects not only flesh to bone, root to earth, stars to sky, but also road to road, city to city.

Moment to moment.

Only marques, Simon knew, had this mighty gift. The gift of traveling. The ability to cross vast distances in an instant, and walk through time as easily as others walk down the road.

Simon had often fantasized about what it would be like to travel back to the time before the Gate was made—before the old wars, when angels still walked the earth and dragons darkened the skies.

But he couldn't think about time, not just then. Time was a dangerous, slippery thing. He must think only about distance: Celdaria to Borsvall.

"No, Rielle!" Corien was screaming. "No! Don't do this!"

Simon looked back inside to see Queen Rielle on her knees with her face turned to the sky, struggling to stay upright as a brilliant shell of light swelled around her. Corien pounded on the light, burning his fists, but he couldn't touch her. He clawed and shouted, cursed at her, pleaded with her.

But all his screams were no use. Rielle's body was unfurling in long streams of light, her skin flaking away like ash on the wind.

Simon turned away and whispered to the princess, "Don't worry, I won't let go. I've got you."

He closed his eyes, bit his lip, ignored the desperate shouts of Corien and the queen's blinding light. He directed his mind northeast, toward Borsvall. As his books had instructed, he guided his breath along every line of his body, every sinew, every bone.

Now.

His eyes snapped open.

Twisting strands of light, thin and smoky, floated through the air before him.

Heart racing, Simon held the princess close with one arm and reached out with the other. He listened to his blood, for it knew the way just as it knew to step, to swallow, to breathe. He felt through the night for the correct threads of *here* and *there*. Somewhere before him lay a road, hidden to his eyes but known, unquestionably, by the power that thrummed in his veins, and if he could just find the right thread, tug it free, lay it out before his feet like a winding carpet—

There.

A single thread, brighter than the others, danced at his fingertips.

Simon hardly dared to reach for it. If he moved too slowly or too quickly, if his mind wandered, the thread could slip away from him.

Behind him, the queen screamed at Corien, her voice thick with fury: "I am no longer yours!"

There was no time for doubt. Simon reached for the brightest thread, cautiously guided it around his fingers like a lock of shining hair.

Take a moment, his books had said, to get to know your thread. The more familiar you are with it, the more likely it is to take you where you want to go.

As Simon stared at the thread hovering in his hand, others brightened and drifted closer, pulled by the force of his concentration.

Though they scorched the tender skin of his palms, he gathered up the threads in his hands, guiding them through the chill night air. Soon he had maneuvered the threads into a quivering ring, and past the ring stretched a passage into darkness.

The first thread, the brightest, crept to Simon's chest and clung there like a briar, tugging him gently forward.

Simon felt silly about it, but thought to the thread nevertheless, *Hello.*

The pressure of its touch lightened.

Simon saw faint shapes through the shifting, sharpening passage: A winding path of black stone, a tall, narrow gate. Ice-capped mountains. Soldiers pointing in awe, shouting in the harsh Borsvallic tongue.

Every muscle in Simon's young body snapped rigid. With each breath, the world dimmed. And yet laughter bubbled up inside him even so. He could not imagine ever being happier. It was not easy, this power, but it was right, and it was *his*.

Then, behind him, Queen Rielle cried out something Simon couldn't understand. Her voice shattered.

Corien's frantic screams were hoarse with anguish.

Simon swallowed hard, fear crowding him like a swarm of insects. A great, sudden stillness swallowed away all sound—the infant's cries, the humming threads. The world fell silent.

Simon looked back just as a column of light shot up from the queen's bedroom and into the night, turning the sky white as the dawn. Simon hid his face, bowing his head over the infant in his arms. His traveling hand shook as he worked. An instant later, the silence erupted into a shattering boom that shook the mountains and nearly knocked Simon off his feet.

The castle pitched beneath him. The air popped with the smell of fire. One of the mountains surrounding the capital collapsed, followed by another, and another.

Hold on to her, said the woman's voice once more, high and clear in his mind. *Don't ever let her go.*

The threads were slipping in the grip of Simon's mind. He felt stretched between where his feet stood and where the thread at his chest tugged.

Go, Simon! the woman's voice cried. *Now!*

Simon stepped toward the ring of light that led east—just as a blazing heat bloomed at his heels.

The last things Simon knew came at him slowly:

A bright wall of fire rushing at him from all sides, crackling like a thousand storms. The air shifting around him as he stepped through the threads' passage, like cold water sliding over his skin. The princess screaming in his arms.

The sight of the Borsvall mountains fading.

The thread attached to his heart changing. Twisting.

Darkening.

Breaking, with a snap like thunder.

A force slamming into him, snatching him forward by his bones.

The baby being ripped from his arms, no matter how hard he tried
to hold on to her.

A piece of fabric, ripping in his hands.

And then, nothing.

→ 1 ←

RIELLE

“Lord Commander Dardenne came to me in the middle of the night, his daughter in his arms. She was covered in blood. It was her mother’s, he said. He could hardly speak. I had never seen the man afraid before. He thrust Rielle into my arms and said, ‘Help us. Help her. Don’t let them take her from me.’”

—Testimony of Grand Magister Taliesin Belounnon,
on Lady Rielle Dardenne’s involvement
in the Boon Chase massacre
April 29, Year 998 of the Second Age

TWO YEARS EARLIER

Rielle Dardenne hurried into Tal’s office and dropped the sparrow’s message onto his desk.

“Princess Runa is dead,” she announced.

She wouldn’t describe her mood as *excited*, exactly—but her own kingdom, Celdaria, and their northeastern neighbor, Borsvall, had lived in a state of tension for so many decades that it was hardly noteworthy when, say, a Celdarian merchant ship sank off Borsvall’s coast, or patrols came to blows near the border.

But a murdered Borsvall princess? That was news. And Rielle wanted to dissect every piece of it.

Tal let out a sigh, set down his pen, and dragged his ink-smudged hands through his messy blond hair. The polished golden flame pinned to his lapel winked in the sunlight.

"Perhaps," Tal suggested, turning a look on Rielle that was not quite disapproval and not amusement, "you should consider looking less thrilled about a princess's murder?"

She slid into the chair across from him. "I'm not happy about it or anything. I'm simply intrigued." Rielle pulled the slip of paper back across the desk and read over the inked words once more. "So you do think it was assassination? Audric thinks so."

"Promise me you won't do anything stupid today, Rielle."

She smiled sweetly at him. "When have I ever done anything stupid?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "The city guard is on high alert. I want you here, safe in the temple, in case anything happens." He took the message from her, scanning its contents. "How did you get this, anyway? No, wait. I know. Audric gave it to you."

Rielle stiffened. "Audric keeps me informed. He's a good friend. Where's the harm in that?"

Tal didn't answer, but he didn't have to.

"If you have something to say to me," she snapped, color climbing up her cheeks, "then just say it. Or else let's begin our lesson."

Tal watched her a moment longer, then turned to pick up four enormous books sitting on the shelf behind him.

"Here," he said, ignoring the mutinous expression on her face. "I've marked some passages for you to read. Today will be devoted to quiet study. And I'll test you later, so don't even think about skimming."

Rielle narrowed her eyes at the book on the top of the stack. "A

Concise History of the Second Age, Volume I: The Aftermath of the Angelic Wars." She made a face. "This hardly looks concise."

"It's all a matter of perspective," he said, returning to the papers on his desk.

Rielle's favorite place in Tal's office was the window seat overlooking the main temple courtyard. It was piled high with scarlet cushions lined in gold piping, and when she sat there, dangling her legs out into the sun, she could almost forget that there was an enormous world beyond the temple and her city—a world she would never see.

She settled by the window, kicked off her boots, hiked up her heavy lace-trimmed skirts, and rested her bare feet on the sill. The spring sunlight washed her legs in warmth, and soon she was thinking of how Audric blossomed on bright, sun-filled days like this one. How his skin seemed to glow and crackle, begging to be touched.

Tal cleared his throat, breaking her focus.

Tal knew her far too well.

She cracked open *A Concise History*, took one look at the tiny, faded text, and imagined tossing the book out the window and into the temple courtyard, where citizens were filing in for morning prayers—to pray that the riders they had wagered upon in today's race would win, no doubt. Every temple in the capital would be full of such eager souls, not just there in the Pyre—Tal's temple, where citizens worshipped Saint Marzana the firebrand—but in the House of Light and the House of Night as well, and the Baths and the Firmament, the Forge and the Holdfast. Whispered prayers in all seven temples, to all seven saints and their elements.

Wasted prayers, thought Rielle, with a thrill of excitement. *The other racers will look like children on ponies compared to me.*

She flipped through a few pages, biting the inside of her lip until she felt calm enough to speak. "I've heard many in the Borsvall court

are blaming Celdaria for Runa's death. We wouldn't do such a thing, would we?"

Tal's pen scratched across his paper. "Certainly not."

"But it doesn't matter if it's true or not, does it? If King Hallvard's councils convince him that we killed his daughter, he will declare war at last."

Tal dropped his pen with a huff of annoyance. "I'm not going to get any work done today, am I?"

Rielle swallowed her grin. *If only you knew how true that is, dearest Tal.*

"I'm sorry if I have questions about the political climate of our country," she said coolly. "Does that fall under the category of things we're not allowed to discuss, lest my poor vulnerable brain shatter from the stress?"

A smile twitched at the corner of Tal's mouth. "Borsvall might declare war, yes."

"You don't seem concerned about this possibility."

"I find it unlikely. We've been on the edge of war with Borsvall for decades, and yet it has never happened. And it *will* never happen, because the Borsvall people may be warmongers, but King Hallvard is neither healthy nor stupid. We would flatten his army. He can't afford a war with anyone, much less with Celdaria."

"Audric said..." Rielle hesitated. A twist of unease slipped down her throat. "Audric said he thinks Princess Runa's death, and the slave rebellion in Kirvaya, means it's time. That the Queens are coming."

Silence fell over the room like a shroud.

"Audric has always been fascinated with the prophecy," Tal said, his voice deceptively calm. "He's been looking for signs of the Queens' coming for years."

"He sounds rather convinced this time."

"A slave rebellion and a dead princess are hardly enough to—"

"But I heard Grand Magister Duval talking about how there have been storms across the ocean in Meridian," she pressed on, searching his face. "Even as far as Ventera and Astavar. Strange storms, out of season."

Tal blinked. *Ah*, thought Rielle. *You didn't know that, did you?*

"Storms do occur out of season from time to time," Tal said. "The empirium works in mysterious ways."

Rielle curled her fingers in her skirts, taking comfort in the fact that soon she would be in her riding trousers and boots, her collar open to the breeze.

She would be on the starting line.

"The report I read," she continued, "said that a dust storm in southern Meridian had shut down the entire port of Morsia for days."

"Audric needs to stop showing you every report that comes across his desk."

"Audric didn't show me anything. I found this one myself."

Tal raised an eyebrow. "You mean you snuck into his office when he wasn't there and went through his papers."

Rielle's cheeks grew hot. "I was looking for a book I'd left behind."

"Indeed. And what would Audric say, if he knew you'd been in his office without his permission?"

"He wouldn't care. I'm free to come and go as I please."

Tal closed his eyes. "Lady Rielle, you can't just visit the crown prince's private rooms day and night as though it's nothing. You're not children anymore. And you are not his fiancée."

Rielle lost her breath for an instant. "I'm well aware of that. My *lord*."

Tal waved a hand and rose from his chair, and just like that, talk of the prophecy and its Queens was over.

"The city is crowded today, and unpredictable," he said, walking across the room to pour himself another cup of tea. "Word is spreading about Princess Runa's death. In such a climate, the empirium can behave in

similarly unpredictable ways. Perhaps we should begin a round of prayers to steady our minds. Amid the chaos of the world, the burning flame serves as an anchor, binding us in peace to the empirium, and to God.”

Rielle glared at him. “Don’t use your magister voice, Tal. It makes you sound old.”

He sighed, took a sip of his tea. “I am old. And grumpy, thanks to you.”

“Thirty-two is hardly old, especially to already be Grand Magister of the Pyre.” She paused. She had to be careful now. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you were appointed as the next Archon. Surely, with someone as talented as you beside me, I could safely watch the Chase from your box—”

“Don’t try to flatter me, Lady Rielle.” His eyes sparked at her. There was the Tal she liked—the ferocious firebrand, not the pious teacher. “It isn’t safe for you out there right now, not to mention dangerous for everyone else if something set you off and you lost control.”

Rielle slammed shut *A Concise History* and rose from the window seat. “Damn you, Tal.”

“Not in the temple, please,” Tal admonished over the rim of his cup.

“I’m not a child. Do you really think I don’t know better by now?”

Her voice turned mocking. “‘Rielle, let’s say a prayer together to calm you.’ ‘Rielle, let’s sing a song about Saint Katell the Magnificent to take your mind off things.’ ‘No, Rielle, you can’t go to the masque. You might forget yourself. You might have fun, God forbid.’ If Father had his way, I’d stay locked up for the rest of my life with my nose buried in a book or on my knees in prayer, whipping myself every time I had a stray angry thought. Is that the kind of life you would like for me too?”

Tal watched her, unmoved. “If it meant you were safe, and that others were safe as well? Yes, I would.”

“Kept under lock and key like some criminal.” A familiar, frustrated

feeling rose within her; she pushed it back down with a vengeance. She would not lose control, not today of all days.

“Do you know,” she said, her voice falsely bright, “that when it storms, Father takes me down to the servants’ quarters and gives me dumbwort? It puts me to sleep, and he locks me up and leaves me there.”

After a pause, Tal answered, “Yes.”

“I used to fight him. He would hold me down and slap me, pinch my nose shut until I couldn’t breathe and had to open my mouth. Then he would shove the vial between my lips and make me drink, and I would spit it up, but he would keep forcing me to drink, whispering to me everything I’d ever done wrong, and right in the middle of yelling how much I hated him, I would fall asleep. And when I would wake up, the storm would be over.”

A longer pause. “Yes,” Tal answered softly. “I know.”

“He thinks storms are too provocative for me. They give me *ideas*, he says.”

Tal cleared his throat. “That was my fault.”

“I know.”

“But the medicine, that was his suggestion.”

She gave him a withering look. “And did you try to talk him out of it?”

He did not answer, and the patience on his face left her seething.

“I don’t fight him anymore,” she said. “I hear a crack of thunder and go below without him even asking me to. How pathetic I’ve become.”

“Rielle...” Tal sighed, shook his head. “Everything I could say to you, I’ve said before.”

She approached him, letting the loneliness she typically hid from him—from everyone—soften her face. *Come, good Magister Belounnon. Pity your sweet Rielle.* He broke first, looking away from her. Something like sorrow shifted across his face, and his jaw tightened.

Good.

"He'd let me sleep through life, if he could," she said.

"He loves you, Rielle. He worries for you."

Heat snapped at Rielle's fingertips, growing along with her anger. With a stubborn stab of fury, she let it come. She knew she shouldn't, that an outburst would only make it more difficult to sneak away, but suddenly she could not bring herself to care.

He loves you, Rielle.

A father who loved his daughter would not make her his prisoner.

She seized one of the candles from Tal's desk and watched with grim satisfaction as the wick burst into a spitting, unruly flame. As she stared at it, she imagined her fury as a flooding river, steadily spilling over its banks and feeding the flame in her hands.

The flame grew—the size of a pen, a dagger, a sword. Then every candle followed suit, a forest of fiery blades.

Tal rose from his desk and picked up the handsome polished shield from its stand in the corner of the room. Every elemental who had ever lived—every waterworker and windsinger, every shadowcaster and every firebrand like Tal—had to use a casting, a physical object uniquely forged by their own hands, to access their power. Their singular power, the one element they could control.

But not Rielle.

She needed no casting, and fire was not the only element that obeyed her.

All of them did.

Tal stood behind her, one hand holding his shield, the other hand resting gently on her own. As a child, back when she had still thought she loved Tal, such touches had thrilled her.

Now she seriously considered punching him.

"In the name of Saint Marzana the Brilliant," Tal murmured, "we offer this prayer to the flames, that the empirium might hear our plea

and grant us strength: Fleet-footed fire, blaze not with fury or abandon. Burn steady and true, burn clean and burn bright.”

Rielle bit down on harsh words. How she hated praying. Every familiar word felt like a new bar being added to the cage her father and Tal had crafted for her.

The room began to shake—the inkwell on Tal’s desk, the panes of glass in the open window, Tal’s half-finished cup of tea.

“Rielle?” Tal prompted, shifting his shield. In his body behind her, she felt a rising hot tension as he prepared to douse her fire with his own power. Despite her best efforts, the concern in his voice caused her a twinge of remorse. He meant well, she knew. He wanted, desperately, for her to be happy.

Unlike her father.

So Rielle bowed her head and swallowed her anger. After all, what she was about to do might turn Tal against her forever. She could allow him this small victory.

“Blaze not with fury or abandon,” she repeated, and closed her eyes. She imagined setting aside every scrap of emotion, every sound, every thought, until her mind was a vast field of darkness—except for the tiny spot of light that was the flame in her hands.

Then she allowed the darkness to seep across the flame as well, and was left alone in the cool, still void of her mind.

The room calmed.

Tal’s hand fell away.

Rielle listened as he returned his shield to its stand. The prayer had scraped her clean, and in the wake of her anger she felt...nothing. A hollow heart and an empty head.

When she opened her eyes, they were dry and tired. She wondered bitterly what it would be like to live without a constant refrain of prayers in her thoughts, warning her against her own feelings.

The temple bells chimed eleven times; Rielle's heart jumped in relief. Any moment now, she would hear Ludivine's signal.

She turned toward the window. No more prayers, no more reading. Every muscle in her body surged with energy. She wanted to *ride*.

"I'd rather be dead than live as my father's prisoner," she said at last. Too dramatic, but she didn't care.

"Dead like your mother?"

Rielle froze. When she faced Tal, he did not look away. She had not expected that cruelty—from her father, yes, but never from Tal.

The memory of long-ago flames blazed across her vision. She kept her voice flat.

"Did Father instruct you to bring that up if I got out of hand?" she asked. "What with the Chase and all."

"Yes," Tal answered, unflinching.

"Well, I'm happy to tell you I've only killed the one time. You needn't worry yourself."

After a moment, Tal turned to straighten the books on his desk. "This is as much for your safety as it is for everyone else's. If the king discovered we'd been hiding the truth of your power all these years... you know what could happen. Especially to your father. And yet he does it because he loves you more than you'll ever understand."

Rielle laughed sharply. "That isn't reason enough to treat me like this. I'll never forgive him for it. Someday, I'll stop forgiving you too."

"I know," Tal said, and at the sadness in his voice, Rielle nearly took pity on him.

Nearly.

But then a great crash sounded from downstairs, and an unmistakable cry of alarm.

Ludivine.

Tal gave Rielle that familiar look he so often had—when she had, at

seven, overflowed their pool at the Baths; when he had found her, at fifteen, the first time she snuck out to Odo's tavern. That look of *What did I do to deserve such trials?*

Rielle gazed innocently back at him.

"Stay here," he ordered. "I mean it, Rielle. I appreciate your frustration—truly, I do—but this is about more than the injustice of you feeling bored."

Rielle returned to the window seat, hoping her expression appeared suitably abashed.

"I love you, Tal," she said, and it was true enough to make her hate herself a little.

"I know," he replied. Then he threw on his magisterial robe and swept out the door.

"Magister, it's Lady Ludivine," came a panicked voice from the hallway—one of Tal's young acolytes. "She'd only just arrived in the chapel, my lord, when she turned pale and collapsed. I don't know what happened!"

"Summon my healer," Tal instructed, "and send a message to the queen. She'll be in her box at the starting line. Tell her that her niece has taken ill and will not be joining her there."

Once they had gone, Rielle smiled and yanked on her boots.

Stay here?

Not a chance.

She hurried through the sitting room outside Tal's office and into the temple's red-veined marble hallways, where embroidered flourishes of shimmering flames lined the plush carpets. The temple entryway, its parquet floor polished to a sheen of gold, was a flurry of activity as worshippers, acolytes, and servants hurried across to the peaked chapel doors.

"It's Lady Ludivine," a young acolyte whispered to her companion as Rielle passed. "Apparently she's taken ill."

Rielle grinned, imagining everyone fussing over poor Ludivine, tragically lovely and faint on the temple floor. Ludivine would enjoy the attention—and the reminder that she had the entire capital held like a puppet on its master's strings.

Even so, Rielle would owe her a tremendous favor after this.

Whatever it was, it would be more than worth it.

Ludivine's horse stood next to her own just outside the temple, held by a young stable hand who seemed on the verge of panic. He recognized Rielle and sagged with relief.

"Pardon me, Lady Rielle, but is Lady Ludivine all right?" he asked.

"Haven't the faintest," Rielle replied, swinging up into the saddle. Then she snapped the reins, and her mare bolted down the main road that led from the Pyre into the heart of the city, hooves clattering against the cobblestones. A tumbled array of apartments and temple buildings rose around them—gray stone walls engraved with scenes of the capital city's creation, rounded roofs of burnished copper, towering columns wrapped in flowering ivy, white fountains crowned with likenesses of the seven saints in prayer. So many visitors had come from all over the world to Âme de la Terre for the Chase that the cool spring air now pressed thick and close. The city smelled of sweat and spices, hot horse and hot coin.

As Rielle tore down the road, the crowd parted in alarm on either side of her, shouting angry curses—until they realized who she was and fell silent. She guided her mare through the twisting streets and made for the main city gates, her body pulled tight with nerves.

But she would not give in to her power today.

She would compete in the Boon Chase, as any citizen was free to do, and prove to her father that she could control herself, even when her life was in danger and the eyes of the entire city were upon her.

She would prove to him, and to Tal, that she deserved to live a normal life.

→ 2 ←

ELIANA

“Eliana says that on the day the Empire took our city, you couldn’t breathe without choking on the taste of blood. She said I should be glad I was only a baby, but I wish I could remember it. Maybe then I would be stronger. I would be a warrior. Like her.”

—Journal of Remy Ferracora, citizen of Orline
February 3, Year 1018 of the Third Age

1,020 YEARS LATER

Eliana was on the hunt when she heard the first scream. Screams weren’t so unusual in the city of Orline, especially in the Barrens, where slums sprawled across the river docks in a dark plain of misery.

This one, though, was high, piercing—a young girl’s scream—and fell silent so abruptly Eliana thought she might have been imagining things.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered to Harkan, who stood beside her with his back against the wall.

Harkan tensed. “Hear what?”

“That scream. A girl.”

“I heard no scream.”

Eliana glanced at the nearby darkened window, adjusted her new velvet mask, admired the lean lines of her body. “Well, we all know your hearing’s shit.”

“My hearing is not shit,” Harkan muttered.

“It’s not as good as mine.”

“We can’t all be as marvelous as the Dread of Orline.”

Eliana sighed. “Sad, but true.”

“I think even I, with my shit ears, would hear a scream. Maybe you imagined it.”

But Eliana didn’t think so.

In the city of Orline, girls and women had been disappearing of late—not shipped off to an Empire work camp, nor taken to the Lord of Orline’s palace to be trained in the maidensfold. Those things left behind gossip, trails of evidence.

These recent girls were simply being taken. One moment they were there; the next they were gone.

At first, Eliana hadn’t let herself care. No one in her neighborhood had been taken, and she didn’t think the Empire would start abducting its own favored citizens. Her family was safe. It therefore wasn’t her problem.

But the more girls disappeared, the more stories she heard of vanished women, the harder it became for her to ignore the situation. So many sisters gone, and so many mothers—snatched from their loved ones, taken as they slept. Not criminals, not Red Crown rebels.

And then there were the rumors that made no sense at all, of a hole in the sky on the other side of the world. Possibly in Celdaria. Possibly in the Sunderlands. Every rumor told a different tale. Some people thought everything was connected—the hole in the sky, the vanished girls.

Eliana was not one of them. Hole in the sky? More like fear run amok. People were becoming hysterical.

Then she heard it again: a second scream. Closer.

A sour feeling drifted across Eliana's body, raking violent chills across her skin. The world tilted, froze, then righted itself. The sweet odor of the white gemma tree flowers overhead turned rancid.

Beside her, Harkan shifted. "Are you all right?"

"Don't you feel that?"

"Feel *what*? What's going on with you tonight?"

"I feel..." The edges of her vision shimmered like a heat mirage. "I don't know what I feel. Like an adatrox is nearby, but worse."

At the mention of the Empire soldiers, Harkan tensed. "I don't see any adatrox. Are you sure?"

A third scream—more desperate this time.

"Whoever it is," Eliana muttered, her voice tight and angry, "they're close."

"What? *Who*?"

"Arabeth's next meal."

Eliana flashed Harkan a grin, then unsheathed Arabeth—the long, jagged-bladed dagger she kept at her hip. "Time to play."

With one last peek at her reflection, she darted out from the shadows and into the cramped, grime-slicked alleyways of lower Orline. Harkan called after her; she ignored him. If he wanted to stop her, he could try, but she'd have him flat on his back in two seconds.

She smirked. The last time she'd pinned him like that, it had been to his bed.

She honestly couldn't decide which context she preferred.

All the same, she didn't want to start a fight just yet. Not when she had a girl-snatcher to hunt.

She entered the Barrens, slipping between patched tents and sagging

wooden shacks dotted with dying fires. Beyond the Barrens crawled the wide river, its banks clogged with piles of festering white moss.

Her first time in these slums, aged ten, she had nearly gagged from the smell. That had earned her a hard glare from her mother.

Now, eight years later, the stench hardly registered.

She scanned the night: A beggar picking the pockets of an unconscious drunkard. A gaunt young man, coifed and powdered, coaxing a woman through a painted door.

Another scream. Fainter. They were heading for the river.

The feeling crawling up her spine magnified. It felt—she knew no other way to describe it—as though it had a *will*.

She placed her hands on her knees, squeezed her eyes shut. Spots of color danced behind her eyelids. On the battered wooden support beam beside her, someone had scrawled a childish drawing of a masked woman in black, leaping through the air with a knife in each hand.

Despite the ill feeling blotting her vision, Eliana couldn't help but grin.

"El, for the love of the saints, what are you doing?" Harkan came up beside her, put a hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Me? Hurt?" She swallowed hard against the sick feeling tightening her throat. "Dearest Harkan." She gestured grandly at the drawing of herself. "How could you think such a thing of the Dread of Orline?"

She sprinted away and jumped off the top level of the docks onto another level about one hundred feet below. The impact jolted her with only a slight pain. She was up and running again in an instant. Such a fall would break Harkan's legs; he'd have to take the long way down.

If Remy were there, he would tell her not to be so obvious.

"People have started to notice," he had told her just the other day. "I hear talk at the bakery."

Eliana, stretching on the floor of her bedroom, had asked innocently, "What kind of talk?"

“When a girl falls three stories and then jumps right back to her feet in the middle of the Garden Square, people tend to notice. Especially when she’s wearing a cape.”

Eliana had smiled at the thought of their gaping, awestruck faces. “And what if I want them to notice?”

Remy had been quiet for a long moment. Then: “Do you *want* Invictus to come and take you away from me?”

That had silenced her. She’d looked up at her little brother’s pale, pinched face, and felt her stomach turn over.

“I’m sorry,” she’d told him quietly. “I’m such an ass.”

“I don’t care if you’re an ass,” he’d replied. “Just don’t be a show-off.”

He was right, she knew. The problem was, she *liked* showing off. If she was going to be a freak with a miraculous body that no fall could kill, then she might as well have fun with it.

If she was busy having fun, then she didn’t have time to wonder why her body could do what it did.

And what it meant.

Running through the docks, she followed the trail of wrongness in the air, like tracking the scent of prey. The docks’ lowest level was quiet, the summer air still and damp. She ran around one corner and then another—and stopped. The scent, the *feeling*, roiled at the edge of this rickety pier. She forced her way forward, even though her churning stomach and every roaring ounce of her blood screamed at her to stay away.

Two figures—masked and wearing dark traveling clothes—waited in a long, sleek boat at the pier’s edge. Their tall, blunt builds suggested they were men. A third figure carried a small girl with golden-brown skin like Harkan’s. The girl struggled, a gag stuffed in her mouth, her wrists and ankles bound.

Red Crown? Unlikely. What would the rebels want with stolen

children? And if Red Crown were involved in the abductions, Eliana would have heard whispers from the underground by now.

They could be bounty hunters like herself, but why would the Undying Empire pay for what it could simply take? And working in a group? *Very* unlikely.

One of the figures in the boat held out its arms for the girl. Lumps crowded the boat's floor—other women, other girls, bound and unconscious.

Eliana's anger ignited.

She pulled long, thin Whistler from her left boot.

"Going somewhere, gentlemen?" she called, and ran at them.

The figure on the dock turned just as Eliana reached him. She whirled, caught him with her boot under his chin. He fell, choking.

One of the figures from the boat jumped onto the dock. She swiped him across the throat with Arabeth, pushed him into the water after his comrade.

She spun around, triumphant, beckoned at the abductor still waiting in the boat.

"Come on, love," she crooned. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

Once, she had flinched at killing. Her first had been six years ago, at the age of twelve. Rozen Ferracora, Eliana's mother, had brought her along on a job—the last Rozen had taken before her injury—and someone had ratted them out. The rebels had known they were coming. It had been an ambush.

Rozen had felled two of them, and Eliana had hidden in the shadows. That had always been her mother's instruction: *I'll keep you from killing as long as I can, sweet girl. For now, watch. Learn. Practice. What my father taught me, I will teach you.*

Then one of the rebels had pinned Rozen to the ground, and Eliana had known nothing but rage.

She flew at the rebel woman, thrust her little blade deep into the woman's back. Then she stood, staring, as the woman gasped away her life in a pool of blood.

Rozen had taken Eliana's hand, hurried her away. Back home in their kitchen, her brother, Remy—then only five—had stared wide-eyed as Eliana's shock gave way to panic. Hands red with blood, she had sobbed herself hoarse in her mother's arms.

Luckily, the killing had grown much easier.

Two masked figures darted forward out of the shadows, small bundles in their arms. More girls? They tossed the bundles to their last remaining comrade in the boat, then spun to meet her. She ducked one blow, then another, then took a hard one to the stomach and a sharp hook to the jaw.

She stumbled, shook it off. The pain vanished as quickly as it had come. She whirled and stabbed another of the brutes. He toppled into the filthy water.

Then a wave of nausea slammed into her, mean as a boot to the gut. She dropped to her knees, gasping for air. A weight settled on her shoulders, fogged her vision, pressed her down hard against the river-slicked dock.

Five seconds. Ten. Then the pressure vanished. The air no longer felt misaligned around her body; her skin no longer crawled. She raised her head, forced open her eyes. The boat was gliding away.

Wild with anger, head still spinning, Eliana staggered to her feet. A strong arm came around her middle, pulling her backward just as she prepared to dive.

"Get off me," she said tightly, "or I'll get nasty." She elbowed Harkan in his ribs.

He swore, but didn't let go. "El, have you lost your mind? This isn't the job."

"They took her." She stomped on his instep, twisted out of his grip, ran back to the dock's edge.

He followed and caught her arm, spun her around to face him. “It doesn’t matter. This isn’t the job.”

Her grin emerged hard as glass. “When has restraining me ever worked out in your favor? Oh, wait.” She sidled closer, softened her smile. “I can think of a time or two—”

“Stop it, El. What have you always told me?” His dark eyes found hers, locked on. “If it isn’t the job, it isn’t our problem.”

Her smile faded. She yanked her arm away from him. “They keep taking us. Why? And who are they? Why only the girls? And what was that...that *feeling*? I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

He looked dubious. “Maybe you need to sleep.”

She hesitated, despair creeping slowly in. “You felt nothing at all?”

“Sorry, no.”

She glared at him, ignoring the unsettled feeling in her gut. “Well, even so, that girl was no rebel. She was a child. Why would they bother taking her?”

“Whatever the reason, it’s not our problem,” Harkan repeated. He took a long, slow breath, perhaps convincing himself. “Not tonight. We have work to do.”

Eliana stared out at the river for a long time. She imagined carving a face into a slab of flawless stone—no sweat, no scars. Only a hard smile that would come when called, and eyes like knives at night. By the time she had finished, her anger had faded and the unfeeling face was her own.

She turned to Harkan, brought out the cheeky little grin he despised. “Shall we, then? Those bastards worked up my appetite.”



The Red Crown rebel smuggler known as Quill snuck both people and information out of Orline. He was good at it too.

It had taken weeks for Eliana and Harkan to track him down.

Now, they crouched on a roof overlooking a tiny courtyard in the Old Quarter, where Quill was supposed to meet a group of rebel sympathizers trying to flee the city. The courtyard reeked sweetly from the roses lining the walls.

Beside her, Harkan shifted, alert.

Eliana watched dark shapes enter the courtyard and crowd together in the corner below a climbing rosebush. Waiting.

Not long after, a hooded figure entered from the opposite corner and approached them. Eliana curled her fingers around her dagger, her blood racing.

The clouds shifted; moonlight washed the yard clean.

Eliana's heart stuttered and sank.

Quill. It had to be him. There was the faint limp in his gait, from a wound sustained during the invasion.

And there, waiting for him, were a woman and three small children.

Harkan swore under his breath. He pointed at the children, signed with his hand. He and Eliana had engineered a silent code years ago, when she first started hunting alone after Rozen's injury. He had insisted she not go by herself, and so he had learned to hunt and track, to kill, to turn on their own people and serve the Empire instead—all for her.

No, came his message. *Abort*.

She knew what he meant. The children weren't part of this job. Quill was one thing, but the idea of handing innocent children over to the Lord of Orline... It wouldn't sit well with Harkan.

Honestly, it didn't with Eliana either.

But three rebels waited at the courtyard's shadowed entrance: Quill's escort and protectors. There was no time. And it was too big a risk to spare the family. She and Harkan had to move quickly.

She shook her head. *Take them*, she signed back.

Harkan drew a too-loud breath; she heard the furious sadness in it. Below, Quill's head whipped toward them.

Eliana jumped off the roof, landed lightly, rolled to her feet. Thought, briefly, how it was a terrible shame that she couldn't sit back and watch herself fight. Surely it looked as good as it felt.

Quill drew a dagger; the mother fell to her knees, begging for mercy. Quill pushed his hood back. Middle-aged, ruddy-faced, and intelligent in the eyes, he had a serenity to him that said, *I fear not death, but surrender.*

Four seconds later, Eliana had kicked his bad leg out from under him, relieved him of his knife, struck the back of his head with the hilt. He did not rise again.

She heard Harkan land behind her, followed by rapid footsteps as the other rebels rushed into the courtyard. Together she and Harkan had them down in moments. She whirled and flung her dagger. It hit the wooden courtyard door, trapping the eldest child in place by his cloak.

The others froze and burst into tears.

Their mother lay glassy-eyed on the ground in a bed of rotting petals. One of the rebel's daggers protruded from her heart.

Eliana yanked it free. Another blade for her arsenal. She wondered why the rebels had killed the woman: to protect themselves?

Or to grant her mercy they knew she would not otherwise receive.

"Fetch the guard," Eliana ordered, searching the mother for valuables. She found nothing except for a small idol of the Emperor, crafted from mud and sticks, no doubt kept on her person in case an adatrox patrol stopped her for a search. The idol's beady black eyes glittered in the moonlight. She tossed it aside. The children's sobs grew louder. "I'll stay with them."

Harkan paused, that sad, tired look on his face that made her hackles rise because she knew he hoped it would change her, one of these days. Make her better. Make her *good* again.

She lifted an eyebrow. *Sorry, Harkan. Good girls don't live long.*

Then he left.

The eldest child watched Eliana, arms around his siblings. Some impulse stirring deep inside her urged her to let them go. Just this once. It wouldn't hurt anything; they were children, they were nothing.

But children couldn't keep their mouths shut. And if anyone ever found out that the Dread of Orlane, Lord Arkelion's pet huntress, had let traitors run free...

"We were afraid the bad men would take her too," the boy said simply. "That's why we wanted to leave."

The bad men. A tiny chill skipped up Eliana's neck. The masked men from the docks?

But the boy said no more than that. He did not even try to run.

Smart boy, Eliana thought.

He knew he would not get far.



The next afternoon, Eliana stood on a balcony overlooking the gallows.

Lord Arkelion lounged at the east end of the square, the high back of his throne carved to resemble wings.

Eliana, watching him, folded her arms across her chest. Shifted her weight to one hip. Tried to ignore the figure standing in a red-and-black Invictus uniform beside His Lordship's throne.

From this height, Eliana couldn't tell who it was, but it didn't matter. The mere sight of that familiar silhouette was enough to turn her stomach.

Invictus: a company of assassins that traveled the world and carried out the Emperor's bidding. The most dangerous jobs, the bloodiest jobs.

It was only a matter of time before they recruited her. She imagined it daily, just to see if the idea would ever stop terrifying her.

So far, it hadn't.

Probably Valentine would be the one to come for her. Eliana had seen him at a handful of His Lordship's parties over the years. Each time, he had requested a dance with her. Each time, his flat gray gaze had dared her to refuse him.

Oh, how she'd wished she could have.

"An invincible bounty hunter," he had crooned in her ear during their last dance together the previous summer. "How curious." He had threaded his cold fingers through hers. "You'll make a fine addition to our family someday."

When Valentine came for her, he probably wouldn't even let her say goodbye to her loved ones before escorting her overseas to Celdaria, the heart of the Undying Empire—and to the Emperor himself.

Welcome, Eliana Ferracora, the Emperor said in her most awful dreams, his smile not reaching his black eyes. *I've heard so much about you.*

And that would be the end of life as she now knew it. She would become one of the elite—a soldier of Invictus.

She would become, like Valentine, a new breed of monster.

Today, however, was not that day.

So Eliana watched, tapping her fingers against her arm, wishing His Lordship would get it over with. She was hungry, and tired, and Harkan was beside himself with shame, and the longer they stood there, the more desperately he would expect something from her that she couldn't give him:

Regret.

The Empire guard marched Quill and the eldest child up to the gallows. It had been constructed in the ruins of the temple of Saint Marzana, the revered firebrand of the Old World—the world before the Blood Queen Rielle had died. Before the rise of the Empire.

Empire soldiers had almost entirely demolished the temple when they seized Orline. Once, the temple had been a grand array of domed halls, classrooms and sanctuaries open to the river breeze, courtyards draped in blossoming vines. Now, only a few crumbling pillars remained. Saint Marzana's statue, standing guard at the temple entrance, had been destroyed. A likeness of the Emperor now loomed there instead—his features masked, his body cloaked. Gold, black, and crimson banners flanked his head.

The plaza beneath him was crowded but quiet. The citizens of Orline were used to executions, but Quill was popular in certain circles. And not even His Lordship often slaughtered children.

When Eliana and Harkan had presented the captive children to him, Lord Arkelion had smiled kindly, inspected the younger ones' teeth, and sent them off with one of his mistresses. The children had reached back for their brother, wailing all the way down the throne room until someone had, blessedly, shut the doors.

But the eldest child had not cried. And he was not crying today, not even as he watched the executioner raise his sword.

"The Empire will burn!" shouted Quill, his hair plastered to his scalp with sweat.

The sword fell; Quill's head rolled. An uneasy wave of sound swept through the crowd.

Only then, his face splattered with fresh blood, did the boy start to cry.

"El," Harkan choked out. He took Eliana's hand in his sweaty one, rubbed his thumb along her palm. His voice came out frayed. He had not slept.

She had slept like the dead. Sleep was important. One could not hunt without a good night's sleep.

"We don't have to watch," she told him, as patiently as she could manage. "We can go."

He released her hand. "You can go, if you want. I have to watch."

There it was again—that same exhausted tone, like a sad-eyed hound resigned to its next beating.

To keep from snapping at him, Eliana fiddled with the battered gold pendant under her cloak. She wore it on a chain around her neck every day, and knew the scratched, worn lines of it by heart. The arch of the horse's neck. The intricate details of its wings. The figure riding astride it, sword raised, face blackened from time: Audric the Lightbringer. One of the dead Old World kings her brother obsessed over for reasons Eliana couldn't fathom. Her parents told her they had found the trinket on the street when Eliana was still a baby and given it to her to calm her crying one sleepless night. She had worn it for as long as she could remember, though not out of love for the Lightbringer. She cared nothing for dead kings.

No, she wore it because, some days, she felt like the familiar weight of the necklace at her throat was the only thing that kept her from flying apart.

"I'll stay," she told Harkan lightly. Too lightly? Probably. "I've got the time."

He didn't even scold her. The executioner lifted his sword. At the last moment, the child raised his hand in a salute—a fist at his heart and then held up in the air. The sign of allegiance to the rebellion, to Red Crown. His arm shook, but he stared at the sun with unblinking eyes.

He began reciting the Sun Queen's prayer: "May the Queen's light guide me—"

The sword fell.

Eliana's tears surprised her. She blinked them away before they could fall. Harkan covered his mouth with one hand.

"God help us," he whispered. "El, what are we doing?"

She grasped his hand, made him face her.

"Surviving," she told him. "And that's nothing to be ashamed of." She swallowed, and swallowed again. Her jaw ached. Pretending boredom was hard work, but so was war. And if she fell to pieces, Harkan would crumble even faster.

The Lord of Orline raised one hand.

The citizens packed into the plaza below chanted the words that constantly circled through Eliana's mind like carrion birds:

"Glory to the Empire. Glory to the Empire. Glory to the Empire."