Slipping Footholds

Part One

by

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to my inner child & all the stories we've loved, lived, and have yet to discover.

"We read fantasy to find the colors again, I think. To taste strong spices and hear the songs the sirens sang. There is something old and true in fantasy that speaks to something deep within us, to the child who dreamt that one day he would hunt the forests of the night, and feast beneath the hollow hills, and find a love to last forever..."

-George RR Martin

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ABSTRACT:

In the ages of old, the Kingdom of Labentis was once a realm tinged with the dusted scent of sorcery and broken apart by the unyielding steel of war. Now, enchantments have long been laid to rest and a dubious peace has settled over the three houses of the land. This calm begins to strain when the diseased, ailing king of House Kenworth can no longer sit the throne. The responsibility to rule is thrust upon his much younger sister, Eadlyn, who must navigate ghosts of her family's past, the loyal yet leering presence of her grandmother, and bigoted animosity from her council, all while desperately searching for allies and a cure for her beloved brother.

In the far south, where spices, silks and long lilting grasses flavor the seat of House Slade, Lord Ballard Slade makes a difficult decision whose effects ripple across the realm. As Harland Haywood, the witty, charming, enigmatical heir of the kingdom's harsh northern corner, travels south with a great host for an impending marriage, Dainya, Ara, and Enoch Slade's lives are uprooted. Dainya, a fierce, proud, and poised young woman, must come to terms with being overlooked as heir in favor of her younger brother, and she struggles to find the balance between duty and desire. Ara, a willful, wild young girl and a master of mischief and subterfuge, is forced from the shadows and childhood in a harsh reckoning she endeavors to combat. Her coming of age is fraught with unsettling discoveries and unexpected relationships as she attempts to cling to tales of lost lords, cursed covens, and dreaded dragons. Enoch, a lover of flowers and frivolities, is thrust into a role he never asked for and must learn what it means to hold power. The bonds of these siblings are tested when a dark, buried secret is unearthed, bringing to light a mysterious question: what if the magic never left?

Part One of a planned novel, this medieval fantasy work is a tale of tourneys and feasts, secret rendezvous and sinister plots, family loyalty and personal ambition, hidden powers and tests of will. It invokes legends of times long gone by as houses grasp at power in a kingdom where footholds are ever slipping.

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“The dreamer awakes

The shadow goes by

The tale I have told you

That tale is a lie.

But listen to me,

Bright maiden, proud youth,

The tale is a lie;

What it tells is the truth.”

-traditional folktale ending

CHAPTER 1:
the tournament of roses

ARA

Looking back, she should have known the golden ages were past. But she had only been a child, caught in her own web of naivete, in romping dreams and legends and fairy tales, blind to the fact that she was perched precariously on cracks that would rupture the realm.

They splintered and spread on a fateful day, the advent of the annual Tournament of Roses. It was customary once a year for the three houses of the Kingdom of Labentis to assemble for a jousting tournament, because nothing brought people together like watching knights travel from all across the realm to knock each other off their horses in giddily violent displays of blood and courage.

The tournament was held at Labentis's unofficial capital, Crescent Grove, which was home to the largest of the houses in the kingdom, the Kenworths. Being saddled in the verdant valleys between the Slades of the south and the Haywoods of the north, their position was perfectly poised to host all fit to travel, lords and lickspittles alike.

But the politics of lords and ladies was the furthest thing from Ara Slade's mind as she arrived with her family through the fabled gates of Crescent Grove. Even the brilliant limestone walls and sturdy round towers of the castle, where bright green and blue banners streamed, were lost on her.

Her predicament was simple: she was struggling to stay on her horse. Before making the long journey Ara had insisted on riding a mount like her father and older sister rather than staying in the wheeled coach with her mother and little brother. Looking at the stubborn jut of her jaw, her father merely shook his head in fond exasperation and acquiesced, on the condition she ride the entire way, no matter what.

At first, Ara had tried to cajole her sister, Dainya, into racing her along their ranks, but the stern, proud glance from the eldest Slade had quickly put a stop to that. Dainya was almost frighteningly similar to their mother, with a haughty, uptight air eclipsed only by affection for her father, Lord Ballard Slade.

Occasionally when they stopped to rest and eat the salted meat they had brought from their lands and the berries her father's foot soldiers had scavenged from the woods, Ara would steal away from their camp and climb a tree to try to see how much further they had to go. Besides the dirt winding road and the occasional wooden farm hut, they had been virtually surrounded by wilderness. But now, when they were here at last, she could not appreciate the splendor she had been so anxious to see.

Her back ached, her rear spasmed with pain, and the insides of her legs were chafing from sitting on her chestnut mare one hour too many. Just as she was trying to force her foot back into the worn leather stirrup, her horse came to a screeching halt with a startled whinny.

Ara hurriedly glanced up, and her cheeks reddened with embarrassment when she saw that the Slades had stopped in the castle courtyard, all but her. Instead, she had almost careened into one of her father's guards.

Wiping a drip of sweat from her forehead, Ara glanced sheepishly over at Dainya, who looked resplendent atop her midnight black stallion. She arched a brow in what must have been her sisterly form of admonishment and Ara turned away, muttering hotly under her breath.

Her father gracefully dismounted and went over to their covered wooden coach to escort her mother, Lady Jane Slade, down its rickety steps. Her parents were proudly adorned in light flowing silken robes, pigmented black and a deep purple, the colors of House Slade. As one, they stepped past the armored guards and knights who still remained on top of their mounts until they reached the front of the entourage. She

watched curiously, trying not to itch her dirt-streaked, mussed hair as her parents craned their necks upwards to three figures who stood on the battlements that surrounded the courtyard.

Ara looked up in wonderment. She had heard many a whisper of the red-haired rulers of House Kenworth, the wealthiest and most powerful of their three, a dynasty that had lasted generations. The first two were tall and fair skinned, indeed boasting shocks of hair that stood out from the tranquil blue sky like bursts of flame. But one leant on the other, seeming about to fall from the parapets. Ara worried her lip, half expecting a death before the tournament even began.

Their third companion ignored their predicament, holding herself with a semblance of old regality despite her stooped and wizened appearance. A long train of silvery hair flowed down her back like the mane of a unicorn.

Her father bowed politely. “I, Lord Ballard Slade, am honored to present our esteemed knights of House Slade for the Tournament of Roses.”

Back home in Knollwood, Ara had asked her sister why it was called such. Dainya told her it was tradition after each contest for the winner to grant his favor to one of the ladies in the crowd by presenting her with a rose. Ara had considered if she wanted any roses of her own, and decided that she would, but only if her knight was to be winner of the entire tourney. Then it would be almost as if she were on the field as well, clad in glittering armor, wind rushing through the gaps in her helm, lance pointed at the shield of her foe, winning victory after victory with unparalleled speed and skill.

Above, one of the Kenworths stepped forward and smiled down at her parents. It was the one who had been supporting the slipping, groping figure, a woman, with rounded cheeks and a long graceful neck. Her manner was easy, but Ara noticed her fingers remained clenched around her companion’s arm.

"King James Kenworth the Third welcomes you to Crescent Grove. May your knights ride honorably and their aim be true." Her voice was soft and melodic, almost soothing to listen to. Lord Slade gave her a solemn nod, and in a swish fabric she turned away and disappeared inside their fortress walls, still leading the other redheaded man. The tottering old woman gave the assemblage spread below one last sharp glance and followed. A guard clad in blue and green ushered them forward, and the Slades entered the castle of Crescent Grove.

~

That night, Ara couldn't sleep. She lay in an unfamiliar bed wrapped in wool, sheets heavier than the ones to which she was accustomed. In Knollwood, their airs were always warm, so she shivered slightly under the chill of their opened window.

After an agonizingly slow moment where the silence of the room was punctured by the rattling of armor and deep murmuring voices of the future combatants, she sat up, frustrated.

"Enoch, stop that," she snapped. "We'll have time enough to watch them tomorrow."

Her little brother turned from his perch at the sill, eyes wide and owl-like, his small, cherub face lit by the light of the pregnant moon. Unlike the rest of their family, who had dark eyes to match dark hair, Enoch's were stormcloud grey, and so large and penetrating Ara felt like he could sometimes read her thoughts. She wondered if he could sense her chagrin at having to share a room with him while Dainya got a whole chamber to herself.

"It's just too exciting," he yelped, bouncing towards her and landing on her bed with a soft thump. "One day I'm going to be a knight," he proclaimed, one little hand held to his forehead in an odd sort of salute.

Ara grinned. “Knights don’t do that, stupid. And besides, it would be much cooler to be a Pincharion.”

Pincharions were a secret order native only to the Slades. Unlike knights, who must be highborn, anyone could become one, even women, but it was a price of great sacrifice. Candidates were rigorously trained underground for several years before passing a final test: they must cut out the tongue of the Ashak, the realm’s most poisonous serpent, without being lethally bitten. After being inducted, they must forsake their former families and take the surname Pinchas, a tribute to the serpent they had killed. They were more assassins than knights, and their ways were one of great secrecy. But they were fiercely loyal, and several of her parents’ closest guards were Pincharions.

Ara found them fascinating, but Enoch merely scoffed. “Where’s the glory in that?” he complained with all the indolent naivety of boyhood.

Ara shrugged and shoved him off the bed, where he landed with an ungainly thud. He looked up at her reproachfully and she burst into a bark of laughter, before nimbly sliding out from under the bed and helping him up. When he was settling under his own covers, she fondly mussed his hair.

“Now go to sleep, little brother, before I tell everyone how our dear knight-in-training got beat by a girl.” She grinned as Enoch mumbled angrily to himself and drew up the covers over his face, turning away from her.

When his breathing had evened out, broken only by an occasional snuffle, Ara crossed silently over to the window and looked out. She saw why Enoch had been so enraptured; row upon row of tents lined the grassy fields outside the walls of the castle, so that the green of the grass was spotted with the blues of the Kenworths, reds of the Haywoods, and the purples of her own people, the Slades. Orange flames licked hungrily like dragon fire from torches and firepits, and the occasional chinks and clinks of armor being polished and tested could be heard over the restless rustling of tent flaps. She

glimpsed a man who she swore could've been half giant thud across the field and snarl a harsh order at a lean young boy who must have been his squire. The boy jumped to his feet and rushed off into the night.

Ara turned away and closed the curtains, flopping backwards onto her bed. As she stared up at the dark canopy her body thrummed with adrenaline, no longer able to deny her own anticipation. She wished on the morrow she could be astride her own chestnut mare, knocking men off their horses to the roar of the crowd.

If only I was given a chance to prove my mettle as men were, she thought feverishly, legs tangling in her sheets, desirous of liberty from their prison of fabric. Her temples throbbed; she could not find rest, or so she thought, for whilst pondering the tumultuous events of the tourney, it snuck over her in a silent, treacherous cloak…

In her dreams, they danced in the gloaming, under the hoary light of a gleaming, rising moon: a group of them, barefoot, elfish and goblin-like. Stamping, rhythmic feet on the forest floor, fire streaming from nostrils and wind seething through the lonely glen. Monstrous they were, but Ara felt a kinship to them, as if they were of her own self; she smiled and joined in their revels, pounding and howling, until–

"ARA, you're *LATE!* Half the lords are already at breakfast! I can't believe this…" Her sister's fist pounded on the door, before violently twisting the knob and storming into her room.

Dainya's angry face loomed over her, dark curly hair groomed to perfection and spiraling down her shoulders. She shook her, before leaning back and folding her arms. "Get up, sister!"

Arya blinked up at her groggily. "Imawake…" Beside her, Enoch's bed was empty. She glared at the ceiling. Her thoughtless fool of a brother had not even troubled to wake her.

Dainya was unmoved. “You best hurry, mother will be furious. Lady Eadlyn has personally requested to meet all of us, even if that means you too.” With that she spun on her heel and sauntered away, leaving Ara thoroughly vexed.

She pulled on a simple black gown a servant had laid out for her that dawn, grumbling to herself all the while. Completely neglecting her hair, even though she knew her mother would frown at her lack of neat braids, she half-ran out of her chambers and was partway down the first hallway before she realized she had no idea where she was going. Directions had never been her forte, and she had often gotten lost in the complex web of tunnels that lay underneath their castle at Knollwood.

She groaned. This morning, the morning of the tourney no less, could not have been off to a more frustrating start.

She was striding hesitantly down the brightly lit corridor, looking warily left and right, hoping she would somehow stumble upon the right room, when a pair of low, sonorous voices gave her pause. Small alcoves lined the limestone walls, and from one several feet in front of her she glimpsed a hearty, broad arm covered in chainmail. She crept closer.

In the dim enclosure stood two men adorned in red, their faces hidden in shadow. The broader, elder of the two reached up a heavy, sinewy hand and slapped the younger on the back, so hard the man stumbled forward, reaching out to brace himself.

“Remember what I told you,” the older one growled. “Whatever it takes. Understand?”

He smacked the other man again; it echoed, clanging, down the hall. Ara flinched.

The younger one, head a mess of golden curls, straightened and smiled–or rather, grimaced–uncertainly, shoulders shrinking away from his comrade. He bobbed his head up and down, avoiding the older man’s penetrating stare, and turned away, practically fleeing down the hall.

Ara stood rooted to the spot, unable to look away from the rough, heavy-featured man still lingering in the gloom…he glanced up and saw her. His eyes locked on hers, large and ireful, looming from the darkness, boding ill.

She hurriedly tripped back the way she had come, turning the corner and bumping smack into a heavy breastplate-covered chest. Thinking irrationally for a moment that the lurking, hulking figure from the alcove had caught her in his grasp, she looked up in dreaded fear, rubbing her sore shoulder…before stumbling back in pleased surprise.

Before her stood Noam Pinchas, the right-hand member of her father's guard and one of the most prominent members of the fabled secret organization of the Slades, the Pincharions. He was a muscular man of middle age, with a grizzled grey beard and kindly brown eyes that crinkled when he smiled.

He looked down at her all too knowingly. "You're late for the morning feast, child," he said in a deep rumbling tone, his voice lightly chiding.

Ara put her hands on her hips, recalcitrant. "I know, sir, truly, but…" she trailed off, not wanting to admit she was lost.

He chucked, gently steering her around to walk alongside him. "I'll show you the way."

"You won't be fighting in the tourney, will you, sir?" she mentioned curiously as they walked; she knew it was rare for the Pincharions to participate in the contests of knights.

Noam's face darkened ever so slightly.

"No, Lady Slade, I shall not. These knights merely play at war, which serves no purpose."

Ara blinked. She hated being referred to as a lady, for in her decade and a half of existence she had not once felt like one.

When they entered the throne room, a circular, cream-colored chamber generously supplied with grooved windows, tables were spread out in abundance and littered with delicious foods: sugared plums and honeyed cheese, birds dripping with juices and fish wrapped in mint leaves.

Ara's mouth began to water, and she parted with Noam to take her place between Enoch and Dainya. She grabbed whatever looked familiar to her and glanced around the room. Some knights stood, mingling about, but their shoulders were stiff with tension, awaiting the contest.

At the head of the table, places were reserved for the royalty of each house. The northerner's place was conspicuously empty, but Ara knew the Haywood heir was to compete; he was likely absorbed in preparations.

Close to her side, Ara's mother was smiling in her proper way and gesticulating appreciatively around her, deep in conversation with the red-haired lady who had welcomed them into the castle.

She must be the Lady Eadlyn Dainya was talking about, Ara thought to herself. *The woman who greeted them.*

Ara studied her. She was wearing a brilliant light-blue gown lined with gold lace, and her hair fell in auburn rivulets down her back. Her reputation as one of the most beautiful women in the realm was not misbegotten, but there was something disconcertingly sharp in her blue eyes, her gaze constantly assessing, observing ways to command her situation. Ara watched as she pacified her mother by gently patting her hands, tossing a stray lock of hair carelessly over her shoulder as she did so.

Next to them, her father was attempting to speak to the wizened old woman. She was dressed in a stately royal blue, and her gloved hands lay clasped tightly in her lap, her food uneaten. She was rather sharper-featured than Eadlyn, with a hawk-like face and harsh blue eyes. She seemed to think this whole affair beneath her, and only turned

her head to Lord Slade's entreaties in order to give occasional one-word answers. Ara narrowed her eyes, disliking how her father was being treated so discourteously.

Almost as if she couldn't resist explaining something to her that she didn't know, Dainya leaned over and whispered, "That's Dame Vena Kenworth, grandmother to the king."

Ara pointed to the sorrowful looking man sitting next to Dame Vena. He too had been on the battlements to greet them, though he had not spoken.

"And who is that, Lady Eadlyn's father?" she asked.

Dainya gave her an appraising look. "That's her *brother*. You know, *the king?* James the Third. Their parents had Eadlyn when they were fairly old, and the grandmother outlived them both."

Dainya eyed the old woman with mistrust. It was her way; her sister was naturally wary.

But Ara was still staring at the man beside Vena. She could tell he was much older than Lady Eadlyn, and may have once been handsome, but now his face was haggard. His red hair was graying, and bits of stubble lined his face as if he had forgotten what it was to shave. His green eyes looked as dull as his faded green raiment, and he stared vacantly ahead of him, seeing nothing. His plate too was untouched.

"What's wrong with him?" Ara whispered to Dainya. Her sister shrugged. "I overheard father tell mother he had some sort of disease. Your limbs stop working and soon you're like a statue and you can't move at all."

How sad, Ara thought, gazing at the man. *I would rather die than live like that, a barren husk, scooped out and hollow.*

She watched King James pick forlornly at his plate for a while longer, stopping only to offer a wearily vacuous smile to his little sister when she placed one of her hands

over his own. His head kept drooping over his chin, as if he were to drowse; he righted himself with an effort.

When her mother introduced them to the Kenworths, Lady Eadlyn bestowed on them a genial, liberal glance, Dame Vena pursed her lips in scrutiny, and King James did not even turn to acknowledge their presence.

Ara was glad no one spoke to her. She thus occupied herself by passing bits of food she didn't like under the table to Enoch, who took them gladly. She had thought she was being furtive, but when she glanced up she met Noam Pinchas's eyes across the room. His black armor glittered with emeralds befitting his order, and he stood to attention, one hand resting on the hilt of his longsword. He raised a brow at her, but his lips were stretched in a faint smile as he lay a finger over them, indicating that he would keep her secret. Ara grinned.

Soon thereafter, a trumpet sounded, signaling the end of the morning feast. Bypassing courtesy, Ara slid off her chair in eagerness and nearly ran out the door, Enoch close behind her. She pulled up her skirts and shouldered past the Kenworth guards, her footsteps echoing noisily on the tiled floor.

Outside, the castle walls were awash with morning sunlight, and the courtyard was bustling with harried movement. Merchants haggled with skinny little boys over toy soldiers and monsters; Enoch paused to ogle a painted dragon breathing fire before Ara impatiently pulled him along. They passed squires laden with spears and shields, young ladies giggling and whispering over their embroidered silks, and lords clustered together in a circle, boisterously betting on their favorites for victory.

"My gold's on Sir Harland, to be sure," a round-bellied, red-faced man proclaimed, sloshing his wine cup merrily.

"I'll take that bet," another thin-necked, long-nosed man replied. "The odds, and gods, if you believe in such things, are with Sir Carlon."

"Sir Carlon?" Another scoffed. "He's too *old*…"

Ara and Enoch weaved in and out of the crowd, a feat for which she was especially equipped considering her small stature and her past practice with eavesdropping on council meetings and filching food from the kitchens.

After Enoch turned nine, their father began to take him to attend House Slade's urgent meetings as his heir. Even Dainya was allowed if she wished, second in line after Enoch, but she often preferred to accompany her mother on horseback or practice archery in the square. Ara wasn't always particularly interested in the council meetings, but the fact that she was never once allowed in made her all the more eager to figure out all happenings. So, she tried to glean what she could by more subtle means.

Her shoes were completely muddied by the time they reached the tourney grounds, but Ara wasn't bothered. She took in the ovular field before her, neatly divided into two. It was smaller than she thought. All around stood elevated seats, covered by a cream canopy in case of rain. The place of most honor was in the middle, reserved for the Kenworths. The Slade section was to the left of their party, the Haywoods to the right. Triangular banners of the houses blew in streams, taken aloft by a light breeze.

Ara sat at the end of the first row on the left and watched as people streamed in, the bright, glittering colors of the lords mixing with the worn, earthen tones of the common folk. Soft hums of the lyres of bards mixed with the stamping of impatient horses. Her family filtered in beside her, her parents giving her quick smiles as if they could somehow taste her anticipation. When Dainya took her seat beside her, Ara was surprised to see a glint of excitement in her sister's eyes as well. Her plum purple gown sat magnificently on her shoulders, and from her ears dangled a pair of twined silver serpents. Ara wouldn't be surprised if she received many roses today.

Finally, the Kenworths were ushered in, their names proclaimed almost unnecessarily loudly by the town crier. King James was supported on both sides by his

grandmother and sister, who gripped his arm as he limped towards his seat. A crown sat crookedly on his bent head.

When they were seated, Lady Eadlyn rose and beamed out at the spectators. “In the name of King James Kenworth, let our tournament begin!”

Enoch looked up at Ara with a toothy beam, and clapped his hands raucously together. The crowd mirrored his mirth; shouts and cheers arose all across the stands.

The first pair of knights rode in, one atop a black stallion and the other a brown. The first’s garb was silver and red, indicating he was a member of House Haywood. When he lifted his helmet to bow to the king, Ara nearly gasped.

He was older than any knight she had ever seen, with snow-white hair and a neatly trimmed beard to match. His forehead was lined with wrinkles and pockmarked, but the set of his jaw was strong and his eyes seemed warm and alert as they looked upon the Kenworths.

“Sir Carlon Daune, at your service,” he said, his voice slightly tremulous but clear. Lady Eadlyn nodded in respectful acknowledgment, the pitying yet kindly smile she had bestowed upon her brother earlier gracing her features.

The other knight did the same, inclining his head. He was young and rather striking, with dark wavy hair that cascaded to his shoulders and bright green eyes. “Sir Rohan Middleton of House Kenworth rides in your honor, my king.”

Lady Eadlyn smiled and glanced at her brother for his reaction. King James nodded, gaining a slight amount of vigour.

Ara watched as the knights briefly acknowledged each other–both bowing in the customary show of respect–before riding to opposite ends of the field. Each grabbed a lance and shield and pulled down their helms over their eyes.

When they charged, Ara couldn't help herself, she leaned forward, watching transfixed as Sir Carlon's lance slammed into Sir Rohan's shield, knocking him off balance and unseating him from his mount in a splinter of wood.

The crowd roared its approval and Sir Carlon humbly acknowledged the praise.

The next pair was an auburn haired man by the name of Sir Oliver Lockmore versus one of their own, a relatively green young boy Ara had glimpsed occasionally sparring in the training yard at Knollwood. She knew the result before it was even over. Her *sister* was a better fighter than him; Ara had seen it with her own eyes.

Sir Oliver Lockmore, being of House Kenworth, bestowed his favor to Lady Eadlyn, holding out a rose and glancing to King James, who straightened slightly, shifting in his seat and swallowing as his sister accepted the gift courteously.

"He's one of the best knights in the realm," Dainya informed her as man and horse trotted back to the tents. Kenworth was famed for its fighting prowess, something the Slades couldn't say the same of. With most of the Pincharions electing not to participate, they put on a pretty poor showing. Ara's cheeks burned with indignation as purple shields were splinted, fallen, or cut in two throughout the melee of the day.

She had to admit that Noam had a point. It was all a show of spectacle, a display of bravado and talent, but there was something ferocious, almost sinister about the way these armored fists clashed without mercy, determined to capture their pocket of glory. It thrilled and unsettled her.

Then she remembered something her father had said, crouching down to her eye-level one shimmering summer night at Knollwood:

Sometimes it is best for our foes to be ignorant of our true capabilities.

"But the Haywoods and the Kenworths aren't our foes, are they?" she had asked.

"No," Lord Ballard admitted. "But they were once, and they can be again."

The thought sent a chill down her spine. Peace, she was quickly learning–as knights from each house viciously rode each other down–was precarious.

After winning several more victories, Sir Carlon's turn was at hand once again. All but he and one other had been eliminated; now they rode for the final victory.

His opponent was a tall man covered in golden-red armor, mounted on a pure white stallion. Ara noticed how the crowd's eyes followed him as he cantered over to present himself to the Kenworths. She had watched him ride beautifully, almost effortlessly throughout the day, but had never quite given him her full attention. Until now, as he deftly removed his helm.

His face was framed with golden curls, dark eyes keen and determined as he surveyed the nobles before him. He had a roman nose with a proud jut to his chin that indicated a certain kind of imperiousness of manner. He was the most singular knight Ara had ever seen, large in part due to the long, ugly red scar that ran from the top of his left eyebrow down to his upper lip, yet he seemed distantly familiar.

"Sir Harland Haywood, heir to Lord Samuel Haywood, at your service."

It came to her: *the young man from the alcove*.

He bowed, almost mockingly, to the king's sister first, then to the king.

Murmurs arose throughout the crowd. Ara glanced up at her father, who frowned, following the knight with his gaze.

Ara held her breath as the two charged at each other. Sir Carlon cried out as Harland's lance pierced his upper shoulder, and he slumped to the side of his horse, blood spurting from his wound as the stallion whinnied frantically.

Miraculously, Sir Carlon righted himself, and urgently beckoned his squire for another shield. At the other end of the field, Harland Haywood and his horse stood immobile and eerily quiet, waiting. A predator poised for the kill.

Ara glanced down the field at House Haywood's tent. At the frontmost stood a middle-aged lord of about fifty. With supremely broad shoulders, he had retained a shocking amount of muscle for so old a man. His large hands were adorned with bulky golden rings and a proud, thick crown to match. His arms were held rigidly at his sides, his frame tense and devoid of any semblance of languidness. He had straw colored hair infused with white and a flat featured countenance that seemed jagged somehow, like a carving irregularly chiseled from an unruly piece of wood.

He wore a steely expression of disapproval as he watched his son, and son he must be, for even Ara could see the resemblance, hold off his attack as he waited for the old knight to get his bearings. His callous demeanor struck Ara with its familiarity; he too had been hidden in the recess in which she had stumbled earlier. It was he who had pinned her with his ruthless glance.

Ara averted her gaze, almost scared to look at him for too long. Lord Samuel Haywood seemed a man not to be trifled with.

This time when they collided, Sir Carlon's spear lodged in Sir Harland's shield, twisting his arm so that the young knight seemed to grit his teeth in pain. Sir Carlon grabbed another lance and pressed his advantage, charging downfield towards Harland…who turned, gave a shout, and plunged his lance right into the belly of his foe's steed. The horse shuddered mightily and reared, falling sideways with Sir Carlon still mounted, so that the old knight's leg was crushed under the weight of the horse.

Ara gave a yell of fury at the unfair move, but was quickly drowned out by the howling jubilation of the Haywood crowd. The Kenworths sat rigid and tense; the Slades too were quiet, until a tentative tumult began to descend, congratulating the tourney winner. The palpable, fraught tension from moments before settled into a forced ease.

Ara's brows knit together. Where was the honor in this? Did a knight's creed mean nothing, was it cast aside as easily as a broken lance?

She could not pretend she was not disquieted. As long as she could remember a Kenworth knight had claimed victory, and while she welcomed a change, the manner in which had been achieved struck her as distinctly dishonest.

Sir Carlon Duane refused Harland's offer to continue the fight with steel and yielded, grimacing as the younger man helped him up, repeatedly glancing toward the tent where his father stood as he did so.

Both were greeted with deafening cheers, Sir Harland more than ever as he stepped forward, a champion ready to bestow his rose. He surveyed the ladies of the crowd almost lazily, taking his time. Ara's eyes widened when his gaze drifted to their purple tent and lingered there.

He locked eyes with her, and decidedly strided over. Ara folded her arms. She would not do it, she would not accept, even though he was the victor he had won without decency… but she needn't have worried, it was her sister he was aiming for, she could see that now. She glanced over and watched as Dainya came to the same conclusion, her brows shooting upward in stunned realization.

Sir Harland Haywood reached the platform where House Slade sat. Blood trickled down his hairline, which to Ara did nothing to improve his appearance. He knelt, and held out the rose to Dainya, lifting his gaze to hers. Dainya slowly, mechanically stood, reached down, and took the rose from his gloved hand, before quickly turning away and resuming her seat.

She gave him a brief, almost curt nod, as if she were displeased, but Ara knew better. Her sister only acted so aloof when she was truly flustered. The ghost of a smirk spread across Harland's features, as if he was welcoming yet another challenge.

And, Ara considered, as the knight made his way back to his father, who gave him a strong and firm pat on the back, likely he was.

CHAPTER 2:
the bartered bride

ARA

She could tell they were getting close to home when the breeze took on the heaviness of a drowsing eyelid, the air shimmering with heat. They had long left the damp twisting foliage behind, and Knollwood soon loomed ahead, the castle rising up from dry pea-green stalks of grass like a spiked black giant. It was roughly hewn, made from jagged, shiny black stone that had been mined from the earth by Ara's ancestors when they first moved here from the north to take refuge during the Great Civil War. A far cry from the splendor of Crescent Grove, but after the uncharacteristic, rather uneasy chaos of the tourney, to Ara it was a welcome sight. It was home.

They passed bedraggled merchants, shirtless and barefoot, selling light silks in shades of striking amethyst, magenta, plum, and orchid. The common people seemed to blend into the dirt of the ground as they skittered about like frightened mice, bowing, deferential, before the royal entourage. Ara frowned.

While she was weary from the long journey, she knew her father would not be. Lord Ballard Slade was a man who strictly observed a lord's duties. He leaned over from his steed and spoke softly to Dainya, who nodded in curt acknowledgment. They both dismounted and strode purposefully ahead into the castle. Ara followed, striking instead for the kitchens, where she hoped there would be good morsels to filch for her and Enoch.

The heat was even more intense there, as fumes from pots escaped in wisps like Spirits, and their double-chinned cook, Marla, waddled about crying orders to the others while wiping smears of sauce from her fingers onto her apron. Ara spied a braided roll of bread on the edge of the closest counter and darted forward while Marla was leaning over a stew, tasting it and making a squinted face of dissatisfaction. That made Ara glad

she wouldn't be eating in the hall tonight. Her long, deft fingers closed around the roll and she snatched it up, turned about, and dashed out of the kitchen. She passed by a vast, imposing portrait of sumptuous fruit directly opposite the steaming doors of the scullery and crept into the dark hall beyond.

It was evening. The castle was lit with torches, its inner walls bordering a courtyard full of lush flowers with a rich, sweet, and intoxicating fragrance. Ara could feel the heat of the day dissolving into a comfortable breeze. She ambled along, chomping on the roll, until she reached an imposing, heavy set of double doors with brass knockers. Stuffing the bread in her mouth, she wrapped her arms around a stone pillar to the left of the door, shimmying upwards until her hand grasped the ledge of a small platform. She swung one leg up, then the other, and crouched in a hidden pocket of wall.

In front of her was a small metal grate that she pried off with practiced hands. Ara pressed her face into the hole and looked into the throne room of the Slades. As she settled into her usual spot, a perfectly hidden, unobtrusive nook, she smiled to herself, an indulgent, crooked grin of satisfaction.

Below, her father sat at the head of the table surrounded by his advisors. Dainya was there too, seated on her father's right side. A fire crackled in the hearth, casting the room in a hazy, comforting glow, but the expression on Lord Slade's face was anything but. He rested folded hands on his chin, dark, sharp eyes surveying those assembled. He cleared his throat.

"Let us begin," he said in his soft voice. He frowned, forehead wrinkling. "But where is my son?"

The doors burst open, and a disgruntled maid rushed inside, towing Enoch in by the arm. "Apologies, my lord. He was in the gardens again." Frazzled, she shook her head and hurried from the room. Enoch stood with his dark curly hair strewn across his face,

his small nose pink and running down his plump cheeks. He stared impassively up at the council around him, gripping a handful of flowers he had ripped, root and stem, from their courtyard.

Ara looked on, making no attempt to stifle her bemusement. Sweet were these moments where she could observe all that unfolded, a silent watcher in the walls. It almost made her exclusion from council meetings diverting, yet the bitter taste of spite still lingered in her mouth as she perched, a bird with a birds eye view, determined to catch all happenings.

Lord Slade sighed, running a hand through his thin hair. “Heirs to houses do not mope about pulling weeds from the ground like fickle maidens. Come.”

Dainya moved down a seat to make room for her little brother to sit at her father’s right hand.

“How fared the tourney, my lord?” squat Lord Timble asked in his usual jovial tone.

“Our knights did as predicted.”

“So you mean to say they got a lance up the ass every time they took the field?”

Noam Pinchas chuckled at that, smile lines creasing his flat broad face. Lord Slade ignored them.

“My daughter received a rose from Harland Haywood,” he declared without preamble. Murmurs spread their wings and took flight down the table while Dainya stared down at her lap, expression inscrutable.

“This is no trivial matter. If you had seen what I had…the Kenworths are not the powerful house they once were. King James is, ahem, *sickly*.”

“*Diseased,* more like.” Someone cut in.

"Nonsense," Lord Slade replied crisply, but Ara knew he felt the truth of the man's words. "He has his little sister and grandmother to care for him, but no heirs to speak of, a fact noticed not only by I.

"Lord Haywood, well, you all know what the man is like…he eyes them like a vulture poised to feast on a dying corpse. I think he means for us to alliance, and I cannot refuse him. Making enemies with the Haywoods would be unwise."

"You think he means to move against the Kenworths?"

Lord Slade grimaced in his chair. "That I do not know, but Samuel Haywood will not let an opportunity to seize more power for his house slip idly by. He is as ferocious as the manticores that grace his banners. If you ask me, his is more lion or scorpion than man."

"What do you think he proposes?"

Her father glanced sidelong at Dainya for a moment before replying.

"Marriage. Between my firstborn and his. Harland's rose was a clear message." Ara watched as her sister clenched her hands together, knuckles going white.

Lord Ballard surveyed the room, searching the faces of his councilors. "What would you have me do?"

Several voices spoke up at once.

"We do not have the military power to oppose the Haywoods, if we refuse them, we risk a collapse of the peace."

"We *could,* if you let women serve as well–" Dainya turned earnestly to her father to entreat him, and in that moment Ara felt a rush of affection for her older sister. But her voice was drowned out.

"Our network of underground tunnels are sufficient protection against their strength–"

"What about our Pincharions? Surely with them they can be defeated–"

"We do the work of subterfuge and shadows, not open combat." Noam forcefully interjected.

Enoch stared at the brazier next to the table, his grey eyes over-large and elsewhere, likely imagining himself far away from this ridiculous facade of pomp and postulation, lying peacefully amidst blades of grass.

Her father's voice cut above them all. "*Enough*. I do not want it to come to war. We must placate the Haywoods, but we cannot not give in absolutely or we will risk being seen as nothing more than a bygone stronghold, halls haunted and tainted by the poisonous magic of our ancestors."

A shiver passed over the room, and it seemed to Ara that the torch lights flickered.

"My Lord, if I may…" A thin, greasy-haired man, Lord Kerys, if Ara recalled correctly, and it was as likely as not that she didn't, uttered in a reedy voice from the far end of the table.

"Speak."

"We could offer an *alternative* match. You have another daughter."

Ara's insides froze. She ground her teeth together, willing her father to put a stop to this notion immediately.

Lord Ballard Slade raised his brows. "*Ara?* I hardly think…"

"She has come into womanhood, my Lord, and as third in line, it is her responsibility to make a prudent match for the house." At this Enoch seemed to shake himself out of his stupor, staring at Lord Kerys as if seeing him from the end of some long tunnel.

"Samuel Haywood would never let his son be disgraced by anything less than the highest Lady of House Slade," another council member interjected, while Dainya's head whipped back and forth between the voices, her gaze sharp and exacting.

"She needn't marry Sir Harland. His squire, I believe, is Sir Carlon Duane's son…a boy by the name of Idran. A most suitable coupling."

Lord Slade rested a finger on his lips, seeming to consider this.

No, Ara pleaded, willing her to hear him. *Don't throw me away, father. I am worth more than a bartered bride.*

"I see wisdom in your words, Lord Kerys," he murmured finally. "She will not like it…but it seems it must be done."

Enoch shifted, making a half motion as if to rise, but thought better of it. He sunk back into his chair, knocking his flowers to the cold floor where they contorted as if in the throes of death. His face was twisted uncomfortably like melted wax. Ara found herself wondering if this boy, her very own little brother, would do the same if it was his head that held the crown…

"My Lord." Noam stood abruptly, dark eyes stormy. "Ara is but a child, not yet five and ten, while this Idran Duane is to be seven and twenty. And I have heard things about the man, queer things…" Ara held her breath, her fingers gripping the sides of the hole she peered through.

"Rumors all, I am sure." Lord Slade interrupted. "I know his father to be an honorable man."

"Fathers are not their sons, my lord."

The veins bulged in Noam's temples like a flood about to burst, but he kept his silence as Lord Slade got slowly to his feet. A small black circlet sat atop tufts of dark hair, and the shadows of the torches carved tunnels under his eyes, his long face sagging under the weight of rule. In that moment he longer looked like Ara's father, the man who used to let her run through the castle walls and climb to the top of the battlements with a mere goodnatured laugh. That man was gone, replaced by a Lord who was willing to send

her into the belly of the beast in hopes that this would somehow make the monster learn reason.

Monsters are just men in disguise, Ara thought bitterly, the colors of the hall beginning to blur together as she let her tears fall silently down to the dark stone, where they disappeared, unseen like the rest of her.

"We are done here," Lord Slade nodded wearily to his council, ruffled the top of Enoch's head, and stared ahead, blank and bleak, as the other men left without a word.

Ara felt as if she had been torn in two, her old self a mere wisp of wistful, childlike longing, illusions bursting with the boom of her father's declaration.

Below, Dainya stood abruptly and grabbed her father's arm, pulling him around to face her. "Ara will not want this, it is not in her nature." She crossed her arms. "If you would listen to my proposal about adding more soldiers, more *knights* even, then this wouldn't be necessary. I could oversee it myself, father."

Lord Slade frowned as he looked upon his eldest daughter, deep purple cloak engulfing his frame. "Adding female knights during our rule is a break of a thousand years of precedent. We have been over this, my daughter. The lords wouldn't have it, and I am inclined to keep with tradition. Do you know what the common people would say if ladies were able to become knights before their own young lads?"

"The Pincharions allow all to join them, father–"

"Which is why we have no need for it in our other forces."

Dainya's dark eyes flashed, her lovely face contorted in burning, helpless frustration. "You've seen me with a bow, father. I can fight better than half those puffed up squires, and *I* taught myself." She fidgeted with the edges of her silken purple sleeves.

"*Without my permission*. That is enough, Dainya. I'm trying to do what's best for our house. Can you not see that?" He looked on her wearily, almost pleadingly, but she

arched her brow in defiance, spun on her heel and marched from the room, her long braid swinging behind her like a scourge.

Ara wanted to go to her then, and was about to jump recklessly down from her nook when Noam's voice, deep and uncharacteristically quiet, stopped her short.

"Do you remember the nature of my last…mission?" At that Ara furrowed her brows in confusion and leaned forward, listening intently.

A pause, where her father rested a hand on the top of the nearest wooden chair and hunched over it like a broken chess piece.

"I do," Lord Slade replied, so softly his voice was barely audible.

Noam lowered his voice still further so that Ara had to strain to hear. "What you had me do to that poor lad…" He shook his head, unable to continue, while Ara's father gazed at him intently, stock still with folded arms, just like his daughter had been moments before.

"He used to deliver armor to us at our headquarters, at the Oscuro."

Lord Slade looked up ponderously. "You know why it was necessary," he said faintly. "The young man was organizing–*arming* a resistance group in the villages of the low towns. He was a threat."

"With respect," Noam began in a tone that suggested he felt anything but, "it didn't look that way to me. He wasn't strong…he–he made little fuss."

Gruesome images came to Ara's mind: the boy being crushed by Noam's large hands…or drowned in a horse's trough…somewhere inconspicuous…Noam's iron gloves forcing the boy's head under, his limbs kicking feebly like desperate dancing spider legs before lying still. Only he hadn't been the spider, but the fly. She felt sick.

"It doesn't matter what he looked like, for Spirit's sake. People don't gain power by simply *possessing* it, but by making others think they do. A mummer's farce, if you

will. Your Pincharion spies as well as my own reported back that he was gaining more fervor from the common folk everyday. Almost a cult."

"You once told me that you could always count on me to be honest with you," Noam persisted. "But I failed you, my Lord. Aye, it's true. I didn't tell you I thought it cruel then, so I'm telling you now. It's also why–"

"He was proposing an overthrow of our family, my own *blood*." Ballard's heightening disquiet made him stand erect. Ara closed her lids tight before opening them again to behold her father's fury. He did not often lose his temper, but she knew him to be as fierce as their raging sandstorms when the occasion arose.

Noam talked over him, his voice booming across the dark stone walls. "It's also why I cannot let you marry Ara to Idran. The man has a reputation for cruelty, I have heard whispers of him forcefully—"

"You cannot *LET* me?!" Lord Slade fumed, striding up to the captain of his guard. "You forget yourself, Noam. You are a Pincharion, bound in loyalty to House Slade."

The pair stared at each other in a moment of tense silence, the tension so thick Ara had half a mind to gag them with it.

Finally, Noam bowed his head, shaggy, greying hair bristling. "I would give my life's blood for your family, my lord. It is because of my loyalty I open this matter with you."

Lord Slade sighed, stepping backward and spreading his hands out in a gesture of placation. "I appreciate your honesty, as always. But what would you have me do? I have heard rumors even from the tightest lips that Samuel Haywood is looking to amass an army of manticores from their Forest of Grotesqueries."

"You would believe this, but not what they say of Idran Duane?"

Stupefied confusion took hold of Ara now, she wracked her brains for what Noam could mean, her tear tracks congealing and drying on her cheeks like oft trodden roads.

"They say he has caught one. That they have seen its unnatural body for themselves. It is proof, something you do not have. I cannot afford to be Haywood's enemy, yet we must retain a capability to negotiate rather than blindly accept terms like a man going to the gallows thinking he will be granted clemency. I cannot afford external threats as well as internal turmoil in Knollwood."

Noam shook his head. "You are making a mistake, my lord. Blindly selling your youngest daughter off like a lamb to slaughter?"

"Not blindly. Distrust is our currency, lest we crumble. We all must sacrifice; I will try to make Ara understand this. Already our power is slipping…" He spoke the last words as if to himself.

Ara clenched her jaw. *I am no lamb,* she thought stubbornly, her cheeks still puffy from when she had emptied her body of its shock and sorrow. *I must be the side of the coin that lands right side up, the torch that does not burn out. I must be strong*.

She watched helplessly as Noam gave the barest inclination of his head and stormed from the room, leaving her father alone with her and the shadows on the wall.

CHAPTER 3:
the price duty demands

DAINYA

Her footsteps crashed onto the cold stone tiles like thunderclaps, jolting the half sleeping guards to attention. Dim torchlight amplified the fiery glow in her eyes and her hair flicked back and forth like a whip ripe with wroth. For Dainya Slade's mood was stormy indeed.

She was tired of her father's shortsightedness in matters that to her, were inescapably clear. How could he be so blind to the startling ineptitude of his knights? Perhaps he was aware, but too cowardly and unwilling to change. He was the most stubbornly rule-abiding, pragmatic man she had ever known.

Her body felt coiled tight like a serpent poised to strike as she rounded a corner that would lead her up the winding staircase to her family's quarters. She had become adept at erasing traces of stress and fear from her face, but it still nestled inside her body like a living, breathing thing eating her from the inside out. She had felt the same kind of abstract, restricting terror take hold of her when Harland Haywood had reached out a gloved hand and bestowed his rose on her at the tourney, yet she had kept her countenance impassive, betraying nothing.

She did not even know what she had been afraid of. Her head had rushed and she had felt powerful as she gripped the rose tight. Its thorns had dug into her hand and made her bleed, so she had sucked the wound, her tongue running over her front teeth, feeling that familiar jagged groove where one had chipped many years ago.

Memories of her pain mingled with the taste of her own blood. *Maybe this wasn't fear at all, but something else.*

As she ascended the stairs, Dainya paused for a moment and pressed a hand to her stomach in an attempt to quell her unrest, her rings digging into the smooth purple silk of her gown.

"Are you well, my lady?" Dainya quickly removed her hand and straightened, turning purposefully, imperiously slowly to face her addressor. Her face eased slightly; a spot of color filled her cheeks.

"Noam." She said, "Did you make my father see sense?"

The burly man chuckled sardonically. "That seems to be evading him of late. Much like our spies…"

"You agree with me, about the knights, don't you?" She genuinely wanted to know what he thought. Ever since she was a girl he had always been kind to her, and she knew him to be an almost brutally honest man, despite the nature of his profession. Absently she fingered her silver serpentine earrings, on edge and strung out, but endeavoring valiantly for equanimity.

Noam rubbed a hand along his beard, looking down at her with a thoughtful expression. "The knights could benefit from people who actually have a code of honor, rather than a mere pretense of one. But in my experience, I'm not sure it would make much difference."

He paused for a moment, then put a firm hand on her shoulder, his eyes not unkind. "Dainya, even if your father would expand the ranks, I'm not sure they would be, ah…welcome among that lot. You want my coin's worth? Don't waste your time with it."

Dainya's shoulders stiffened, displeased. Regret seared her insides and it felt like a spear in the belly, but she respected Noam's counsel, knowing he had more experience with these matters. Likely he was right, she insisted to herself, she must abandon the ploy; better to operate properly, with her father's approval, than risk the disgrace that would come–and she knew it would–with disobedience.

Noam began to turn away from her and descend the worn stepstones. His voice faded as he spoke, but she still caught his words clear as crystal: “I’m proud, Lady Dainya. For you speaking without qualm what you believe in.” His dark cloak disappeared around the corner and one of her rare, upside-down smiles graced Dainya’s face, a secret one, just for her.

He and her father must be right–it would not be worth the strife. It would uproot the foundations of this very castle. She stared at the dark wall across from her, walls that protected her yet also wore her down. It was like staring her helplessness in the face. It disgusted her, rendered her incapable. Her poise, her control, it was all a facade. Maybe in time she could convince her father to relent, but for now, she must press on.

She had never forgotten the day that Enoch had been officially named heir; it burned as brightly in her memory as the sun on her mother’s hair. Her father had assembled all the noblemen and women to court in order to pronounce his son the next Lord of Knollwood.

Dainya had stood rigidly next to Ara, her hands clasped behind her back, her fingers worrying her cuticles, trying to burrow into her skin as if to seek refuge there. She was the eldest Slade, being passed over for a little boy who had no interest in council meetings or experience with responsibility. Even Ara had been subdued that day, and Dainya had caught her glancing sidelong at her more than once. She had felt connected to her sister then. They were like shadows, casted and casted aside, existence and strength dependent on their father’s light.

As Dainya neared her chamber, she tried to imagine Ara’s reaction to her proposed marriage. She would start with an outright outburst of refusal, throwing her skinny arms up to grip her unevenly-chopped dark hair. Then she’d lapse into stony silence, but that was something she could never abide for long, so she’d begin her argument campaign. Dainya often thought Ara approached words like men approached

battle, and she pictured her sister's dark eyes boring into her father's as she spoke, wearing him down war of attrition style. Once, Dainya had been convinced this would sway the ever-stubborn Lord Slade, for she knew he loved his daughters dearly. But now she saw that desperation had wrung him dry.

She understood the urgency of it all and the necessity of the match, but she was not sure her sister would see it that way. Sometimes she wished Ara would act more a lady and do her duty for once. Handling situations with grace was never quite her style, something Dainya had thought she would grow out of and soon became dismayed when she saw that she would not.

Why couldn't she see? Father may love them, but he would never consider their council if they could not cover themselves in decency. They were not Enoch, indulged despite having no concept of what it meant to hold unwavering, unfaltering allegiance.

The hallway in front of her was low-ceilinged and dark, much like the rest of the castle. A smattering of torches burned on the wall, and underneath her feet lay an intricately woven rug, covered in the color and history of their ancestors. The door to her parents' chamber was ajar, and she crept towards it, soundless as a Spirit on Hallow's Eve.

Her parent's room was spacious, ornately furnished with purple and black draperies. Their four poster bed was intricately carved from cedar wood and covered in silks slippery as dreams. Her father sat slumped in a chair, hands on his knees, head in his hands. Her mother was taking his crown gingerly from his head, and Dainya watched as she set it carefully aside where it perched precariously, discarded.

Lord Slade's heavy brow looked oddly elongated in the candlelight, which flickered as soft as his voice when he finally spoke.

"This marriage business with our daughter…" He glanced up at his wife, dark eyes searching hers. He looked both older and younger than his age in that moment, a burdened old man as unsure as a child.

Dainya's mother pursed her tight, thin lips and said nothing. Her small, round face was as elusive as the moon; Dainya would have given anything to know what she was thinking.

Her father curved into himself as Lady Slade squeezed his shoulders.

"Is it right?" He finally asked, meekly.

Jane Slade arched one of her finely shaped brows. "For our house or for the family?"

Ballard turned around to face her. "Are they not one and the same?"

Dainya's mother considered. "Ara must go north to Bridgewall, where she will reside far from home. But that is the kind of sacrifices Slades must make, if we are to live on. I think she will understand this."

Her father nodded in relief as his lady cupped the bottom of his face in her hand and tilted his head up to meet her gaze. "But," she continued, "she will not understand that some sacrifices are not chosen, like this that has been forced upon her. You must make her see."

Dainya watched as her father, Lord of Knollwood and the south, dipped his head and rested it on his wife's bosom. She crept away, pleased at her mother's prudence and frustrated at her father's fragility. She knew ruling was as hard and lonely as an island surrounded by raging waves, but she could not help her irritation. Her father was weak and easily swayed, constantly seeking reassurance and council.

She slipped into her room and sat perched on the end of her bed for one still moment.

Though they were surely by now in the darkest pit of night, Dainya called one of her servants to make her up a bath. The water was steaming hot, just as she liked it. She slowly rolled her neck in a circle and began to loosen the knots of her braid. When she dipped her head under the water, she felt for a moment like she could wash her worries away, the ones that covered her heart like grime.

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The days following flew past, unrelentingly quick like the clattering carts bumping and tilting on uneven cobblestones in their courtyard, pulled by harried stableboys and panting horses. Communication between the southern and northern houses commenced, decisions had been made, and a formal invitation had been issued to the Duanes for the approaching ceremony. No reply had yet been given, but frenzied preparations within Knollwood had already begun.

The common folk cluttered the halls, working doggedly, making it nearly impossible for Dainya to have a moment's peace. Their eyes followed her and her finery as she passed, and try as she might to ignore their probing looks, she still felt soiled by them. Their purple banners lay limp and feckless, as if waiting for a storm to arrive and give life to the labyrinth swirls that lay engraved upon its fabric.

It came. The Daunes, accompanied by an immense Haywood host, arrived with all the pomp and court that could be expected from so proud a house….and much earlier than expected.

Dainya worried her lip, knowing they were at present unprepared to properly receive so large an assembly, having been given no warning of their coming. She watched the procession from her chambers, where the chipped stained glass of the window distorted their shapes so that mounted soldiers looked like misshapen monsters.

She swiftly adorned herself in a gown dark as pitch with a plum purple train peeking out from two slits that began at her waist and opened at her feet. Her hair was

curled into a braided bun, and a silver serpent necklace fell across her breasts. Before leaving her chambers she inspected her appearance for traces of imperfection. She had her father's strong nose and her mother's round face, and her olive skin paired well with her attire. She looked older than her twenty years, which satisfied her.

She hurried to meet the Haywood escort, taking her place with the rest of her family next to the throne, a sleek, thick seat hewn from the same black rock that coated their castle. Directly to the right of her father, in the place of honor, was Ara. To her credit, she did not appear disgruntled or miserable, but held herself fiercely erect, her thin lips and sharp cheekbones accentuated by her slight pout.

Dainya had expected Ara's rebellion to be fierce and disruptive, but the almost statue-esque poise she was exhibiting gave a casual onlooker no hint of the protest her mind and spirit must be harranging against her frame. They would not be given that satisfaction.

Struck by her forbearance, Dainya wondered what Ara was thinking. Was this merely a guise to hide a later, desperate bid for freedom?

Her sister was dressed in a lilac gown laced with white, so thin Dainya could see her skinny form underneath. Her sister's big dark eyes staring directly ahead, waiting for the moment her intended would walk through the doors.

Lord Slade began to fidget in his chair as the moments passed. His robe was slightly rumpled; Dainya could tell he had been hurriedly dressed in order to meet their new arrivals, and was now growing irritated at the prolonged delay. Even Dainya herself felt unnaturally restless. Ara did not so much as flinch.

It felt like their waiting would never be at an end when their herald finally stepped into the room.

"Presenting Idran Duane of House Haywood, son of Sir Carlon Duane and squire to Sir Harland Haywood, the heir to Bridgewall!"

The figure that approached was a very short man with unkempt dark brown hair that circled his head as if he had tried to will it into a crown of his own. As he moved closer, Dainya saw a face with finely shaped nose and lips set in such a way he looked to be sneering, and eyes as hard and blue as ice. He was not an unpleasant sight; his features were arresting in an oddly vicious, unyielding way. As Idran Duane bowed rigidly to her father, Dainya saw patches of dark on his chin, as if he was trying to grow a beard and failing.

"You are very welcome here." Lord Slade respectfully inclined his head. "I admit we were not prepared for you to arrive so soon, but we thank you for your promptness."

Idran surveyed him piercingly, his movements odd and almost hawklike. "And is this my bride to be?" He sharply turned his head, leering at Ara.

Her sister met his gaze with a steel of her own. "It is. Honored."

Lady Jane Slade spoke up in her smoothly efficient way. "This is Ara of House Slade, second daughter to Lord Ballard Slade, ruler of Knollwood."

Idran waved a dismissive hand. "Yes, yes, what niceties. Would that I could stand here all day to listen to them…"

"We have been waiting long for you since seeing your host arrive, sir," Dainya cut in. "Did our overlong stalks of grass block your view? It would have been a pity if you had gotten lost."

Ara began to smirk and quietly disguised the motion with a cough so ridiculously dainty Dainya looked gown, grinning.

Idran made a move as if to strike forward, but a tall man to his left stepped deftly in front of him before he could act.

"House Haywood sincerely apologizes for any offense caused." His voice was honeyed and carelessly mirthful. He was dressed in bright, armored silver. Golden hair fell over tawny skin, and an ugly red scar ran down the left side of his face.

Stark realization flooded over her, and Dainya compulsively gripped the side of her hand where a rose's thorns had sliced her skin.

"It is an honor to be guests of House Slade," Harland Haywood continued. Dainya surmised had come with his squire to attend to the festivities, likely as a gesture of goodwill from his lord father, Samuel Haywood, who was conspicuously absent.

His eyes flickered over to her, dark and full of levity. She stared back, stony, unsure what to make of this heir to the north.

Idran bent to kiss Ara's hand, gripping it vicelike. A flicker of unease went through Dainya like a chill. Ara let him, her face bloodless, but Dainya suspected she wanted to bite his hand off with sinking, tearing teeth, to become one of the monsters from her tales.

The price duty demands is steep, she told herself as she watched her sister and her betrothed lead the procession out of the throne room.

CHAPTER 4:
feasts and filth

ARA

In the afternoon after the Haywoods' arrival, the castle was in an uproar as maids bustled about with linens and silks, guards marched in harried patrols down corridors, and cooks waddled about, barking orders and waving their wooden spoons as if hunting for someone to beat with them. Ara laughed and darted out of reach when Marla threatened to do her in with it if she caught her stealing from her stores one more time; it was one of the few moments of mirth she could grasp.

Tonight there was to be a feast, hastily thrown together to honor the wedding–she refused to call it *her* wedding because that would make her painful reality all the more clear. Her father had insisted it would be rude not to welcome their guests without some form of elaborate ceremony.

That fateful night, the one that had decided her still doom, Ara had curled up in her bed amidst the jaws of darkness and let her tears fall, using her scrawny arms to cover her head as sobs wrought from deep within wracked her body. She hated herself and her weakness in that moment, after she had promised herself she would be unbreakable. But more so she hated her father and the frivolous men gambling with her life as if it were nothing but a bargaining chip. She could feel the cracks forming within, but Ara Slade refused to shatter.

She did not give her father the satisfaction of seeing the dragon flames of fury and fear roiling inside when he came to her room the next day to deliver the news. He carried himself with such an exaggerated solemnity that she could have laughed in his face, gratingly harsh.

"Ara. My daughter…" his voice wobbled and strained as he spoke; he twisted his hands. She did not want to see his tremors, to witness the guilt in his eyes. *Can you*

imagine what I feel? she wanted to shout, all balled fists and broken nails chewed off in distress.

"I know," she had cut him off. "I will do it, father." Some deep part of her still wanted to make him proud, to prove she was worthy of his attention. *I can be as diligent as Dainya, as promising as Enoch,* she vowed to him then, silently. *You will regret giving me away.*

"You…do? But, how? You will do this for our house?" He was frazzled, dark, thick brows nearly disappearing into his hair.

She had nodded and he had gone to his knees before her, spreading his arms out and giving her a watery smile. She let herself bury her head in his shoulder, deluding herself briefly into thinking those arms were still her shelter.

Ara could tell he had been surprised at her lack of resistance, and maybe even a little concerned. She smiled wryly to herself. Lord Slade had not seen it fit to take her thoughts into consideration before choosing to cast her off, so she too would keep herself as mysterious as the labyrinth that served as their sigil.

She did not want to think too much about Idran himself, and she dreaded the moment when she would become his. Ara Duane was a person as foreign to her as the last name she carried, a person as removed from reality as the magicks that were said to linger in the mystical desert lands of the Whispering Shades.

She delayed rising for the feast; soon servants came bursting into her room like an unwelcome plague, urging her to wake and dress. She promptly dismissed them, wanting solitude. While this was far from precedent, special circumstances had arisen–the unexpected arrival of the northern house meant they had other, likely more important, chores to attend to. They left like a whirlwind forsaking a lonely lane.

So it was Ara Slade who slowly pulled silken black gloves over her thin fingers, who placed the string of obsidian circles across her head, who pulled on her shimmering

dark gown. A gown of mourning. She hesitated a moment before wrapping a heavy ruby necklace around her neck, her fingers fumbling with the clasp so thoroughly she nearly threw the wretched thing across the room before composing herself and persisting. It was the color of House Haywood, and she was obligated to wear it. The chain tugged heavily on her neck and Ara thought wryly of the noose in their square they used to hang traitors and rapists and thieves.

When she looked in the mirror, Ara Slade was a stranger. Her thin nose, long face, and eyes as dark and wide as caverns were ever the same, but the rest of her was almost striking, reminiscent of her elder sister's glow. Instead of feeling satisfied, she felt more loathing than ever; her face a painted mask of pretense hiding its real self.

Their gaping great hall was packed with more strangers, Ara observed as she walked slowly past the tables where grimy soldiers guffawed raucously. An old man with a snaggletooth spooned a lump of potato and flung it to the table across from his; Ara sprung to the side to avoid it and it crashed into the boiled face of a Haywood soldier with an ungainly plop. Ara grinned wickedly as she passed.

She took her place at the head table between her sister and Idran, both of which were already present and groomed impeccably. Ara was taken aback at the sleek fit of Idran's navy doublet and the neatness of his nails that tapped a jumbled, impatient rhythm that made her as on edge as a drunken man unable to gain his footing.

Her father stood and ushered for quiet, twinkling down at them all, preparing to usher his usual pleasantries.

"Be welcome, all! We are gathered here tonight to celebrate the arrival of House Haywood into our midst, the formidable, unrelenting power in the north!"

A bawdy clamor rose; red and silver men in chainmail shouted out and banged tankards of mead on the tables, their contents sloshing over rims and splashing onto the floor.

Lord Slade waved his hand downward, gesturing for silence. “Of course, we would not be here if it were not for a momentous occasion we have before us. I am pleased to announce that my youngest daughter, Ara Slade, will be wed to Idran Duane!”

More shouts; Harland Haywood slapped Idran hard on the back, grinning. Ara gripped her thighs under the table, fingers leaving indents, and hunched over, wishing she could tune him out.

But her father, clad in majestic raiment, spread his hands and continued. “As we begin preparations, you are welcome to stay in Knollwood and avail yourselves of our hospitality–(here he paused and gave a good natured chuckle)—I know the journey back north is long and tiresome indeed!”

Cries of hear, hear! resounded.

“A toast!” Lord Slade cried, raising his glass and looking genially at Ara, who pointedly turned her head in the other direction. “May their union join our houses together in peace and prosperity!”

Everyone stood and mimicked him, clinking glasses and raising them, froth-filled, to thirsty, waiting whiskers. A moment of quiet slurping ensued as they drank, in which Ara caught Idran turning to his father and murmuring, in that slimy way of his, “In the north, things would really be on time…”

She stared at her plate, hoping that if she examined its surface intently enough, she could conjure something for herself to eat, for she really was hungry. But that was stuff of stories, and she was depressingly without such power.

When dinner did arrive–scant for such a large party, it had clearly been scraped together in a rush–Ara gulped it down, not caring much about manners. Afterward, she spent a large part of the meal hoping Idran would keep quiet and let her be, but unfortunately he was the sort of man who liked to hear himself talk.

"And so I told them," he cried, leaning over to where Harland Haywood sat, pressing his face uncomfortably close to Ara's, "I told them: lads, why picture her head between your legs when it would look much prettier on a spike!"

He guffawed, tapping his fingers on the table and nearly upending his fork. Harland chuckled uncomfortably, glancing at Ara and her sister, before lapsing into uneasy silence.

Dainya forced herself to smile, but Ara could not. Her derision had disappeared and was replaced with a tightening of her chest that threatened to squeeze the breath from her. She dreaded this foreboding union, where her intended's obviously unstable nature would be wreaked upon her unchecked, a veil pulled back.

She resumed her distant, rather horrified observation of him; from Idran's profile Ara could see a small silver hoop glittering in his right ear. The other…the other was missing, a gaping pool of deformed skin.

"What happened to your ear?" She blurted, interrupting whatever drivel he continued to spout, a waterfall of useless verbiage. Dainya gave her a sharp look.

"Are you sure you'd like to know?" Idran drawled. He gave her a careless, dismissive glance, but the look in his cold, light eyes was one of deranged eagerness. Ara almost regretted the question, but was curious nevertheless.

"Very well, if you insist, I will tell it true. When I was a young boy, probably around your age by happenstance," –he broke off to poke her cheek, his finger leaving a gouge in her skin– "I went with several other lads to an…ah, rather choice establishment, where another and I quarreled over a, well… what it was is of no consequence. We drew steel, naturally, and the fight escalated until he" –here he made a sharp jabbing motion with his thumb– "he cut off my ear. The blood was monstrous, pooling like ink at my feet and (he paused for dramatic effect) I blacked out.

"Luckily the others, after being reprimanded by the head of the place and ejected, found me a healer adept at head wounds. Thank the Spirits, otherwise I might have perished, and sadly, would never be set to wed such a lovely thing as you." His grin was sharp, almost predatory, and Ara leaned away from him, unsettled.

"And that's it?" Dainya asked, turning his attention from Ara and arching an inquisitive brow.

Idran sat back and sighed, putting his hands behind his head so Ara could see the thick veins running through them like winding trails on a map.

"Regrettably," he began in a tone that suggested it was not regrettable at all, "that one had to pay the steel price for his insult. So, on a pitch dark night I crept from my quarters, taking the knife he had cut me with, which I had stolen from him several weeks earlier, mind you. It had to be the same blade you see, there's a certain poetic justice to that, you know. I went to him and I slit his throat."

Ara sat like a statue, petrified and riveted by his harrowing stare.

"Why?" Dainya asked, her voice strange.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Blood for blood."

"But you *killed* him. It's not the same," Ara insisted, ignoring the quelling look Dainya was giving her.

"You think the world operates with balanced scales?" Idran intoned, leaning over to face her. He smelled crisply clean, like dried leather and fresh air, yet somehow it disgusted her and she fought to keep her nose from wrinkling. *An ocean may ripple but it always settles smooth*.

"'We should do what we can to tip them in our favor, wouldn't you agree?"

Ara was silent. She wondered if he was right.

Why should she sit back and let the world wreak on her what it would? In her legends she had learned of the fates, three old crones that controlled the destiny of

everyone in the world. Heroes and knights had fought back against them, and much worse besides. Why couldn't she?

You are no knight. You never will be.

But I can be a hero, another voice, deep inside of her, echoed in response.

Suddenly, a lilting tune took to the air like a bird to flight, momentarily banishing her troubled thoughts. Ara looked down at the polished stone floor to see her mother closing her eyes and playing the flute, a little whittled thing made from bone. She had bought it during the Festival of Japes, a trading market held once a year in the green of summer across all three regions on the neutral, barren land bordering the realm of Labentis to the west called the Strip of Bleached Bone. It was one of Ara's favorite times of year.

Vendors came from even the most remote regions of the realm to sell their wares, boasting colorful silks, jewels, pearls, shells, daggers and swords, old books, and even magic, though they were always proven to be mere conjurer's tricks, to Ara's immense disappointment. Lurking on the fringes of Ara had always noticed mysterious hooded figures watching the proceedings so intently it was as if they had vision of the third eye. Her mother had purchased the instrument at the urging of her husband and Ara herself.

A burst of wistful nostalgia filled her as the music crescendoed; the memory reminded her of times long gone, much like the ages of old when magic still reigned.

Now Lady Jane's shapely figure was swaying in tune to the song her lips performed, the notes like a melodic cacophony of hooting owls. As a flower given to bloom, Ara was reminded of her mother's stately beauty anew as the music transformed her usual stern, implacable expression into something almost tender. Her father had paused his conversation with Harland Haywood and Sir Carlon Daune, the white-haired father to her betrothed, to gaze softly upon his wife. His face beamed and the corners of

his eyes wrinkled fondly as little Enoch ran to the floor to join his mother, grabbing her hands so that they swayed and stepped in a rosy circle.

Ara tried to smile, but it came to her face as more a grimace. It was hard not to think these were the last moments she would have with her family. Already this moment felt beyond her, lost to the relentless stream of time.

Several Slade soldiers took up a rowdy chorus, and soon after the rafters reverberated with deep, drunk voices of merriment and the loud stamping of feet as more rose and began to dance. Next to her, Idran did not offer his voice to the fray, but that did not stop him from being silent. After meticulously cutting his over-raw meat with fork and knife, he speared a morsel and shoved it in his mouth, chomping loudly. From her plate of greens, Dainya looked at him from the corner of her eye, frowning in distaste. It would almost have been funny if not for Idran leaning over and whispering, “It tastes better knowing you had to work for the kill. Helps you relish it.” A trickle of blood ran down his lips as he smirked at her, but he gingerly dabbed at his mouth until the cloth turned red and runny with juices.

Her father had moved amidst the crowd to converse genially with a tattered looking family sitting at one of the far tables, his dark crown glinting in the firelight. He looked a proper king then, engaged and attentive to his subjects, and Ara felt a rush of warmth for him. *He could be a good king or a good father,* she realized, *but he could not be both. Good men do not make great kings, nor kingdoms.*

Ara loved observing, the art of gathering information about others while she herself remained unknown and aloof. Her gaze hungrily ran through the room, drinking its fill. Along the table, Harland Haywood was deep in conversation with Sir Carlon Duane and a reedy man with a thin neck and protruding ears. With their identical flaxen hair, Ara guessed they must be related. Interested, she watched him as he bent to shake the white knight’s hand.

"I apologize for the manner in which I defeated you at the tournament, sir. It was not proper. Even my uncle says so," he said offhandedly, indicating the reedy man. Ara studied his face, trying to discern if he was genuine.

Sir Carlon brushed him off. "Not at all, my dear boy, not at all! No offense given, I'll just have to get a new horse is all…and you did offer to continue the fight, it was I who yielded. Getting soft in my old age," he chortled.

"Oh, but you fight brilliantly. I admire it, sir," Harland continued, gathering a cluster of nuts and berries in his hand and causally popping them into his mouth. His dark eyes, framed with almost unnaturally long lashes, were playful and light as he turned from Sir Carlon and his uncle and clapped one of his knights on his shoulder, cajoling him into a drinking game and slamming a tankard onto the table. Ara was startled at how natural and easy he looked, a great contrast to his rigid formality at the Tournament of Roses. He had insisted on wearing grey and white furs to the feast despite the warm weather, and though it made him look rather grand, Ara would have bet he was stifling. *Not even mountains can compare to the imperiousness of men.*

She watched Sir Carlon Daune excuse himself and approach them, looking kindly down at her and the son that slouched next to her. "My congratulations to both of you," he rasped in his rumbling baritone.

Idran waved that dismissive hand again, barely glancing at the older knight. "Save it for the wedding, father."

"Of course, of course. What think you of this merriment?"

"It *is* merry." Ara wondered if his father caught the irony. She felt a surge of tenderness for him; he seemed a man who had toiled to improve his lot in life, unlike his son. He reminded her a bit of Noam.

The white knight stood there, a bygone era of honor, and asked, "Perhaps a dance is fitting for the both of you? A good omen for the union?"

"I do not dance, father."

"Perhaps your future wife would…"

"She would not."

"It is considered proper etiquette, my dear son."

"What of it?" Idran's voice had a steely edge. Ara watched his face harden with a mix of amusement and trepidation.

"Only one turn about the room. It's harmless, my boy. It will show the Slades our gratitude."

"As I clearly articulated, my *dear* father, I do not participate in such things and–"

"Of course, I would gladly take the lady's hand." Sir Carlon smiled at Ara gently. "Only I fear I am too old for–"

"FATHER!" Idran erupted to his feet and banged a fist down upon the table. "I WILL NOT!" Several faces turned their way with identical expressions of alarm as Idran adjusted the leather belt around his waist and stormed from the room, muttering about going to groom his steed and knocking heavily into his father's shoulder as he did so, causing the old man to stumble. Dainya grabbed his arm to steady him.

"I don't think he'll ever love anyone except for that damned horse," Sir Carlon muttered under his breath, and reddened when he realized Ara had heard. Flustered, he gave a quick half-bow and did an awkward, pirouette-like spin to turn away from them to rejoin the banquet.

Beside her, Dainya stifled a snicker with her hand. Ara raised her brows and looked at her, wide-eyed. "Did you actually just laugh, sister? Now? Really?"

Dainya rolled her eyes, though her face was diverted. She pulled Ara away from the festive jumble of dancing limbs, the ornamental, hanging braided grasses adorned with flowers, and the merry crackle of the hearth. They walked purposefully across the great hall towards the dark maw of the leaving doors. "Let us go. I've had enough."

For once, Ara was in assent.

Hand in hand, the sisters crept through the maze-like corridors, their shadows distorted and humpbacked like an old crone's.

Ara let Dainya lead her along, a weariness heavy as a shroud settling in her bones. *I cannot escape this,* she thought. *But I cannot go on…* It tortured her, ravaged her, battered her, a humdrum of shuddering panic settled in her bones, a great contrast to the nearly eerie silence of the halls.

They crept through the castle without trouble until they rounded a corner; heavy, unsteady footsteps lurched towards them followed by a reverberating clanking of armor. Dainya pulled Ara flat against the cold stone wall, and they kept as quiet as possible, hardly daring to breathe. Ladies wandering the castle alone at night during a time of revelry was rather ill advised. Besides, tonight Ara had faced enough strange men to last her several lifetimes.

Two grubby Haywood soldiers came into view, one with a face as flat and emotionless as a plank and the other sloshing a cup of foul smelling liquid, slightly cross-eyed.

Ara glanced at Dainya, but her eyes were riveted to the pair of intruders, trying to riddle if they had spotted them. She tossed a strand of hair over her shoulder as if it had purposefully offended her, and Ara was reminded of another woman, the red-haired Lady Kenworth, who had done much the same.

"Can't believe we traveled all this way for *this."* Cross-eyes tipped his flagon and poured it out in a stream where it splattered onto the stone floor like piss.

"Aye, the meat and ale ain't much," the other replied. He slapped the obsidian wall beside him, making Dainya flinch. "But their castle is a right beauty. This stone ain't somethin I've ever laid eyes on in the north."

"True enough," said Cross-eyes. "But did you see their knights? A sorry lot."

"That's because any man worth his salt in these parts is a Pincharion."

Interest piqued, Ara squinted through the flickering darkness as if that would somehow make her hear them better.

"Any man…or woman." They chortled, before lapsing into a fit of wracking coughs. Ara watched in disgust.

"Don't let Noam Pinchas here ya say that," the other rejoined, still cackling. "Do ya know that's the whole reason he became one of em in the first place?"

"You're pullin my leg…"

"It's only rumor, that is. But I heard he used to be a fine ol knight until the Sir in charge a his training took em to a tavern one night after border patrol. Sir was talkin to the barmaid wench an doin a little more than talkin, if ya know what I mean. When he tried ta reach up her skirts ol Noam dragged him off and beat him with an inch of his life. Well, they kicked him out an he never went back."

"All tha trouble over some wench?" Cross-eyes wondered aloud in astonished bemusement.

"She probably wanted ta give it up anyway…" They clattered past Ara and her sister, bumping into walls as they laughed and wheezed until they were no more than muffled snorts echoing down the corridor, eerily distorted.

Ara was biting her lip and staring at the ground, their words lingering in her mind like cobwebs. Did they speak true? Could knights truly be capable of such depravity? But Noam…at least Noam had not let it stand. She felt a rush of pride for him that lingered as they crept to their quarters, neither speaking about what they had heard. That was their way now. Thoughts and secrets, strange and sharp like thorns, were instead left to fester, stabbing at their hearts.

CHAPTER 5:
the crooked king

EADLYN

The King could no longer sit on his throne. That single, irrefutable fact burned in Eadlyn's mind like a brand; she imagined it searing her a deep gash in her skin. She would take the pain, and more, if it could erase the sickly grey spots rising up over her brother's face, poisonous sores oozing ill and boding even iller.

Eadlyn knew her brother was stretching at the seams even during the Tournament of Roses, his legs locking up intermittently throughout the fighting until he had barely been able to stand to congratulate Harland Haywood on his grisly victory. But now, nearly a week past, his deterioration was evident even to the fools that entertained them at supper.

King James III had called council at the toll of noon, as was his custom. He always said he liked to deal with dark tidings while the light was out, and obediently, it had leaked into the chamber like ribbons of spilled milk, spooling into every crevice of their circular limestone walls and floors. Eadlyn and their grandmother Vena had sat amongst the rest as he shuffled in, faded green cloak and faded green eyes, his limbs sprawling out like an untidy scroll.

There had once been a time, when she was small, that he used to take her to court and balance her on his knee as he presided over Crescent Grove. Now Eadlyn wished she could go to him, guide him to his place, but she was not blind to the greedy, almost disdainful gleam in some of the Lord's eyes as they followed her brother's slowly painful progress. She had watched, feeling helpless and ill, as King James Kenworth reached the throne at the head of the table, shuffled his body in front of it, and had tried to bend his thin legs.

One had promptly snapped like dry driftwood, the other had refused to move at all, and the King, Eadlyn's dear brother, had toppled to the ground, a chess piece checkmated.

She had sat for a moment in stunned silence; she remembered her fiery hair curling around her chin before she had gripped it fiercely in her hands as if to rip it out. Abruptly she leapt to her feet, falling to her knees beside him, crying indistinguishably for help. Sir Oliver Lockmore, one of the King's most trusted knights, lunged towards him, and together they attempted to right him while the others looked on like mute puppets.

Now dusk had fallen in a crimson tidal wave of blood and Eadlyn was walking the corridors of their castle aimlessly, trying to piece together the upended board. She and James had often taken turns testing each other's prowess at chess, and her brother was one of the only ones who could beat her. Eadlyn remembered on one of the rare days when she won he had playfully knocked the players from the game with one pass of his arm. She had pretended to pout, but it had all been in jest. No longer.

Lady Eadlyn Kenworth often wandered the corridors, for sleep had never come easy to her, if at all. *The blissful angel of dreams once again has passed me by,* she thought resignedly as she walked, blue eyes peering through the darkness. It was her habit not to bring a torch; she liked the gloom of obscurity.

Lately she had been craving solitude, though she used to be a person who greatly enjoyed the company of others. She loved life at court once, the simple pleasantries of it all. She had basked in the titterings of the fellow ladies, and was often the first to ask another for their hand in a dance; now all she wanted was to stare out across the moonlit moat and muse, turning over memories in her mind like stones.

She remembered when her brother, though being twenty years her senior he had felt more like her father in those days, began first telling her about his affliction. Unlike

others, who tiptoed around the subject, James spoke of it openly, though not unabashedly.

She had gently touched the left side of his mouth, which drooped slightly, trying to put it back into place so it looked like the rest of him: vibrant, alert, striking even. He had laughed lightly, green eyes sparkling like grass with dew, slowly pulling her little hand down and covering it with his own.

"Why is your face tired?" she had asked, and he had chuckled good-naturedly. He told her that he had been born with something, a certain disease even the most trained healers couldn't cure, though not for lack of trying. When he was a baby, they had injected many slurping liquids that oozed like slugs into his tiny frame, to no avail. The result was a partially paralyzed mouth and an obvious lisp that had caused many an askance glance to be thrown his way like barbs. Eadlyn flared just thinking about it.

"And that's why I roll around my letters sometimes, sweet one," James had explained to her patiently, before she had known what a lisp was, before she had known that one day, this monstrous usurper of her brother's body would one day leave him unable to move. He had neglected to tell her that, and now she was almost angry with him.

She fingered the smooth silken fabric of her nightgown, trying to picture her brother when he was once strong. He had used to swing her up onto his shoulders, where she would giggle and demand to be carried through the halls like a queen. When his right hand turned still as stone he could no longer lift her. Instead, she had watched from their battlements, standing on tiptoe to see over the sandy walls, as King James sparred with Sir Lockmore, trying fruitlessly to gain fighting prowess with his non-sword arm. She would jump back in fright when her brother cursed and slammed his weapon down in frustration, and even sometimes would run down to try to cheer him with a joke or jest. Always in vain.

That had been when he still fought his deterioration. She knew it must have been painful for him to slowly, inevitably lose pieces of himself–no longer able to thread the still waters of the rivers he once loved to swim, no longer able to command like he had during the Battle of the Green Blades, not even able to recognize his once bright green eyes and full chestnut hair in the dull, washed out visage reflected back to him.

Eadlyn shook her head, wanting more than ever to seek the counsel of her sage grandmother Vena. She had witnessed the rise and fall of generations of Kenworths; her very birth a symbol of peace between houses when Kade Kenworth had married Laine Barrow in the alliance that had ended the Great Civil War. More than anyone, she knew what it took to outlast and outwit, the very personification of the fox engraved on their banners.

She nearly walked right into a golden breastplate, which started and grabbed her elbows with steady hands. She looked up into the face of Sir Lockmore, whose brown eyes studied her in confusion. He was a tall man nearing middle age with curly auburn hair and a beard to match. He stood at attention, vigilant in front of the door to her brother's chambers; somehow Eadlyn had been drawn to it despite setting out with no real destination in mind. She realized suddenly that she needed to see him, to speak with him, like a man dying of thirst needed water.

"You should be careful, Sir Lockmore. What if I were an assassin coming for my brother's head? They would have taken you completely by surprise." She smiled at him and winked, rather unsuccessfully, both her eyelids fluttering closed and open. For Spirits sake, she could never master that.

"I am ever thankful that you are not, Eadlyn," Sir Lockmore answered. He knew her well enough to get when she was merely quipping, though it had taken him many moons. He was a man who took everything completely seriously, which Eadlyn found strangely endearing. Oliver Lockmore was one of the few whose company she was able to

truly enjoy, even standing in her brother's presence had been dampened by the dim cloud of his condition.

"How is he?" she asked, watching as his face darkened.

"Much the same," the knight answered grimly. "The healers tried to give him medicine but he has refused all, as I thought he would. He doesn't like them fussing over him…" his voice dropped, though they were completely alone. "He seems resigned to the pain. It's his constant companion." As if on cue, an agonized moan sounded from within her brother's quarters. Sir Lockmore grimaced, as if he too was suffering the grievances of his king.

"I need to see him." She stared at the knight, intent.

"The king needs his rest…" Sir Lockmore began hesitantly, but relented when she began to attempt to bodily push past him. She twisted her emerald rings restlessly as she stepped inside, her blue gown out of place amidst the sickly green of the draperies and the stench.

Her brother's chambers smelled like sweat, sand, and something slightly more sinisterly pungent he lay on his bed, his broken leg elevated in a thin sling, arms thrown out at his sides. His breaths were heaving, his eyes half shut, but Eadlyn sensed he was awake. Sleep too was eluding him.

She sat down on his bed next to his prone form and grabbed his hand. "My dearest brother…" He fixed her with a deadened, glassy stare and after a few aching moments seemed to register her.

"Eadlyn…what hour is it?"

"Past dark. But I had to see you, after what happened. You wouldn't let us comfort you."

"Cannot…let you see me…like this…" Every word was an effort for him, the dragging of a rock uphill only for it to roll down again with a thundering crash.

"You cannot go on like this. It is too much for you to bear, brother. Let me help you, let me be by your side."

She knew she could help their house if he allowed her to act in his stead, yet she could not push the suggestion past her lips. It felt odd, uncomfortable even, almost like a usurpation, for her to tell the one who was her closest kin, the most powerful man in Crescent Grove, that she would take up his mantle, while here he sat, cast aside.

James Kenworth turned his head away from her, gasping and murmuring to himself. "I am slipping…cannot let this happen. Eady, cannot burden you…"

"I already am burdened!" she cried out. "Locking yourself away from me like some prisoner in a cell, a prison of your own making! It does not need to be this way, my brother, my *king*. You wound me with your distrust." Her fear and distress threatened to sink into her like the teeth of a beast, but she did not cry.

James gripped her hand with what little strength he possessed. "Never…wound…shield you…"

"I am not the child who used to perch on your lap at court. I am grown, and capable. With grandmother we are able to help you, and our house. People look to us, to *you,* with derision and scorn. I want to end their trifling grasps at power. I want to protect us."

Oh, if only he would suggest I take control! I would gladly accept.

"Let them…talk…"

Eadlyn gazed with a distant kind of horror at the man she had loved since she was an infant, the man who had practically raised her. He would wallow in his cocoon until it suffocated him. She had to make him understand.

"James, you have no heir. Who will carry the Kenworth name and throne when–" she could not say it, now more than ever. Death itself seemed to linger in the room, eavesdropping, a wicked phantom growing ever more real.

"How can I–" Again she faltered, her voice breaking. *How can I go on without you?*

But the king seemed unable to say anything more. His stringy hair, now more grey than red, was damp with perspiration, and his mouth was half open, a gaping contortion of woe. Eadlyn slowly slipped her hand from his and rose, that thin film of sadness filling her lids and threatening to spill over.

She had come to comfort him, to be the crutch he could lean on as he had during the latest stage of his disease, yet she recognized that she also needed his solace to lean on herself. She had wanted him to reassure her, but this visit had made painfully clear that he could not, and it slowly sunk in, dully, that she was past his protection.

She glanced back as she gently shut the door behind her, and the sight of him was somehow worse from afar. It made her feel lost. She didn't know how to help him; he could not help her. They were the most powerful house in the realm of Labentis, and they were tearing apart at the seams, a papery legacy stretched too thin.

She was about to wave away Sir Lockmore and depart back the way she came, but he fell in step beside her, dutiful. Another guard, one he must have summoned while she was within, took his place outside her brother's door. As they walked his silence was oddly insistent, and she sensed he was waiting for her to speak. She knew they were both thinking of the same person.

"I am afraid for him." It was all she could say. His head dipped in acknowledgement, striding ahead with his hands behind his back. He opened the door to her chambers for her and ushered her inside.

"As am I."

CHAPTER 6:
bloodlines of rage

DAINYA

The midafternoon sun was hot and orange, burning like an ill omen. The air was as suffocating as it was warm, but Dainya basked in the feel of sweat trickling down her neck and between her fingers as she gripped her bow, pulling the string taut and squinting down the shaft of her arrow, prepared to loose. The training field was crowded with knights and squires alike, and the added presence of the northerners made the atmosphere a thick pot of stew full to bursting.

Dainya spotted flashes of golden hair across the expanse of thin dirt where Harland Haywood was sparring with Idran Daune. The pair was clad in armor the color of dried blood, and Harland was shouting out instructions to his partner as they swiped and thrusted, hacked and parried. He moved with a fluid grace, equally lethal and languid, so that the clashes of their blades seemed more akin to a dance than a fight. Idran was puffing to keep up, his eyes cold yet wild, like ice beginning to crack.

Their presence made her more determined than ever, but instead of driving her, this desire disquieted her. While she willed herself to be as calm and steady, a river without ripple, her stance nevertheless became a little more rigid, her hands clumsy as if they were moving in slow motion. When she loosed her arrow, it whistled through the air and landed with a dull thud on the bottom right corner of the circular target. *Spirits take me*. She groaned inwardly.

Another whistle sounded behind her, and she whirled, irrationally thinking an arrow was about to make its mark in her flesh, but it was just a knight, staring at her with a twisted, mocking expression on his face. He was thin, with a weak pouty chin and fair hair, the manticore of House Haywood marking his gauntlet, in which he gripped a bow of his own. *One of theirs*. She didn't know whether to be relieved or irritated.

Most men of House Slade knew not to bother the daughter of their lord, but occasionally she had borne the brunt of snide remarks, some whispered and some not. She had willed their blows into becoming idle glances off her own armor, not the kind she could not wear but the kind she kept within. It made no matter to her, *honestly*. And more importantly, most knew to leave it at that. She could endure their scorn, stoic and silent, and this often put them off, leaving her free to observe their stances and techniques in order to implement them into her own regimen.

And what a regimen it was! While Ara had a fighting spirit, she had not the discipline, and remained content to alleviate her energy in bursts, in secret, furtive, dark corners. Dainya, meanwhile, *she* held herself proudly; sometimes she would say to herself, *I am the only woman who dares*. The thought made her smile.

But now she had a more pressing concern: the fact that these ever-encroaching knights of House Haywood were not aware of, or cared to follow, the same courtesies those native to Knollwood did.

“Dainya Slade, lady of missed targets!” The weak-chinned knight who had accosted her performed an exaggerated curtsy, splaying out his arms where his silver armor glittered in a sardonic smile.

Dainya rolled her eyes and turned away to pull another arrow from her quiver, but when she notched it into place he was there in her peripheral, folding his arms gleefully and nudging the other knights around him so more and more plumes and helms turned her way.

It was out of the question to leave and admit defeat. *You are the tree that never sways. Stand your ground, dig in your roots, plant your feet,* she told herself. Her fingers gripped her bow, a beautiful lithe thing made from red oak, picked out specially during the Festival of Japes. She honed in on the little black circle at the center of the target like it was the only pinprick of hope in the world and inhaled. Exhaled.

A startled neigh erupted behind her and in a panic she released her arrow too early–it flew upwards and embedded itself into the bark of a nearby tree. Laughter exploded around her but this time she paid no mind; in swift steps she crossed to the terrified, bucking horse that had just been slashed across the hind. It had been dragged abruptly from the stables that abutted the training grounds to her right and was now surrounded by armor and steel.

"*What is the meaning of this?"* she yelled, marching up to the knight who still held the offending sword tightly in his hand.

He guffawed slightly nervously and looked to the weak-chinned knight, who shrugged.

"Distract you. Easily done. Would expect nothing less of you southern women."

"By *mutilating a horse?"* She had never been so furious.

"We barely scratched it–"

"Had to make it squeal somehow–"

"What, afraid of a little blood?"

Dainya charged towards the reins gripped in Weak Chin's steel fist, but just as she was about to rip them from his grasp, he pulled them out of her reach and shoved her backwards–too hard. She lost her footing and landed in the mud with a sickeningly humiliating squelch. Weak Chin's eyes widened and the other knights went quiet as she lay sprawled before them, so achingly exposed that angry, hurt tears sprang to her eyes.

"Is that a way to treat a lady, Filand?" His voice tsked in chastisement as he sauntered forward and gently helped Dainya to her feet. One more she felt the pressure of his gloved hand in hers.

"We wouldn't want to be ungracious guests, now would we?" Harland Haywood's tone was light but his expression was not; his lip curled and expression curdled, scar burning red as blood.

Dainya turned away from them and was about to walk diagonally back to the archery targets when a small shape darted from the shaded archway of the stables. In a flash, it ran past the gathered Haywood knights, leapt towards Filand, and snatched a little, bronze-hilted knife from his belt.

It turned its face toward Dainya in with a ruthless grin of amusement and she gasped. *Ara*. She watched in astonishment as her sister bounded past them all, turning and jogging backwards to yell, “Would expect nothing less of you northern nitwits!” Her short dark hair cut across her shoulders as she disappeared back into the depths of the castle.

Dainya let herself snigger; somehow Ara always managed to surprise her.

Filand, however, was not laughing, he had been humiliated. In a flash he drew his sword and pointed it at her. “I demand that demon sister of yours return what is rightfully mine!” He exclaimed, more pouty than ever. She raised her brows at him.

“And now you would threaten her with steel?” Harland stepped between them, his voice the edge of a newly sharpened sword.

“I would remind you that her sister is to be my squire’s bride.” He glanced over his shoulder at Idran, who had taken up Dainya’s fallen bow and was busy shooting; three arrows already fighting for dominance in that black inner circle like squabbling crows. Dainya eyed him in disgust.

“What of it? I was raised to believe that one answers for his crimes.”

Harland’s hand crept towards his own sheathed blade. “That was hardly a crime.”

“She stole from me.” The other knights slowly dispersed around them with disgruntled mutters, until only Dainya, Harland, and Filand were left. The sporadic plunks from Idran’s bow did nothing to cut the tension.

She found her voice. “I will have you know that harming that horse is tantamount to the destruction of Slade property. My sister only did you back in kind.”

Filand lunged towards them, his sword swinging in a lethal arc, but before Dainya could react, she was pushed aside by Harland and his sword rose up to block the strike. Steel clashed on steel and a fight began in earnest.

They circled each other in a little dirt rut between the training grounds and the stables; the conflict cut Dainya off from the poor, wounded steed. When Harland had pushed her, she had fallen once more, landing hard on her hindquarters and using her legs to scoot backwards out of harm's way. Now she found her feet once more and began to study their fighting styles with interest.

Filand was all quick jabs and stabs, constantly darting out of Harland's way with an agitated energy; his opponent, meanwhile, fought in wide arcs and slashes that looked almost too ornate to be effective. Yet as Dainya watched the duel unfold, Harland was clearly the more disciplined fighter, each stroke landed with cool precision as he slowly drove Filand back towards the stables.

He stumbled, and Harland placed the point of his sword against that weak chin and chuckled. Filand made a noise in the back of his throat almost like a growl and kicked out his foot, ripping Harland's legs from under him. Their swords tumbled out of their reach and the pair began to grapple in the dirt.

Dainya wrinkled her nose in distaste, but in spite of herself, she could not look away. She watched in fascination as Harland wrapped his arms around Filand's torso, grunting. He used the force of his momentum to gain the upper hand, long legs planted, the muscles in his arms straining… *Use your leverage,* Dainya thought, filing it away. *Useful.*

She tore her eyes from them, frightened by her reaction, and spun to Idran. But he was merely twirling an arrow in his hands and watching the tangle of limbs and lost dignity with an eager sort of satisfaction.

The bleeding horse whinnied again, rearing up, hooves pawing the air.

In a burst of desperate inspiration, she charged towards the mare. *This will work,* she silently hoped.

She put a tender hand against the side of the horse's face. "Shhh, girl." Then she deftly swung up her legs in a practiced arc and mounted the horse like she had done a thousand times before. She kicked her legs against the steed's sides and charged towards the two knights, who heard the thundering hooves and sprang apart from one another, stumbling out of the way as she raced through, kicking up clouds of dust. She exhaled a sigh of relief and grabbed the horse's mane, gently tugging and bringing her flank around so Dainya faced them.

Both were bruised and dirtstreaked. Filand had a nasty slash down his neck while Harland was bleeding from a vicious cut across his cheek, mingling with his scar so he looked crossed in a bloodline of rage. He was staring up at her in a kind of glassy astonishment, like he just got hit over the head with a club. She relished in his gaping stare, surmising it was no small feat to render the Haywood heir truly speechless.

"That is *enough,"* she said as firm as she was able, reminding herself of her chastising mother. She leveled them with a gaze as severe and harsh as their winters, pleased to have reasserted herself after her earlier mortification.

"The next time the like of this occurs, you will be banished from our training grounds. You are lucky it's not from our entire castle." Technically she didn't have such authority, that power resided with her father, but the less they knew couldn't hurt them.

She left them there, coaxing the horse into a trot back to the stables.

She discovered the steed was a mare by the name of Weatherchaser after questioning the stable boy. He replied in a tight-lipped, almost frightened manner; she sent him brusquely away to obtain bandages for the animal's wound. He was so different from their previous servant, she thought with a slight pang in her chest.

She was stroking the sides of Weatherchaser's face in an attempt to soothe her trembling when the boy returned, pressing a wet rag and dry cloth into her hands. She nodded in thanks, dismissing him, and he scampered off.

Dainya sighed, trying to force the tension from her shoulders by rolling them backwards as fluidly as men row oars. As she wiped the blood from the horse like servants scrub the stain from a dress, she reminisced about the feel of the animal's straining muscles under her legs as she mounted and rode through the Haywood knights.

There was nothing Dainya loved more than being astride a horse, cantering through grasses or long-forgotten village roads with nothing but the rays of the sun on her face, the people milling about below her like scuttling beetles making her feel blissfully powerful. If only it could be her commanding troops, viewing the battle atop of a distant hill like most leaders do before swooping in to claim victory. She would assuredly prove her worth then, and would not have to resort to unleashing arrows in the grubby training yard while enduring poorly thought insults.

So preoccupied was she that she failed to notice the shadow that crossed over the stable entrance and stepped cautiously inside.

"Quite a show, *my lady."* Harland spoke her title with an exaggerated sarcasm like it begrudged him just to say it. Dainya jumped up, startled and irate at being disturbed. He was nothing if not persistent, she would give him that.

"I thought you would trample us underfoot with that beast."

"You are lucky I did not." In truth she had never intended to injure them, merely to break up the fight. Her skills on horseback were developed enough she knew she could have swerved away if they had not the presence of mind to do so first.

She made no move towards him, but watched warily as he approached her, all urgency drained from his frame, fleeing like thieves in the night.

The lighting of the stable was dim, all dark oak and stuffy-smelling hay, so she could not read his expression. He might have been smiling or scowling. All she could make out was that bleeding cross on his face.

"I was defending you, Lady Slade. Surely you know this…?"

"Do you know how often I have been insulted by poncey knights who think they are better than I?"

"And that does not bother you?" He stepped forward and placed a veined hand upon Weatherchaser's flank. A beam of light caught his dark eyes as he regarded her, curious.

She turned away. "No."

He craned his neck around so he found her gaze; she was caught in its trap, feeling uncomfortably laid bare.

"But it wounds the pride, perhaps." He put a finger to his chin and smiled. "You strike me as one not to let a slight pass unchallenged."

She lifted her chin. "And why should I?"

"I never said you should not. But you did not answer my knight's barbs with one of your own…you let me cut in." He twisted his mouth and raised his brows in a patronizing way that roused Dainya's temper.

She shoved at him. "You escalated the situation! What would our fathers have said if one of your soldiers was dead on my watch, by your hand?"

His eyes darkened as he gripped her wrists, pulling her hands away from his chest. "I should be less worried about some petty training squabble and more for your own sister."

Dainya pulled back and eyed him suspiciously. "How do you mean?"

"I know what Idran is. Did you see him just now?"

She nodded. "He saw you both fighting and did not seem to care. It was…odd."

"Violence is not the same to him as it is to others. He thinks of it as a tool, or a game to put at his disposal."

"Most knights think this way," she insisted, thinking back to the tourney. But Harland shook his head.

"You don't really understand. Idran was born with pain, and it's been a closer companion to him than even I. As a child he'd get struck with fits where his limbs would shake and he'd cry out." Harland glanced backwards towards the entrance of the stables where Idran had skulked and maybe did still.

Dainya didn't know what to think. Was he speaking true, or merely trying to frighten her?

He turned back towards her and lowered his voice, though they were alone with the dry air and swishing of horse's tails. "Whenever I tried to help him, he would strike me in a bout of fury. I thought he would grow out of it, as he did with the fits, but I was, well, *sadly* mistaken."

"Speak plainly," she told him, weary of his riddled speech.

Harland raised a brow and grinned. "Impatient, are we? Well, if you insist, I will continue. There is not much more to tell. Many a time I have seen him in our lower towns during the few moments we are not together, astride his beloved mount and brandishing his whip at poor passersby. Once I saw its rope crack around the neck of a child, dragging him to the ground and leaving a sweltering welt across his neck. He wouldn't have cared if the boy perished…it was fun for him."

Dainya put a hand over her mouth and tried to make sense of what he was telling her.

Harland leaned closer and whispered, "Beware a man who treats violence like a game. He will never know when the jig is up."

He rocked back on his heels and straightened up, turning and ambling away from her with a lightness in his gait like nothing had happened.

What was behind this warning? Did he harbor some kind of moral code behind those annoyingly cloy smirks after all? Was he merely trying to make Idran look bad in her eyes?

She huffed. Why go through the trouble? *Idran had done that plenty himself.*

"Why did you come here and tell me this? Why defend me?" she yelled to his retreating back. *Is he expecting me to thank him?* she thought derisively. He would be sadly disappointed.

Harland paused and looked over his shoulder at her, sweaty curls plastered to his mired face. "I had to protect the one who received my rose, did I not?" Dainya laughed in snide exasperation, flushing.

"As to why I am here, what a rude question to ask your honored guest!" He gasped in fake indignation, pressing his gauntlet to his armored chest before lowering it.

Dainya glared. He was ever disingenuous, always making light, a boy who cried for wolves. She could not trust him.

"In truth, I came as a courtesy your house deserves. But I also came to keep him in line, at least until the union is settled. Then, I fear I can do no more."

Before she could reply, his rose red armor had melted back into the sun, leaving no trace except faint drips of blood that had fallen from his cheek to the dusty floor.

Dainya dried Weatherchaser's now clean wound, disquieted. She usually could read people well, but Harland Haywood was infuriatingly opaque. She could see the honor in his actions and supposed she could appreciate the notion, but his defense of her seemed to have done more harm than good. She shook her head. Knights have no subtlety about them. Yet Halrand was not only a knight, but an heir, and what he said of Idran Daune seemed too malignant to be borne.

How could she condemn Ara to such a match? To be sure, Harland's tongue could be speaking forked words…

She threw the cloth to the ground in frustration. She just could not be sure.

~

That night, when the castle slept in a fog of darkened nightmares, Dainya crept from her chambers to seek her sister. Truth or no, what Harland had intimated about Idran lingered in the back of her mind like a stubborn, bristling prick of thorns.

She found Ara still awake, fingering the stolen dagger, taking it from her side and whipping it out in front of her in rapid bursts, its small, sharpened hilt reflecting bits of moonlight. She was still in her clothes from earlier, the grime of the day clinging to her like a hard kept secret.

Dainya creaked open the door further and stepped inside.

"Go away," Ara said immediately, half-glancing up. "It's past your bedti–" her eyes widened and she broke off.

Her sister glanced back down at the knife, twisting it in her hand. "Thought you were Enoch," she mumbled.

Dainya sat next to her on her bed and pulled the weapon from Ara's hands. "Will you return this?"

Ara eyed her peevishly and snatched it back. "No. I earned it, fair and square."

Dainya held up her hands in surrender, sensing she had already misstepped. "I didn't ask you to."

Ara threw the dagger aside where it landed next to her pillow. Her room was small and cluttered yet surprisingly orderly. Her bed was small, with laced white sheets Ara loved to kick off during the night, on her shelves were rows of multicolored rocks she had swiped from their streams, and next to those a small wooden box with a pearl clasp. On top was a knight carved from onyx brandishing a sword.

In the corner lay a stack of books she had likely stolen from the castle library and stashed here for her own purposes. Dainya squinted to read the spines: *Secrets are Sources of Power: Exploring the Pincharions; The Witching Hour, Spirits, & the Origins of Hallows Eve; A History of Magic in Labentis; Tales of the Trifecta: A Magical Order*…she could read no more. Her sister's immersion in legends and fairy tales had long been a source of chagrin for her, yet she could do nothing to stop these fantasies. The Slades were nothing if not stubborn.

"So if you didn't come to admonish me, why are you here?" Ara squinted up at her, hands on hips.

Dainya took a breath. "To…talk to you."

"Talk to me." Her sister's voice was flat and incredulous.

"How are you feeling? With, with everything?"

"Don't pretend you care." Ara scoffed and flung herself backwards so she lay on the beg with her legs dangling off.

"You're making a great sacrifice to help our house. That takes–"

"Don't you start," Ara snarled, surprisingly venomous. She sat up viciously fast. "Not a single person has even considered how this would make me feel. It's all about *duty,* and sacrifice for a greater good, and frankly, I do not see what good it's doing me!"

"It might not be a bad thing to be married to a man who is the right hand of the heir to House Haywood." But as she imagined her sister, sitting on her bed so petulant now, being forced to share one with Idran, the words tasted brittle in her mouth.

"He's despicable!" Ara burst out, eyes wet with tears of fury. Dainya put a tentative hand on her shaking shoulders.

"I'll visit as often as I'm able. I'll force Harland to protect you." She had no idea if she could pin his enigmatic self down in such a way, but then she remembered his dumbstruck face looking up at her astride her horse. She wanted to see that look again.

Ara looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes. “No one can protect a wife from her husband.”

“Don’t say that,” she said sharply, gripping her sister tight. She briefly envisioned Ara cowed in submission to her betrothed, but soon after banished the unpleasant picture, upset. They shared a moment of silence before Dainya pushed on.

“Love can be a messy, ugly thing. You may be glad it has spared you. It’s the end of duty, and duty gives you power. Trust me.” In her own case, this had always been true.

Ara shook her head and avoided her eyes, as obstinate and unmoving as stone. Dainya made a decision, taking a shaky breath before beginning her story.

“I…I never taught myself archery, as I so often told you. In years past, I used to sneak out and watch the men shoot, but I did not possess the guts to try myself.”

Ara cocked her head and shrugged, irritated. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“Just listen. One day, I was caught by the stableboy, but instead of telling father, he offered to train me. His own father had been a knight before being slain on a scouting trip, but not before he had taught his son how to shoot. I didn’t know if I trusted him, and against my better judgement I snuck out to meet him in the light of a dying day. He taught me what he knew, and with his help I gained the skill of the bow and arrow.

“In time we became friends, and I grew to care for him. But the firstborn daughter of the Lord of Knollwood and a servant of the stables do not mix.” She paused heavily. “I could not be seen with him; it would leave my reputation in tatters. So he was sent away.”

Ara’s dark eyes were deep pools, quietly absorbing her tale.

“What was his name?” she asked quietly.

Of all the questions she expected her to ask, this one caught Dainya off guard.

"Theodore. Theodore Rogers. A rather simple name, actually," she said quickly. Already half-regretting her admission, she reached inside an embroidered emerald pouch round her neck and pulled out a small silver necklace with a stone of deep plum.

"This is for you," she said, holding it out to her. "A wedding gift." Ara took it gingerly, and fumbled with the clasp.

"Let me," Dainya said. Ara turned around and Dainya brushed her sister's dark tangled hair out of the way to put the necklace on her. The two fastenings were tiny silver snakes that looked as if they were kissing when clasped together.

She had not told Ara that she had given Theodore her first kiss, and had maybe even her heart. Perhaps they could have married; after all, Lady Jane had been a lowborn scroll keeper's daughter when she and father had met, but Dainya could not risk her own dishonor and that of her family. She felt ashamed, even now; it had been a dizzyingly silly lapse in judgement on her part. She needed to uphold the family line, so she had begged Lord Slade to send him away to where she knew not. *What good was sacrifice and honor if I only asked it of others and not myself?*

"You used him." Her sister's voice reached Dainya as if from another world, eerily discordant to her ears.

"You used him for his talent at archery and discarded him when he was of no use to you." Ara had turned around to face her, expression resentful.

"You talk of sacrifice, but all I see is selfishness."

Dainya stood abruptly. "Think what you will," she spat, and stormed from the room. Ara slammed the door shut behind her, leaving Dainya with a gaping pit of emptiness in her stomach.

She had tried so hard. Why could Ara not view things the same way? Her heart was always getting in the way of her head.

Much like my own sometimes, she thought dismally. Her sister just had not learned to quell it yet, had not mastered the art of taming desire.

But have I?

Dainya undressed in a fog, forgoing her typical hot bath for sleep. When she finally surrendered herself to its arms, she dreamt she was on the precipice of a cliff, trying not to fall into the chasm roaring up before her, but the harder she tried, the more her feet stumbled, taking her closer and closer to nothingness, until she slipped into the deep abyss.

CHAPTER 7:
stones and swirls of sorcery

ARA

Morning dawned cold and grasping, much like Ara's hand as she fingered the plum necklace her sister had given her the night before. Her small face was pinched in consternation as she recalled Dainya's story and the subsequent argument that blossomed between them like a poisonous flower.

Her sister was insufferably rigid, always peremptorily obedient, striving to live honestly, dutifully, by the rules, treading the same path countless others had before her until it soon would rut and she would be stuck in it forevermore. It baffled and frustrated Ara to no end. She wished she could abandon the long, loping road ahead and be free to fly to unknown corners and face the demons that lurked there on her own terms.

But that might mean breaking with her sister, and her family, whom she loved, even as they agonized her. It was a risk she was not willing to take…as of yet.

By the time she stepped foot outside the air had grown dense and humid, and she sniffed it eagerly, basking in its blanket of familiarity. She was dressed in dark breeches, for today she was to go beyond the castle walls where only bird and bee ruled and as a result would not have to suffer the scoldings of her mother. Her deep pockets were empty and eager to be laden with the multicolored stones that graced the streams of the south.

Her servants had tied back her hair in a loose fitting braid that was meant to keep the hair from her face, yet still strands popped loose and fell across her cheeks. She clamped a strand in her mouth, chewing it as she passed the inner gates. Like the Kenworths, the Slade castle kept in its jaws a wide courtyard containing stables, a training yard, and a brief stretch of road meant to host royal entourages or, Spirits help them, a royal army. The castle loomed dark and ferocious over all, its shining stone

pointed like the tip of a sword. Beyond the courtyard were the outer gates, even more heavily guarded than the inner, and it was to these Ara purposefully strode.

The guard standing at his post had just finished his overnight shift and was waiting for her with an indulgent smile. He lifted helmet from his head, revealing a shaggy beard going white at the sides and wrinkle lines cornering his eyes like cracks in dry earth.

“Ready, my lady?” Ara grinned up at him; Noam Pinchas was, as ever, a welcome sight.

Two other armored guards pulled the gates open, and she glimpsed the swaying grasses and bright blue sky beyond. *My own kingdom,* she thought indulgently, trying not to linger on the fact she would soon be borne from its charm and into the hard, unforgiving land of the north.

She walked side by side with Noam, her necessary and chosen protector for when she ventured beyond the castle. Once a month, when his duties were rather slack, they would set forth together. As third in line, Ara barely had any duties of her own–she had rebuffed her parent’s latest attempts at preparing her for her union so robustly they had relented, seeming guilty–so she often had to create her own adventure from within the castle walls. But today, a special day Ara had begun to treasure, no pretence was necessary: the journey out was real.

Once, she had hoped to go alone, but Lord and Lady Slade bid that out of the question. She would have–and did–complain, but Noam was such a pleasant companion she quickly abandoned her pretence of distress.

The ground was flat under Ara’s feet as they walked, silence broken only by a distant call of birdsong. Their land did not have many trees, but the sprouting olive green grasses surrounding them were nearly as tall. The rich smell of spice wafted into the air–cayenne, coriander, and nutmeg–smells Ara vowed she would never forget, even in

the north when all they could get to wash down their stinking fish and boar where the tiniest pinches of traded pepper.

They bypassed the right fork in the road that would lead to the lower towns, where all manner of silks were colored and pressed from the wildflowers that littered the circumference of the castle like discarded maidens, and instead went left. Here the path was slightly rockier and the grasses winding and unkempt, but it would lead them to the crystal blue waters of their streams. To Ara, it was a haven.

They heard the first lazy trinkle of water after nearly a two hour silent walk. Ara admired this about Noam; he never felt the need to sully quiet moments of contentment with the drudgery of words.

When the stream came into view, a languid body nearly ten feet wide, Ara darted ahead, immediately scanning the dark muddy shore for rocks. She had many a stone dark as obsidian, nearly that much of bright glittering gold, some aquamarine blue and steely silver, fiery red and blushing purple, but today she meant to find one of glittering green, a slippery shade that had in the past always evaded her.

“Hunting again, eh?” Noam crouched down beside her, sweating in his heavy armor. He reached a huge hand and scooped up a handful of pebbles, fingers dripping mud like a dark bleeding wound. “Haven’t you got enough?” His tone was lightly teasing.

She gave him a half mocking, half serious stare. “My collection is far from complete, I'll have you know. It’s not enough until I say so.” As a child she used to think the stones contained whispers of magic in their tiny forms, but now she wasn’t so sure. Maybe she kept up her collection because of the half-formed, subconscious hope that one day she would stumble upon the very one that would give her the power of enchantment.

Noam bowed. “As my lady commands.”

Ara swatted his arm, laughing, before picking up an ivory pebble and throwing it into the stream, where it skipped merrily across before plunging itself into the water’s

depths. When a stone's color was no use to her, Ara delighted in discarding them in this way. It was good practice for her arm, as well as her aim.

"Oh, we're starting this early, then?" Noam asked, giving her an indulgent grin.

Ara skipped another rock, this one orange, where it bounced thrice before sinking. It was their favorite game, or rather fierce competition, as it became a grueling test to see who could throw best.

"What's the record?" Noam grunted as he chucked a stone across the lake, where it rippled twice before disappearing.

"Six, or actually seven. Remember last time?"

"That was assuredly not seven, my lady."

"Oh yes it was," Ara rejoined, her search temporarily abandoned as stones went skidding over the stream's surface in sleek succession.

Their game lasted through the afternoon and ended when Noam miraculously sent a rock careening over the water in nearly ten skips. "Bet you cannot beat that!" He had roared with delight, lifting his hands into the air in victory. Ara had tried until her arm grew sore and frustrated, but all to no avail.

"That was a fluke," she finally huffed, before sullenly sitting herself down in the muddy bank of the stream.

Noam thumped down beside her, chuckling. He flipped a dark stone upwards and caught it. "Aye, maybe."

Her fingers itching, Ara pulled out her dagger, bronze and crusted like a rusted hull, yet, to her, beautiful in its concentrated power. Now that she looked closer, she noticed engravings on its hilt: running men with spears, fair maidens eaten by dragons, an old witch raising her hands up, an incantation trembling on her lips. Ara's eyes widened. From her readings she knew this type of iconography had been banned long

before even the Great Civil War, in the wake of the proclaimed extinction of magic. She was holding a rare relic, like as not.

"How did you get that?" Noam asked, noticing her preoccupation. He tried not to betray his concern, but Ara could hear it in his voice–his deep tones were tinged with it.

"I stole it," she admitted casually.

Noam sighed resignedly, which made Ara grin her crooked smile of mischief, feeling for a brief moment like her old self again.

"Ladies should not possess such weapons," he admonished halfheartedly. But he soon stood and drew his own knife. "But, since you already have it and I assume you have no intention of giving it back" –he looked severely at Ara, who grinned again and vehemently shook her head— "then you might as well learn how to use it."

Ara jumped to her feet. "You mean it?" Noam chuckled and spread his feet, holding his weapon out from his body and pointing it at her.

"The first thing to know is that there's two grips: regular and reverse. One is holding the knife so the point pricks upwards, the other is gripping it so the end arcs downwards when you jab." Noam lunged forward, swift as the running water that gurgled beside them, and Ara jumped out of the way.

"Good," Noam approved. "In this kind of fighting, it is very close quarters, so quick reactions are key to staying alive. There are several forms of attack, including the one I just did, the jab. Another is the slash" –here is swung his knife in a fierce arc downward– "as well as the thrust." Noam threw his arm outwards in a powerful drive, plunging his blade into the bark of a tree that stood like a sentry, guarding the waters of the stream.

Ara's dark eyes sparkled, alight with danger and excitement. She tried to imitate him, only to have the knife fall from her grasp and roll down the bank. She clambered down and snatched it back up again, facing her opponent.

Once she had mastered the basics, he let her spar against him, though he easily disarmed her, for he was quicker and more experienced. However, Ara did not lament, and was so fierce in her endeavors she nearly slashed one of Noam's fingers off.

They both laughed, after Noam's initial shout of surprise faded. "I think that's enough for today." He tucked his blade away. "Well, I know one thing: you should not have any trouble with that betrothed of yours with that in your arsenal. You'll set him straight."

Ara smiled, but his words sent reality flooding back and a leaden pit of dread filled her stomach like venom. Her grin slipped and fell from her face, and before she knew it, droplets were dripping down her nose and running down her face, tasting of salt.

Treacherous tears, curse you, she admonished furiously, hating how easily she cried.

Noam leaned towards her and cupped her cheek, thumb gently swiping away her tears. She jerked away, hating his pity, his tender touch, and spat viciously on the ground.

"I'm pathetic."

"No," Noam said, his tone sharp, his eyes heavy with sorrow. "Crying does not make one weak. Understand?"

She sniffled and turned away, but he held her fast until she let herself fall into his arms.

"I'm afraid," she finally admitted. "I try not to be, but I still am. What does that make me?"

"A human," Noam insisted. "It takes courage to admit fear, and wisdom to have it. What man would go into battle unafraid? A fool, and the Ara Slade I know is no fool."

Ara nodded, trying to compose herself. She wished she was a magick of old, able to will herself away from here with a flick of her mind. But she was only a girl, trying not to drown…slipping under a relentless tide.

Noam pulled away, gazing sternly and intently down at her. He took her gently by the shoulders. “Your father…what your father—” he shook his head. “It is not right. It’s not right for him to shoulder you with this, and I will not sit here and tell you to carry it because it is the proper order of things. By all the Spirits, I will not.”

“But I must,” Ara whispered. “It is for the family.”

Noam sighed again. “That’s your father talking. I know he is trying to preserve his house, and I will always stand by him in that…but does that make this right to you?” he prodded.

No. “I don’t…know.”

Noam patted her head and stood, a forlorn, lone figure against the darkening shade of sky. Ara knew he had already pushed the matter with her father as far as he had dared. Now, all he could do was console her.

“I know it may not seem like this at present, Ara, but know this. You can always choose your path. It may not be a road paved and promised to you, but one you must forge alone, without a clear destination. A journey is oft more than its end. Think on this. And know, I am here.” He smiled softly then, a hint of that old glint in his eye.

“Come, we best get back, before your parents worry. It’s collection night.”

Ara had been so wrapped up in her own impending doom-like marriage that she had forgotten about collection night. Twice per month, Pincharions collected candidates for their order all across Knollwood, from holdings of the richest statesmen (though this was unlikely, these men did not often want to condemn themselves to the underground) to the filthy keeps of the poorest beggars.

As they reached the low towns near the foot of the castle's shrouded shadow, Ara began to see occasional crumbling, dried snake skins nailed to wooden doors; this was how prospective candidates indicated their interest. Unmarked homes would be passed over. Though their initiation ritual was strictly secretive–something Ara could not even get Noam to confess after years of pleading–most knew that Pincharion prospectives were collected in the black of night, blindfolded, and taken to a small domed building, as pitch as the sky they walked under. Noam and other Pincharion members referred to their headquarters as the Oscuro, but among the common people it had a more infamous, insidious name, whispered in dingy huts and alleyways: the Dark Below. Though only members could look upon it, it was said that its door was made completely of the emerald scales of the Ashak snakes killed during initiation, and initiates became members when they placed their scales on that door.

Thinking of the Pincharions made Ara remember the emerald green stone that had once again evaded her and maybe would forevermore. She clenched her fists against her sides as Noam steered her through the throng of people outside the outer gates pushing to and fro in a mad throng; collection nights were always preceded by chaos among the poor folk. At the inner gates she parted with Noam, who gave her shoulder a squeeze and an encouraging nod, before disappearing to the soldier's mess hall, a gathering place used when they were not invited to the royal great hall to dine. Even without the Haywoods, they often did not have the space to hold all their guards and knights.

Ara skipped dinner, where she knew the Haywoods and her betrothed would be dining, shouldering past a chattering Haywood fool who was juggling a trio of cantaloupes and prattling on to no one about Dainya the fierce, who had charged the Haywood prince on horseback, intent on killing him for taking advantage of her womanhood. Ara shook her head dismissively (their household did not keep such vulgar

entertainers), feeling both relieved and chagrined at his complete lack of recognition of her, that very lady's sister. Perhaps that was the wine's doing.

Though it was not really her practice to retire early, Ara went to her chambers, carefully depositing her small smattering of stones in her pearl clasped box with the painted knight. She gripped her knife and practiced the jabs, slashes, and thrusts Noam had taught her before growing bored and setting it aside, her arm throbbing from the frenzied movements.

Plopped on her bed, sleep evaded Ara like a thief absconding into the dark of night. She thought about all her sister and her protector had told her, about duty and sacrifice and forging your own way, like a prince hacking through briars. But she was not a prince, or the eldest Slade, or a mighty Pincharion.

It was easy for them to say, easy for them to give advice when it was not their future that hung like a loose thread about to snap. What would they have her do? She could not abandon the marriage, but neither could she stand it. For a brief moment she imagined herself, dagger in hand, slipping into Daune's chambers and sliding its point across his throat…

She bolted upward at the sound of voices, guilty and afraid someone had sensed her thoughts. But it was only her mother, leading Enoch to bed. After an initial clumsy yet endearing attempt to comfort her, they had not spoken much of late. Now Ara sensed her brother was afraid to approach her, as if her misfortune was a disease that would somehow infect his fragile self. Perhaps he had been poisoned by the gossip of the counselors who pampered and praised him, proclaiming him the "future of House Slade." Or maybe he felt the same as her, that if he further broached the subject it would become all the more real, and he would have to face the prospect of losing his sister with devastating finality.

She craved his company; with Enoch she could be a child again, a little girl who could pretend her life was full of magical stories and fairy tales. After a moment of uncertainty, she crept from her bed and, following the glow of candlelight that emitted under the crack of his door, creaked it open and peered inside.

Her mother, Lady Jane Slade, sat perched on the side of his bedside, tucking silken covers under his chin and urging him to close his eyes. Enoch protested, wriggling underneath as if trying to free himself from binds.

“A story, mother, please, it’s been so long,” he whined. Ara softened. He was still so gentle, so innocent, completely ignorant of all those who resented his station.

Lady Slade arched a brow, her hair and attire still impeccable, her cream nightgown artfully embroidered with meanders, the lines acting like running scrolls trailing down the length of her dress.

“Your father disapproves of such things, child.”

“As does our sister. But they’re not here, are they?” Ara interjected, drifting inside and laying next to Enoch, propping her head up with one hand and kicking him playfully as he giggled. She was relieved by his evident happiness upon seeing her.

“Ara,” her mother gasped, surprised at her unexpected approach. Ara squirmed, a little uncomfortable. She and her mother had never been particularly close, connected only by the bedtime stories she used to tell her before Ara had been deemed by her father as too old and silly to believe such nonsense. Growing up a scroll keeper’s daughter, Lady Jane was an exceptionally learned woman, yet what she favored most was passing on to her children tales of times where magic had once reigned in Labentis.

Perhaps remembering their shared love of these legends, or maybe merely feeling sorry for her, Lady Slade bent her head. “Just one story.”

Her mother primly cleared her throat. “Not so long ago, our house did not yet exist. The land south, now known to us as Knollwood, was as yet uncharted by men.

Instead, it was occupied by a mysterious band of witches and warlocks called magicks. It was rumored that they could control not only the elements of the world, but time itself. If history can be believed, these people were our ancestors."

Ara leaned back and closed her eyes, picturing it. Even though she had heard this story a hundred times, every word spoken from her mother's lips still felt as fresh as the crisp air leaking in from Enoch's open window.

"What was it like?" Enoch asked. "Their magic?"

Their mother paused for dramatic effect; a cheeky smile almost resembling Ara's creeping over her face like a dipping crescent moon.

"Their deeds were legendary and numerous. They could quake the deep sands on the lake floor of Dreymond's Loch, they could soar along streams of air bent to their will, they could twist and warp time so the seconds ticked backwards, they could bid a man forget his own name…"

Ara tried to imagine possessing such a power. The first thing she would do would be to command Idran Duane to forget he had ever wanted to marry her.

"During this time," their mother continued, "the settled regions of Labentis were in turmoil. House Barrow of old was warring with the Kenworths for independence after their King, James the Cruel, had beheaded Lord Neptune Barrow's sister, Venus Barrow, in a conflict that is now known as the Great Civil War."

Her mother's voice sounded different somehow, brighter and more animated, excitement pulsing in her pronunciations. She reminded Ara of herself, reveling in histories long past, before reality had sunk in with its rusted teeth.

"As this war dragged on, men grew weary of bloodshed, and many sought an escape. A few, brave or desperate, left the cause and began to venture to unknown lands previously avoided because of their supernatural repute. Here they came upon the magicks, who initially spurned their encroachment. However, a truce was forged when

the defectors pledged themselves to the gods of magic, the Spirits. So the two groups mingled, producing offspring that became our ancestors and the foundation for House Slade.

"Yet over time their magical bloodlines became diluted with those from House Barrow until there came a time when no supernatural powers were able to manifest in their children. And that was the end of magic in Labentis." As her mother finished the tale, Ara glanced at Enoch, who was rapt in fascination.

"Is that true? Did magic really exist?" he asked, eyes saucer wide.

"We may never know. But there was a rumored group of magicks who were scornful of this incursion and the peace accepted by many of the others, as well as the dilution of their magical blood. So, they broke off and formed their own secret coven, what the history books call the Paranorm Trifecta. They moved west into what is now known as the Land of the Whispering Shades, that desolate, dry land which remains mysteriously elusive. No man that has ever dared to venture there has returned to tell the tale.

"Yet there are whispers, passing through every unseen corner of the realm, that these wanderers have survived, and continue to do magic to this day."

Silence gathered around them, and Ara let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Now, traces of magic in Labentis were unheard of and feared, that much she knew. Yet the blood of magicks ran through her veins, and the veins of her brother, who sat beside her, rigidly spellbound.

"Well, best you both sleep now," Lady Slade said softly. "Goodnight." She stooped to kiss them both on the forehead. Ara's breast beat with a sudden warmth for her mother. In some strange way, magic was their pointed star, their tether of connection, much like their shared love for the little boy laying beside her.

Could magic survive still? The thought lingered in her mind as her mother left them in her quiet manner, composed and quaint once more.

She knew what Dainya would say. A fool's hope, borne of a fantasy. But right now, it was the only hope Ara had, so she clung to it like her brother clung to her arm, eyelids drooping.

"I want magic," he murmured, pressing himself to her side as he drifted off.

"Then I'd save you."

His soft snuffles filled the room.

Ara looked down on him, tortured by his tenderness.

"You already will have that power," she muttered, thinking of the day he would be crowned.

Someday. When it's too late.

She brushed the hair from his eyes and stared out the window, into nothingness.

CHAPTER 8:
cursed with counsel

EADLYN

Dame Vena Kenworth's quarters were frigid, as it was her grandmother's practice to open all her windows to flood her rooms with the air's severity. Everytime Eadlyn had questioned this, she had curtly responded that it helped sharpen her for the day's trials. *And mark my words, granddaughter, trials there would be,* she had always said. Today, Eadlyn could hardly argue with her logic.

Her grandmother was a severe woman herself, with sharp cheekbones, overly plump lips, and blue eyes that protruded slightly from her face, which often gave Evelyn the impression she could pop them out at any moment and use them to see from the back of her head. She had thinly penciled brows and eyelids in mourning–perpetually clothed in a heavy black shadow. Her face looked stretched, worn thin and wrinkled with age, though Eadlyn knew she had once been beautiful. It was said her late husband, formerly a prominent lord of House Slade, had pledged himself to House Kenworth after witnessing Vena Kenworth's beauty, even changing his name from Lord Carado Slade to Charles Kenworth. Eadlyn tried to picture her grandmother young but found she could not. Even her own mother had not been young when she had given birth to her.

Time is cruel, she thought with a rush of sadness that pinched her heart.

Yet the remnants of Dame Vena's grandeur remained. The wimple that wrapped around her chin and was tucked tightly by her ears was plain white, but the rest of her was adorned in heavy velvets of royal blues and robust greens, lined with bright pearls and gems at the seams. Cream frills covered part of her purpled, veiny hands, while rings of emeralds and precious stones lined her thin fingers. Dame Vena had a touch for finery and splendor, it adorned her like armor as she and her fabrics rustled towards her granddaughter.

"Well," she began, her voice laced with her usual curt austerity, "the first council without your brother. And what have you prepared to say?"

Eadlyn folded her hands in front of her own, simpler, azure blue gown. Still hovering by the door, she faced the Dame from the opposite end of the room, the distance between them stretching, reflecting their difference in age and experience.

"I had hoped to seek your advice." She knew her grandmother was no stranger to rule, having witnessed the heavy crown pass through generations, including that of her grandfather, father, and now, her ailing brother.

"Have you yet sought out the council of your brother, the king?"

"I went to his chambers, but he is gravely ill. I offered myself and my service to our house, but he still sees the little girl I once was, not the woman I have become. He will not yield." She began pacing the room, as her grandmother watched her with those looming eyes.

"He is indisposed; his body has yielded even if his mind has not," she clipped. "Our people must see an able ruler, a Kenworth, at the helm of Crescent Grove, or we are lost. That viper Samuel Haywood is sure to be sniffing the air like a beast out for blood…"

Vena Kenworth's eyes narrowed in scorn; long had she hated the Lord of the North, ever since he had dared to raid their lands during the short, sad reign of her son and Eadlyn's father, King James the Second.

"The lords on our council have looked at my brother similarly," Eadlyn admitted as she strode across the marbled floor. "But what can we do? Without heirs, how can our line continue?"

"With *you*." Her grandmother surveyed her intently.

"I? I cannot. The lords would never accept a queen, especially when their king is still living…"

"You would act as regent to the king during his time of need. A queen in all but name…"

"They would never allow it, surely you know this!" Eadlyn burst out, throwing up her hands in frustration.

"They will have no other choice, my dear." Grandmother Vena softened, drawing closer to Eadlyn and cupping her face in her cold, thin hands, the metal from her rings chafing against her cheeks. "We are the Kenworths, rulers of Crescent Grove, and the whole of Labentis before the War. We are the House others look to for guidance, and strength. For hundreds of years your ancestors have held steadfast in their duties as kings–"

"*Kings,* grandmother. *Kings* have held steadfast. Do I look like a king to you?"

"You are a Kenworth, Eadlyn. The blood of all our rulers of old runs in your veins."

"Blood does not a proper ruler make!" Eadlyn cried. "Look at King James the Cruel, he nearly sent our house to ruin! I have sat in on James's council for some years, but to govern is something I have little experience with."

"You know more than you think. And I will be there to advise as well, ever at your side. We *will* prevail, granddaughter. House Kenworth will live on, as ever."

"And my brother?" Eadlyn inquired, her mind working furiously. Things were happening too fast…whatever she had expected, it was not this. She had gone from being rebuffed by the king to being thrown into the lion's den in a mere matter of days. She welcomed the chance to save her family, but not without the permission of their current ruler.

Was this precisely what she had thought, had even hoped would occur by going to her grandmother? The thought scared her and filled her with shame.

“He has not named me regent, nor consented to this arrangement. What if he still wants to rule?” She would not condone any kind of treachery.

“He cannot, and we shall say no more about it.” Grandmother Vena strode over to her sitting table, where amidst a thin jewel encrusted mirror and several inkwells and rogue-stained brushes a thin scroll sat unfolded. “Sir Lockmore delivered this to me earlier this morning.” She held it out to Eadlyn. “The list of events to be discussed at our council meeting. Take it.”

Eadlyn accepted it gingerly, too afraid to even peek at its contents. She knew all her grandmother was doing was for the survival of the Kenworth name, but she decided she must reopen the matter with James as well. He deserved to know, and hopefully approve of, her acting in his name. She rolled the paper up and clutched it to her chest as she walked alongside her grandmother towards the council chamber, goosepricks from the brisk air still running down her arms like a painful reminder of an age old curse come back to haunt her.

They arrived at the council chamber early. Eadlyn was grateful for her grandmother’s preparedness, as it gave her a much needed chance to calm her nerves. The room was small and circular, suspended so high above the cobbled streets that when Eadlyn looked out the large windows that spanned the entirety of the space, she felt she could almost touch the puffy white clouds that lingered among the pristine sky. It was always bright, the sun lightening the sandy limestone walls to such an extent that it sometimes became nearly blinding.

Yet even this could not clear the gloom weighing on Eadlyn as she stooped down, pushing and tugging at her brother’s heavy stone chair: an uncomfortable thing, straight-backed and unyielding. It was ceremonial for the ruling king of Crescent Grove to preside sitting upon it, so James had insisted on dragging himself there until it had broken him. Eadlyn had no wish to sit in the seat that was his by rights, so once she had

driven it painstakingly off to the side, she moved her usual place, next to her grandmother, to the head of the table. She spread the paper before her, and skimmed its contents while she and Dame Vena awaited the lords.

The first to arrive was Lord Ioc Winsor, a tall man with a long face and hair that was tied back in with a golden brooch. He had a pointed, thin black beard and dark circles under his eyes, but his manner was lively as he entered, posture erect and his expression passive. He sat and surveyed Eadlyn pleasantly over his hooked nose as if nothing was amiss, though he had surely noticed King James III's empty stone chair sitting abandoned in the corner.

The trio had barely exchanged pleasantries before a wide man burst through their circular doors, followed by an even wider man, so fat he let loose ragged bursts of breath as he waddled towards the council. The first was a seasoned warrior by the name of Lord Tenoch Eldren, who had by virtue of his experience in battle become her brother's chief advisor in matters of war and peace. He wore an expression of forced joviality, curly brown hair unruly and nose as bulbous as a doorknob. While Lord Eldren had undoubtedly grown stout in his later years, it was nothing compared to the man beside him. Red faced and panting, in came Lord August Mard. He was the most recent addition to the council, ushered in by the others when King James had been getting progressively more ill. The seat was granted to him due to the repute of his current position, or rather, possessions. He had accumulated perhaps a greater wealth than the rest of the council put together, and it glittered on every one of his fat fingers.

Then came their kingdom's keeper of coin, Lord H.B Poteat. No one knew what H.B stood for, and if they ever had it had long been forgotten, just as the voice of the man himself often was during table discussions. He had been an able advisor to the king on the crown's expenditures, but the man himself was so extremely timid and small it hardly seemed to matter.

The last to enter were Sir Oliver Lockmore, her brother's closest confidant and longtime companion. His demeanor was placid, and he gave Eadlyn a reassuring smile and nod as he moved towards his place along the table. *At least in him there is an ally,* she thought.

Once they had all taken their seats, Eadlyn cleared her throat in trepidation. She knew these men well, but this was the first time she was to address them not as equals, but as their acting leader. The prospect was overwhelming.

"As you all know, my brother is indisposed, given what befell him during our last meeting. I will be acting in his stead on matters concerning the crown until he is well again." *If he is well again.*

The lords exchanged brief glances with one another, but none said a word. Eadlyn rushed onwards, filling the awkward silence with their first order of business.

"Lord Poteat, the crown thanks you for handling the coin needed for the Tournament of Roses. How fares our coffers after the expenses?"

Little Lord Poteat cleared his throat, running a hand through his thinning rust colored hair. "Well, Lady Eadlyn–"

"You will address her as Your Grace, Lord Poteat." Dame Vena cut in sharply. "She is your acting regent to the king."

"Of–of course. Your Grace–" While Lord Poteat stammered circles over himself, Lord Eldren stood and jabbed a finger harshly in Eadlyn's direction.

"*Regent? Her?"* He cried incredulously. "We did not agree to this!"

"It is not for you to agree to, Lord Eldren." Dame Vena uttered every word with clenched teeth. "She is the next Kenworth and thus the matter of ruling falls on her shoulders."

Lord Mard undoubtedly would have stood if able, but given his bottom was drooping over his chair, he remained seated.

"She is a *WOMAN*!" he shouted, jowls quivering.

The table erupted.

Lord Mard and Dame Vena were shouting over each other to be heard, while Lord Poteat stared at his lap, small round face troubled. Sir Lockmore was trying to wrestle a blade out of Lord Eldren's hand, their limbs a jumble.

"She should marry and entrust the matter of ruling to her husband," slick Lord Winsor said amidst it all, regarding her keenly. "It is tradition."

Somehow seeing their scorn steeled Eadlyn, so much so she felt she had a blade of her own when she angrily stood and raised her hands for silence.

"Stop this madness *at once,"* she demanded. The room fell silent in shock. "Now *sit."* She raised her brows, daring anyone to disobey. *How dare they?* Unprepared as she was, she was certainly capable, for she had been a part of this council for some time now.

Cowed for the moment, everyone resumed their seats, and the hint of a smile on her grandmother's face emboldened her to resume.

"Please continue, Lord Poteat."

"Well, the realm's coin is reduced for the moment, but the tax that Lord Winsor plans should replenish them within a fortnight." Lord Winsor managed the passing of the realm's laws, which more often than not included extensively planned taxations.

"Ah, yes." Lord Winsor smiled. "The proposal is laid out on that paper you hold, *Your Grace."*

Eadlyn glanced down and read. Her eyes widened and she looked up incredulously. "Have you all read this?" When no one answered, she thrust the paper towards Sir Oliver, who read with a frown and passed it to Lord Eldren, who gave him a grievous glance from the side of his eye before hurriedly thrusting it towards Lord Poteat. Eadlyn knew he resented the younger knight, for King James had often ignored

his advice to listen to that of Lockmore's, his most trusted friend and protector. Worse, Eadlyn suspected Lord Eldren could not read.

Poteat, for his part, held up some kind of glass object towards one of his small eyes and squinted ponderously at the page. She sighed.

"This proposes a heavy levy on merchants bringing goods into the city. It will weaken our relationship with the other houses, particularly House Slade, whom we rely on for our spice and our silk. We cannot afford this in our current position."

Lord Winsor no longer looked pleasant. "I'm afraid you are sadly inexperienced in these matters, my dear lady. This is the best way to ensure our continual prosperity."

Lord Mard nodded vigorously. "We must replenish to enforce our status as the most wealthy and powerful house of Labentis."

Eadlyn could not believe what she was hearing. "This will raise prices for the poor in our city, and there are many. They will look at us with anger if they can no longer afford such things."

"Let them," Lord Eldren said, while the others agreed, Lord Poteat nodding reluctantly after glancing at the rest and seeing all in favor. Eadlyn knew their acquiescence came with the knowledge that they themselves would not be affected, for all lived on Goldmint Lane, the richest part of Crescent Grove. They sequestered themselves atop verdant green hills inside pristine white holdings with fountains and golden knockers.

She shook her head. "This will beset us with enemies from within and without, my Lords!"

"What do you know of war!" blustered Lord Eldren. "I have fought with men, seen friends die alongside me. And you would presume–"

"I presume nothing, my Lord. I do not claim to have experience in battle. I am merely trying to prevent one from occurring."

"A wise proposition, Your Grace," Dame Vena said solemnly.

"We have the knights and numbers to overcome them all!" Eldren continued. "Let them wipe their arses and curse our names, while we laugh and spit in their faces!"

Eadlyn looked to Sir Lockmore, following in the footsteps of her brother. The knight looked uncomfortable. "I do not want it to come to war, Your Grace. I believe you are right that forbearance is most prudent." Eadlyn exhaled in relief, but he was continuing on. "Yet I cannot deny that it is likely we have the numbers, as well as the talent, to withstand a strike from the likes of House Slade," he finished finally.

Lords Mard and Eldren pounded their fists on the table in a demented, triumphant rhythm, while Lord Winsor surveyed her sharply, as if trying to undress her, assessing her next move. Lord Poteat still sat with his head down, looking strained. She waited for him to speak. He did not.

Knowing she was beaten, and more chagrined than ever, Eadlyn fought to keep her composure. "Very well. Implement this levy on the morrow, Lord Winsor."

The rest of the meeting passed in the same manner; Eadlyn felt undermined at every turn. Nearly all the lords seemed in agreement with one another, and none would side with her points, even the most rational of propositions. Lord Mard seemed to revel in this; Lord Poteat seemed regretful, but he did nothing to voice his sympathy. Lords Eldren and Winsor often eyed her in a way that made her feel uncomfortable– the former with blatant desire in his eyes, the latter with a piercing, unsettling scrutiny, as if wishing to unwind her and find the key to her thoughts.

What little support she got came from Sir Lockmore and her grandmother, but Dame Vena held her tongue so as not to make her granddaughter seem reliant on her. She, Eadlyn knew, was a fierce proponent of making a name for yourself, bootstrap by bootstrap.

After she dismissed the men, she began to pace once again, freshly frustrated yet emboldened with a kind of desperate determination. *I am regent of the most powerful house in Labentis. I will conquer.*

"Your Grace?" The voice startled her; she twirled.

"Oh please, Sir Oliver, you've known me since I was a child. Call me Eadlyn."

"Eadlyn." He seemed uncharacteristically out of sorts, shifting the weight under his heavy armor from foot to foot.

"I was wondering if I may talk to you about something."

"Of course, Sir."

"I know that was quite a… a fraught meeting–"

"If you're going to suggest I get a husband I'm sending you to the stocks." A sly, half-grin flashed over her countenance.

"No!" Oliver Lockmore let out a surprised laugh. "Not that at all. It's another matter actually…"

Eadlyn stopped pacing and turned to face him, unimpressed. "It is really a wonder how my brother put up with you," she said teasingly while Lockmore flushed. "Please, tell me what is troubling you."

"I have heard rumors, as I am sure you have as well, about the Land of Whispering Shades."

Eadlyn was taken aback. "Well yes, I have heard all titterings, flutterings, and mutterings imaginable."

"Then you know that there is magic rumored to reside in that dusty wasteland."

"I have heard such things, some coven of sorts. What of it?"

"I have been talking to our healers, about my–about James. I know there is no cure, but one of them, well he told me that in the ages of old, before the Great Civil War, magic had been used to cure all manner of ills."

"And you think that magic will heal my brother." Her voice was flat.

Sir Lockmore paused, looking slightly embarrassed. "I did not think it a matter for the ears of the council, but what if…?" He moved as if to grip her hand but thought better of it, his brown eyes wide, freckled, suntanned face pleading with her to understand.

"Sir Oliver," she kept her voice gentle, "I love my brother more than anything, but this is a folly. Magic does not exist in Labentis, if ever it did."

"But what if there is a chance, Eadlyn!" Lockmore was more impassioned than she had ever seen him.

"I need you here. I cannot lose your support," she admitted. "People don't come back from that place."

"We must try, oughtn't we?" he cried, looking as desperate as she felt.

She thought over his words, not daring to hope. If there was a tiny sliver of salvation, a crack of air for a man buried alive, how could she not seize it? For her brother's sake? She would do anything to see him restored to health, even if it meant chasing a fool's dream.

She could charge the willing, devoted knight before her to go in her stead, to search amidst the timeless sands for what may bring James Kenworth back to life.

The supernatural powers of the fabled Paranorm Trifecta were ever elusive, if they existed at all. But the hunt had begun, and Eadlyn was loath to let it go.

She drew herself up, gazing at Sir Lockmore, and smiled.

CHAPTER 9:
paintings and tunnels, haunts and hovels

ARA

"House Kenworth. Colors: blue, green, gold. Symbol: fox. Region: Crescent Grove. Known for their wealth. Harbor the best, finest knights in the realm."

It was morning, and ribbons of sunlight streamed down upon them as Enoch sat at his newly planted desk, dutifully reciting from a volume of Labentis house histories entrusted to him by their father. As heir, he was charged with memorizing important facts and figures of the realm, something Lord Slade had insistently pressed upon him. Ara turned up her nose at the whole ordeal; besides, she knew enough of the past from her legends and fables.

She had woken–having drifted off next to the gentle snores of her little brother–to find him perched at his overly large mahogany desk, poring over and plodding through page after page, so that their water-stained, earmarked corners rested on top of one another in an ungainly pile of condensed, tottering history. Supplanted flowers in vivid pinks and blues sat haphazardly in a clay jar at the corner; they blushed and bloomed under Ara's gaze. She was pleased to see her brother still had time for the garden amidst the chaos of the castle.

She now stood perched behind him like a sparrow, watching Enoch's small shoulders hunching, his dark brown hair dropping in strings over his eyes and loosely hanging in front of his face. Ara was surprised–and a little chagrined–at this abrupt change; just last night he had been a wide-eyed hopeful little boy with wonder in his look and radiant curiosity in his mien, but with the dawn he had risen a soon to be man, studious and solemn as a grave.

We are all changed, she told herself. For the wedding, once two moon cycles away, as distant as its silvery light, was growing ever closer.

"Their lands are ripe with rivers and streams, their grass plush and dark from wet earth," Enoch persisted, reading on. "They are crowded with many forges, inns, and holdfasts, but this also makes them vulnerable to rampant disease, illness, and filth. Crescent Grove is overflowing with hills with many twists and turns…" He trailed off, staring absently outside the window at a hummingbird that had landed on the sill. It quirked its head and gazed at him curiously, before abruptly taking flight.

Enoch sighed softly, quiet even in his frustration. "I will never remember everything he wants me to." Though the window panes were shut, a sudden breeze thrummed through the room, rustling Ara's hair and the pages of the book in a restless cacophony.

Ara gripped his arm and leaned down so she was face to face with those owlish grey eyes.

"Father tests you because he believes in you." She gently pushed the pregnant volume away from his still hands. "Let's make it a game. You'll tell me as much as you know, and I'll fill in."

Enoch turned towards her, frowning. "You don't know everything. Anything you know comes from fairy tales."

Ara raised her brows. "I know more than you, little brother. Besides, legends can be lessons too, you know." *Sometimes a fable contains a truth more poignant than the most robust reality*.

Enoch huffed, and Ara grinned to see his old petulance emerge.

"Tell me about House Haywood."

"House Haywood." Enoch repeated. "Colors: red and silver. Symbol: lion."

Ara shook her head. "Manticore."

Enoch slumped, but Ara righted him and made him look at her. She reached in her pocket and pulled out a handful of dates from her pocket she had filched from the kitchens last night. “Everytime you get right, you get one of these.”

He perked slightly. “Region: Bridgewall.” She tossed him a date, which he caught and began to chew after removing the pit, so his next words were garbled.

“They boast the finest archers–” (Ara snorted, from what she’d witnessed at the training grounds, this was a far cry from the case at present) “-and they have harsh winters.”

“Where the lakes freeze and the snow runs deep and the sinister lurks of the Forest of Grotesqueries retreat to their lairs, lying in wait…” Ara leered at Enoch, eyes alight, hands raised and curled into claws. She wondered if Lord Samuel Haywood actually *had* managed to capture a manticore amidst the boars, bears, wolves and griffins in that dark wood. Now that would be something worth recording for future lords like Enoch to read and remember.

“What else?” she pressed, when Enoch didn’t react to her grisly pantomime.

Enoch gave her a fed up look, but obeyed. “Bordering House Haywood is Dreymond’s Loch, a wide, deep lake. Those that live beyond its borders in the far, icy north are called the Iceshorn.”

Ara huffed. “That’s all it had to say? So disappointing. The tales have much to add.”

“Well?” Enoch endeavored to look disinterested, but his eyes were sparkling.

“According to rumor, legend, whatever you will, Dreymond was a pirate from Labentis who settled beyond our borders after pillaging his way through half the realm. They say those nomads, born of the wenches he claimed as his prizes, roam the shores, lying in wait for their chance to cross and… *strike* at us!” She lunged toward Enoch, who started and swatted at her face.

"That's foolish," her little brother pronounced, folding his arms. Ara grinned. *There was a certain flavor to falsehoods*. She wondered if there was any credulity to be lent to these fables.

"You want to know why they cannot cross?" she continued, bent on riling him up.

"Why?" He was curious in spite of himself.

"Because of the kraken that lurks underneath those deep waters, a sea beast who ferociously snaps up every passing vessel, wrapping its tentacles around them and dragging its sailors to a watery grave."

Enoch stared at her incredulously, half-reminding her of Dainya in that moment. "I don't believe you."

Ara shrugged happily. "Your choice. Now what about us?"

Enoch moaned. "Do I have to?" The look she leveled at him was answer enough.

"House Slade. Colors: purple and black. Symbol: Labyrinth. Known for the assassin Order of Pinchas whose colors are emerald green and black. Full of grain and the finest silks."

Ara tossed him one, two, three dates in succession, and laughed in bemusement when he tried to catch the last in his mouth and it bounced off his forehead instead. "Don't forget our network of tunnels," she chided.

Enoch gave her a grin that nearly mirrored her own in its crooked assuredness. "Of course I don't. But others aren't supposed to know about that, are they?"

Ara mirrored his shrewd smile. "Point taken. That reminds me…"

~

The lazy glow of the late afternoon sun shone upon Knollwood, but Ara and Enoch were not among those who felt its haze. Instead, they had vanished underneath the earth, into the secret tunnels where old kings and long lost secrets were buried.

Within that hollow hole Ara could cast aside her sorrow and instead dance with ghosts, through the day and into the night, until the walls crumbled around her and she forgot the world above, never wanting to leave.

Ara had first stumbled upon a passage to the tunnels below when, as always, she had been attempting to steal–this time a stack of letters left unattended that were to be sent to her lord father. The courier was a gangly young fool besotted with one of the amply bosomed kitchen servants, so whilst he snuck off to flirt, he had left the letters on a small table across from the door to the scullery. Ara had pounced upon the pages, filtering through the orders of business that were to be brought to the council that evening. More often than not it was a tedious affair, but Ara delighted in knowing its contents nevertheless.

One day she had tried to grab the letters too hastily, and her elbow had knocked into a bronze candelabra sitting on the table; its towers of melting wax had pitched backwards against the cold stone wall. In a panic, Ara grabbed at it, nearly burning her fingers off in the process, but not before it knocked against a small niche under the painting that loomed above her. Cursing under her breath, Ara glanced at it. It was a brilliantly painted still life, with oranges, pears, pomegranates, and bananas drawn so lustily they seemed to leap off the canvas, begging Ara to taste their juicy sweetness.

That's when she noticed that it was the frame of the painting that was leaping off the wall, or rather, that its bottom right corner was hinging forward, revealing a crack of abyss beyond. Letters abandoned, Ara sucked her fingers, piqued, and peered closer. The painting swung open further, revealing a hole in the wall, where dark steps zig-zagged down into bleeding darkness.

By the time the love-struck courier returned to his upended stack of correspondence, the painting was fastened shut. He remained oblivious to the young girl moving just behind its peeling edges, heading into the deep bowels of the castle.

It had taken Ara years to master the layout of labyrinth-like tunnels that lay before her like a mess of unspooled guts. She had not uncovered all of its secrets, unlike the Pincharions who knew them well, but she had made it her goal to explore as much of it as she could. Plenty of times she had to retrace her steps, and since her first disastrously dark venture, she had learned to bring plenty of candles, matches, and provisions to help her on her way.

She had dragged Enoch down there almost as soon as he could walk, but had never shown her discovery to Dainya, fearful of her disapproval. Soon accustomed to the dank smell and low cobwebbed ceilings, it had become to her a puzzle to unravel, a riddle to solve. And since it was the perfect distraction for her as of late, it was where she and Enoch bent their steps.

Both were small enough to fit in the narrow gap the painting revealed, and the kitchen servants had become so accustomed to their predilection for pinching morsels and sweets, they no longer bothered to admonish their other mischiefs. Ara paid close attention to the patter of her feet as they descended, for no matter how often she walked this path, the stairs seemed to thicken or shrink or curve unexpectedly, and any slight stumble would send one tumbling down to the unforgiving below. She gripped a sputtering candle in one hand and Enoch's hand in the other, though today he had shrugged out of her grasp, insisting he could manage himself.

Once they reached the cracked, hard floor, Ara bent them left. Several fortnights ago, she had happened upon a small square door, so grimy it had blended into the fortification surrounding her. It had opened to the poor towns, where she and Enoch had roamed free for one blissful night, staring in awe at tightrope walkers, jesters spitting flames of fire, fiddlers hopping to and fro, all amidst a medley of lecherous laughs and sweet music. Ara was bent on tasting that freedom once more.

"So," she began as they walked–for it took many hours to reach their destination— "you hadn't mentioned House Barrow. Was it not in your studies?"

"They were. I hadn't gotten to them yet, but I remember mother mentioning them in her tale."

"Right. They were the house of old, the one that warred with the Kenworths in the Great Civil War. They flew navy banners with a bright white star, the North star, as that is the region from which they came."

They walked on in silence for a few moments, musing. Finally–

"What about mother's story?" Enoch asked. "Do *you* think people of magic really exist?"

Ara considered. "I'd like to believe so. Deep in the Land of the Whispering Shades, they may be out there somewhere.

"Or maybe we're kidding ourselves, and the real reason no one has returned from that wasteland is simply because they starved, dropping to the ground like lifeless husks." She shrugged, trying for an air of nonchalance. This talk of death was dreary when its stench hung around them in a catacomb-like hush.

Ara let that hush fill her as they walked. Gloomy as it was, the tunnels still held for her a morbid fascination. She was strangely rejuvenated by its oppressive air, knowing that this was a puzzle she could solve, a maze she could navigate. Its sense of mystery was intriguing, as was its danger. Ara fingered her dagger, which she now kept perpetually tucked in her pocket. Just a couple days past she had used it to hack off a piece of hair growing pariah-like over her forehead; now her bangs hung lopsided and choppy.

The ground around them was damp, smelling of rot. An eerie, quiet dripping noise echoed around them. Ara's feet padded through a trickling moisture as if she were following a ribbon of tainted, darkened moonlight, oozing amidst piles of grisly bones.

The tunnels were grotesque, dusty crypts, so unlike the peaceful purple moors above, and despite traversing them countless times before, Ara always felt a creeping sense of unease. She often glanced over her shoulder, wary of following footsteps, her mind wandering unbidden to the skulking goblins and hobbling trolls from her tales.

At last, they reached a little wooden door. Ara tugged its brass knob and they went spilling out into the twilight. Rickety dwellings sprung up around them like mushrooms; the dirt road before them was uneven, punctured by muddy tracks. Clouds hung dreary, tinged purple like a ripe bruise, and people bustled about carrying baskets of bread and spits of charred meat, waving them around, looking to exchange for coins. Ara pulled out their own soggy ration of bread and offered it to Enoch, who had been basking in the waft of the village food. He glanced glumly down and sighed, before biting into it as Ara pulled him along.

Under the pretense that she was helping Enoch master his lessons, no one would notice they were gone until dark, so they had a couple of hours at least to explore. Last time they had nearly gotten decapitated by a drunken butcher, and before that they had been scolded harshly by a crotchety barkeep after Ara had been caught trying to thieve a small flagon of beer. Today, it had taken some convincing for Enoch to agree to go, but she suspected he had humored her, knowing she would not be long remaining in Knollwood.

She did not know how to talk about the upcoming…*union* to her little brother; after his brief, groggy moment of consolation they had said no more on the subject. How did you communicate to the only person you could still be a child with that you would soon be forcefully wed? Even their typical banter and levity had been slipping away as pressure to be Lord Slade's proper successor on Enoch increased, leaving them as unsure as their creeping footholds in the darkened tunnels.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she saw the carriage careening towards them too late. She yanked Enoch out of its path and wildly threw herself aside, landing on the dirt road with a thud, where mud (or something worse) began to pool under her cheek.

"Enoch," she wheezed, trying to catch her breath. Her hand blindly groped for him, latching onto the fabric of his shirt and clasping him tight.

"Help…" a voice, small and desperate, called out to her.

Shaken, Ara frantically whipped her head around to her brother, who lay behind her, but his lips had not moved.

"I'm fine," he rejoined, confused.

"Then who…?"

"*Please…*" It came again.

Ara struggled to her feet, glaring hard in the direction of the sound, but all she saw before her were dilapidated shacks on all sides, chipped and forlorn as rain weeped down upon them. She rubbed her eyes to clear them from moisture, and, after hauling Enoch upright, led him by the hand to the end of the street, where a small hovel sat. All was dreary, like dull colors of a running painting, until a brief flash of movement caught her eye.

"Look–!" she cried to Enoch, pointing. Snaking out from under the drooping door like a deformed, demented figment of her imagination, was a thin arm, stark white against the odious brown of its abode.

Ara blinked, but it was still there, fingers feebly stirring. "Ara, *be careful–"* Enoch whispered insistently as she started forward, curious.

"Who's there?" She ventured.

A pause. Nothing. Something. A moan, beginning quiet and rupturing into a gasp of agony. So heart wrenching was the cry Ara wrenched the door open without a second thought.

Inside it was dim, stinking of urine and reeking body odor. The floor was filled with hay, and in those straggled straws nestled a group of children, if they could be called such. They were so thin they looked skeletal, eyes boring horrible holes into Ara's memory.

The arm she had seen had dropped onto a chest, and the owner, his strength spent, fell listlessly onto the ground where he lay, prostrated. Ara shook him gently, and when he did not stir, she drew a flask of water from her bag of provisions and cupped his head upwards, lifting it to his mouth.

She bit her lip hard, anxious and unsettled, as the boy roused and began to greedily gulp it down. He drank it all, still compulsively swallowing after the last drop had disappeared down his throat. Suddenly he gasped and began to wretch, the liquid he had just consumed pouring out of him in an unquenchable flood.

Distressed, Ara tried to soothe him, patting his back as he heaved and rocked back and forth. Thereafter his body began to shudder, even after he eased him back onto a lump of hay. It was several excruciating moments before he could catch his breath, which still came in ragged gasps.

She found herself at a loss of what to say. Turning desperately to Enoch, she bade him to watch the boy and slowly feed him bits of bread, as well as any other who was able to eat without it coming back up.

She raced towards what she figured was the square and after what felt like ages, came upon the well. She refilled her flask and then the entire bucket, lugging it back towards the decrepit hovel with fierce determination, straining to prevent any liquid from slopping out the sides.

One by one, the children had roused and were gathered around Enoch, who was breaking bits of bread and distributing it to them with careful tenderness. Ara set the bucket down with a clatter, and they clustered around, gulping the water down like animals. The boy Ara had helped was sitting up now, and he regarded her with bleary yet cautious eyes. Ara was disturbed to see they were the same shade of grey as her brother's.

"Thank you," he finally said, voice weak.

Ara nodded brusquely. "The water will help, but you need food."

The boy smiled sardonically, like that was some kind of joke.

"Why are you living here?" she asked, before cringing at her insensitivity.

"Nowhere else to go," he said.

"Where are your parents? All your parents?"

He merely shook his head.

"You're orphans, all of you," she realized. Ara gazed at a tiny girl with stringy tresses so matted she could not tell which was hair and which dirt as she feverishly rubbed water across her cheeks, trying to wipe off the grime and failing. She could not yet have been ten.

"But I don't understand. There are orphanages in the lower towns…"

Again the boy shook his head, mousy brown hair bouncing with the movement. "Full."

"Full?" Ara looked at Enoch, who looked close to tears. The orphan boy nodded.

Ara let out a breath of frustration, feeling disgusted with herself. Here she was, a so-called proper lady, cavorting through tunnels because she felt like it and complaining about an impending arranged marriage when these kids were starving to death. She regarded the boy in front of her again, whose dark brows were furrowed in misery. He looked around her age, yet his life could not have possibly been more different.

"What's your name?" she inquired, gently.

"Henry."

"Henry what?"

"Don't matter."

"I'd like to know."

"Henry Nickles."

"Well, Henry Nickles, I'm going to find you some food. Enoch, come with me." Ara beckoned her little brother to her side. As she reached the threshold of the hovel, she turned back and raised her voice. "Please don't worry. We *will* be back for you."

Getting provisions was no easy task. Nearly all the shops were either closed or overcrowded, but Ara was able to push her way through to the counter of one dingy shop where pots of questionable smelling broths simmered. Ara wrinkled her nose, then cursed herself. She offered some coin for a bowls full, but it was not nearly enough. She tried to barter one of her multicolored stones, but was scorned. It wasn't until she thrust the soup into Enoch's hands and brandished her knife at the shopowner's throat, pricking his flabby neck until a trickle of red ran down his pockmarked face, that he relented.

When she returned and the orphans slurped and smacked it down in contentment, she made a vow: they would never go hungry again. She would be sure of it.

Enoch read her face, saw her expression steel, and tugged on her sleeve, indicating where Henry Nickles sat apart from the rest, hunched in on himself. He was clearly the oldest of the group, and likely the leader. Ara approached him, and, receiving no rebuff, sat down next to him.

He glanced over at her, shy and almost ashamed. "I do not know what we would have done without you," he admitted. "My strength had finally failed me nearly three

days ago, and no one else was strong enough to provide food or drink. We all would have died."

"I'm lucky I heard you," Ara said.

Henry nodded. A habit of his, she noticed. "When I heard wagon wheels and shouts, I figured–hoped–someone was near. Speaking those words aloud…it felt like the last of my strength."

Ara leaned forward, earnest. "I am going to help you. My father is Lord Slade, and I'm going to take you all to the castle where you will be well-provided for–"

"The ruler of the south is *your* father?" Henry interrupted. He began to laugh, a weak chuckle but a chuckle nonetheless. He had a slight overbite; his teeth were crooked. "Piss off."

"I'm telling the truth." She insisted. "I'm going to take you all to the castle to get help."

Henry scoffed. "A bunch of gutter rats like us would be a right sight amongst that lot."

Ara cornered him with her gaze, his thin face clouding over as he read the earnestness there.

"Bloody Spirits take me, you're serious?" he cried. He looked her up and down, taking in her faded black gown smeared with mud, her long, thin face, sharp, almost gaunt cheekbones, and big dark eyes. Ara's lips were in a frown of intense concentration as she tried to gauge his thoughts, but as it turned out, she did not have to.

"You're no lady." He spoke it with such certainty.

"No, I'm not." Ara said after a pregnant pause. "Not by choice, but by title. My little brother, Enoch Slade, is heir to the seat of Knollwood." She pointed over at Enoch, who was worriedly watching a slightly green-looking young boy sip his water gingerly.

Henry Nickles' face broke out into the first smile Ara had seen from him, a cheeky, sly quirk of the mouth, tentative yet sweet to see. She guessed he had possibly recognized Enoch, seeing as he had been presented as the heir apparent to the whole of Knollwood. Ara got satisfaction from banishing the doomed atmosphere from the room, at least to some extent.

"See? I actually was telling the truth. Surprised?" Her wicked, crooked grin was back.

Henry looked sidelong at her, unimpressed.

"You do not have to present yourselves to my father if that's your wish. I'll bring food from the castle kitchens twice a week, would that be enough?"

Henry nodded. "We can manage."

He peeked closer at her laden pockets, where a slice of soggy, half-trampled bit of bread protruded. Ara hurriedly took it out and gave it to him. "Take it."

In his desperation, he had no pride left to refuse; he gobbled the scant morsel down.

Ara's eyes swept the room, making a mental count of the children there. They were so young–too young. There were not quite a dozen, but still too many to be left floundering, destitute and starving, without a place to call home.

Henry seemed to read her thoughts. "We only got each other. I try my best to help, but there's no work nowadays, so it's steal or go hungry. I never knew my parents; I was kicked out of the orphanage when the overcrowding became an issue, but some of these little ones were cast out by their folks. Too many mouths to feed."

Ara ground her teeth. *What cruelty one can be driven to when desperate*. She looked over again at Enoch, who caught her eye. She beckoned him to her side, and he came and sat down beside her.

She introduced him to Henry, and barked a laugh when the orphan boy inclined his head and said exaggeratedly, “My Lord”, leaving her brother baffled.

“We will return tomorrow with more,” she promised when they finally had to take their leave. It was late, and the creeping hands of midnight were beginning to reach up and grip the horizon.

Henry simply nodded again, but the look in his eyes was grateful. Ara stooped to kiss the forehead of two little girls who were still clutching their soup, and she and Enoch passed out into the night.

CHAPTER 10:
moonlit secrets, armored amore

DAINYA

The moon hung swollen and overripe like a fruit waiting to be picked as Dainya laced her boots and made her way to the stables, dark hair and cloak blending seamlessly into the shadows. While she did not have her sister Ara's skill at slinking about unseen, she had taken steps to ensure she did not have to, nodding imperiously as she strode past the guards she had bribed to turn a blind eye to her nighttime wanderings. Her footsteps were able and sure, for this route was one she knew well.

Dainya saddled up her mare–a bold coal colored animal with the very apt name of Shadowdancer–with practiced hands and slid quickly onto her back, steering her toward the outer gate. She longed for stillness, quiet and solitude, and needed an escape from the riling racket of the men within their walls. *I am trapped in my own castle,* she thought disagreeably, shaking her head.

In the weeks leading up to Ara's wedding to Idran, the stifling presence of the Haywood crowds had become nearly unbearable, a stinking pestilence of a presence. Men would drink themselves ditzy, seeming to forget that the ceremonial festivities had yet to come, and silly servants would wobble past, shrieking and bouncing and squawking like fettered hens. Worst of all was the stench; Dainya bet all the gold in Crescent Grove that at least half of these knights and squires would not know soap if smacked in the face with it.

She also needed to clear her head and mull over her conversations with Ara and Harland. Could her sister's intended really be as cruel as the Haywood heir made him out to be? If so, she feared for her sister, even if she knew this was the order of things. Sometimes it made her so aggrieved she would seize her bow in her hands as if to smack it on something, before rigorously composing herself using the breathing techniques her

mother taught her. She knew what it meant to be a lady more than her little sister, and a part of her wondered if she would feel less helpless if it were her condemned to marriage rather than Ara.

Yet another part of her resented her sister. How dare she criticize Dainya for what she did to that stable boy Theodore? Even now the stables still stank of the ghost of his presence, like a stain she could not erase. Did she not see that Dainya had sacrificed, had recognized the danger of association? Maybe this union would finally make Ara understand that she could no longer operate with the wild abandon she had so callously adopted. What had it gotten her? Excluded from council meetings and married off at the earliest opportunity.

Dainya sighed. Deep in her gut, she had a nagging feeling that Ara would never see. She would continue on with her own little rebellions and mischiefs as she always had without realizing she was only making things worse for herself.

It is rare for women in this world to get what we desire, Dainya thought as she kicked her mare's sides, spurring her outside the final gate and towards the grasses beyond.

"My Lady! Halt!" a voice shouted from behind her.

Dainya cringed, debating if she should make a mad dash and urge Shadowdancer into a gallop, vanishing amidst the tall stalks of grass. It was what her sister would do. Instead, she slowly turned round.

"What business have you?" she said archly, wondering how likely it was that by the morrow she would be confined to her room with the windows barred.

The man before her was mounted on a steed of his own, its shining coat pure as snow, even in the darkness. His face was hooded, calling to mind a phantom premonition of death Dainya's mother used to tell them appeared before men when the time was near

in her tiresome fables. *Folly,* she thought as she peered closer. His cloak was maroon, after all. Death prefers a dark ink of mourning, the color of despair.

He inched nearer, horse's tail flickering like the torch held aloft in his gloved hand.

"My Lady Slade should not venture out alone in the hour of the owl. Rather, she should–"

"Just escort me back to my chambers then–"

"–need someone to join her," he finished, sidling up next to Dainya and grinning down at her. Even in the faint glow of his torch there was no mistaking that red scar, those golden curls.

For a moment her astonishment was so great she could not speak.

"What are you *doing?"* she hissed.

Harland shrugged in his concerningly unconcerned way. "I wish to accompany you this fine evening for a pleasant moonlit ride–"

"Be *quiet!"* She paused, displeased. "And if I refuse?"

He chuckled at that. "Well, then I am afraid I will have to ask that you to return with me while I take up this matter with Lord Slade…"

"For Spirits sake!" she nearly shouted, causing several of her paid guards to glance her way, shifting their grip on their spears in unease. She glared at them and then at this so-called prince of the north.

"Very well," she finally spat. "Have a mind to keep up. If you can." She kicked Shadowdancer into a gallop, leaning forward and gripping the reins as tight as she could.

They flew through the countryside, Dainya relishing the wind on her face. Reeds raked along her neck and hair, but she remained firm and swift, guided by the light of the moon. Harland had blown out his torch and thrust it quickly aside before urging his own

steed along. Dainya was surprised at how well he kept pace, but she knew the lay of the land more intimately, and soon outstripped him.

When he finally caught up, she had dismounted, tied Shadowdancer's reins to a tree, and had begun to crest the hill that stood before them. It was one of the only places where Knollwood was not crushed flat as if by the palm of some great stone giant, and the clearing that rose before her as she neared the top offered one of the most stunning views of the kingdom and what lay beyond that she had ever seen. It was her favorite spot, and whenever she felt trapped within the confines of the castle, she came here to remind herself she was only a very small piece in a realm full of villages and towns and troubles and woes much larger and heavier than her own. Tonight she had headed towards it without thinking, and did not have time to regret the decision because at that moment Harland stumbled to the top, panting slightly.

"Well ridden," he said appreciatively as he came to stand beside her. She watched him take in the scene before her, lips parting in awe. Below them, the grasses roiled and stirred like a drowsing monster. Small holdfasts and smatterings of smaller castles sprung up among them, and further out along the horizon the milky sands of the Strip of Bleached Bone glittered in the moonlight. Beyond that, Dainya knew, lay the Land of the Whispering Shades.

The moonlight illuminated Harland's strong features and dark eyes as he surveyed the domain of the south.

"It is…" he seemed at a loss.

"It is my home," Dainya said. He turned to look at her curiously.

"Do you know my mother came from one of these dwellings?" She did not know what made her say it.

"She was born a scroll keeper's daughter, and her own mother came from a line of farmers. It is why she so loves animals and the outdoors. She even keeps several dogs

and cats at hand around the castle." The memory made her smile. Riding was one her favorite things to do with her mother, and they had spent many a lovely afternoon on horseback under the sun. She missed the comfort of her presence.

Harland had looked away, frowning. This was the first time Dainya had observed him alone, and she was nonplussed to find that he seemed oddly solemn and taciturn.

"And your father was allowed to wed her?" he asked, a hand reaching up to itch at his scar.

"I am not sure he gave my grandparents much choice in the matter," Dainya admitted. Lord Euvuan Slade had been a kindly man rather lapse in his rulings, and he had always heard petitions from an emotional rather than a practical lens. He was likely to be especially susceptible to bending to the wishes of his son. His wife, Lady Drea, had been a more uptight woman, fiercely spoken and fiercely protective of her family, yet she had also possessed a very generous nature when it came to her only child. Dainya thought with sadness at the tears in her father's eyes when he talked of her grandmother's passing in childbirth, a result of trying to give him a sibling and her husband a stronger line.

"My father would probably feed me to the dogs rather than accept a common born wife for me," Harland said, smiling sardonically.

Dainya shrugged. "It was one of those things. They met when my father was undergoing an intensive study on our tunnel system under his father's tutelage. My father got it in his head that he would marry for love rather than suffer an arranged match, and grandfather Slade gave my mother his blessing."

"Do you believe in that?"

"In what?"

"Marrying for love."

Dainya looked at him in surprise. “My parents got lucky. It is not as easy for a lady to find love, when one of our principal roles is to make matches advantageous to our house.” This time it was her turn for an ironic twist of the mouth.

Harland hummed softly in acknowledgement, gazing at a wisp of smoke emanating from one of the stone holdfasts below. It twisted and contorted amidst the stars like a malign wyvern.

Abruptly, Harland went to his knees and lay down on the grassy ground of the clearing, knees up and elbows drawn out as his hands cradled the back of his head. Dainya gazed down at him, her mouth pinched at the sides, and he grinned up at her, motioning for her to join. She scoffed and glanced away. When she peeked back at him his eyes were closed. He would have looked almost serene if not for the red gash slashed across his face.

After a few moments she sat next to him anyway.

“What exactly is so great about his rock hard ground…” she grumbled.

Harland raised an arm into the air and pointed. “*That.”*

Dainya gasped. Above her stars sparkled in sporadic bursts, clumped together in pockets of blue and purple, while hidden gaps of darkness peeked through their belt of brightness. They were so numerous and glittered so intensely it made Dainya wonder if magic did exist after all. Here was a hidden trove of beauty, wide open before her. She had seen the stars many times, but never like this.

“Sometimes all you need is a change of perspective, my Lady,” Harland grinned, looking smug. He ripped out a long blade of grass and twirled it in his fingers, before sticking it between his teeth, where it rolled between his lips. It made his voice lisp slightly when he spoke.

“When the Haywoods used to be House Barrow–”

“Haywoods *and* Slades both,” Dainya added.

"Your ancestors were deserters," Harland said offhandedly.

Dainya bristled. "Maybe my ancestors did not want to fight in a pointless war!"

"Suit yourself," Harland said. "As I was saying, the Barrows were really interested in the stars, and the planets as well. Some people thought of them as other worlds, but most worshipped them and the constellations as gods. They built temples that mimicked the night sky at a closer proximity to supplicants so they would be heard when they begged for favor. But nothing can beat the original, if you ask me."

Dainya couldn't argue there. She felt pulled towards the stars, as if trapped in a spell. She tried to trace patterns between them, wondering what constellations the Barrows had found, but a movement to her right caught her eye.

"What is that?" Harland had been fingering a golden pendant clasped around his neck.

"What does it look like?"

Dainya rolled her eyes. He could be so charming when he wanted to, yet it was all a ruse to hide this troublesome, difficult man laying before her…

"I know it is a necklace, you dolt. Who gave it to you?"

"My mother." He shifted, turning his moonlit countenance away from her. Dainya took the hint.

"Look at that," he remarked after a moment.

"What?"

"That cluster of stars kind of looks like our lake in the north."

"Dreymond's Loch?"

"Mhmm."

"It is not your lake, you know."

"Mmm…pretty much is."

She sighed. "So what does it look like?"

Harland considered. “Blue and vast, so vast you feel like you could sail forever. None of our ships have gone far, but half a day’s journey out the waters turn bone numbing cold and dark, so dark that what lurks under the surface remains hidden. They say that on the other side there is nothing but sheets of ice and snow, an endless blizzard.”

Dainya was suddenly grateful for the mild cocoon of warmth around them now; even at night Knollwood was a temperate, pleasant place.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Hmmm. So nosy.”

“How did you get your scar?”

This time he barked a laugh. “In a duel. When I was young,” he added.

“How did it happen?”

He paused for a moment. “This kid came running at me with a knife. I did not dodge in time.”

“You fought with real steel?”

He blinked. “Of course.”

“And what mark did you leave in return? I know you did.”

“I slashed his leg, or it may have been his arm. I can’t remember,” he said quickly.

A brief, awkward moment of silence ensued.

“Now it truly is late.” Harland yawned exaggeratedly, sitting up and bending his back in a stretch, reminding Dainya of one of her mother’s cats.

She got to her feet, a bit disappointed, not feeling tired at all. This had been a welcome venture, even with the heir of Haywood’s insufferable presence.

They stood side by side for one last moment, taking in the knot of stars and the quiet peace of the land, the kind of dark blanket that only falls when men find sleep.

CHAPTER 11:
history is a burdened woman

EADLYN

Eadlyn woke to the singing of birds, a soothing, chirping melody, which did nothing to pacify her. After a day's reprieve, they–she–was to hold another meeting with the troublesome lords of the council. After Eadlyn had charged Sir Lockmore with finding the magical cure for her brother he had so believed in, he had left forthwith, setting out for the Land of the Whispering Shades.

She had brought him to James the night before he was to depart, so the pair could say their farewells. Her brother had grown more lucid as of late, and he looked upon Oliver with a kind of desperate tenderness as the knight knelt by his bedside and pledged to find a cure for his king.

Feeling intrusive, Eadlyn retreated as they began to talk in low tones to one another. They spoke so quietly she could not make out what was said, and though her ears strained at the door she told herself that she was not trying to eavesdrop. She peeked through the crack of the door to see Oliver press a gentle kiss to her brother's forehead. As he made to stand, James raised his spotted, sickly arm as if making to feebly clutch at Lockmore's gauntlet, before seeming to think better of it. Instead he waved the knight away and fell back upon the cushions, turning his head into his pillow.

Sir Lockmore rose and stiffly marched from the room, and at dawn the next day Eadlyn watched from her window as he mounted his steed and rode away, disappearing into the pale horizon and leaving nothing but dust clouds in his wake.

Since his departure she felt ever more unsteady and unsupported; even her grandmother, steadfast and hardy as a rock amidst crashing waves, bombarded her with advice with such frequency she felt she could crumble. How ever did her brother endure without slipping?

Because of her propensity for nightime wanderings, Eadlyn often found it difficult to rise early, but her current inner turmoil made it impossible to sit longer in her bed without feeling slightly sick with inactivity, so she pulled back her linen sheets and stood. She drew the curtains back and stepped into her silk gown–today a royal blue inlaid with glittering green and cream lace. The fabric bunched around her hips and she strained to lift the dress up around her curves.

The evening after Eadlyn's first sparring match with the lords, her grandmother had approached her with her usual indomitable spirit, the look in her eyes, as ever, reminding Eadlyn how Dame Vena Kenworth was a force to be reckoned with. Today was no different.

Eadlyn paid a visit to her early, for today her grandmother was not to be at the council meeting. Instead she was overseeing the choosing of a new guard Eadlyn had ordered to be arranged. They were tasked to sweep the crime-sodden streets in the underbelly of Crescent Grove and report any incidents of betrayal immediately. Eadlyn had thought it best to root out the weeds by force before letting them grow strong enough to choke her.

"You conducted yourself well, much better than your father would have done." Her grandmother's blunt demeanor always took Eadlyn off balance, rendering her unsure how to conduct herself.

She did not remember her father, which apparently entitled others to profess to her their decided opinions on the man. Some thought him trite, unassuming, and warm-hearted, but most professed that King James II Kenworth had been spineless and weak, allowing Lord Samuel Haywood to conduct extensive raids on their lands throughout his tragically short rule.

Eadlyn did not usually put much stock in these rumors; she knew from what her brother had told her that he had been a loving father and a sweet husband. James had

often re-spun the tale of their parents' childhood romance when she, in her childlike earnestness, urgently requested stories of them.

Their mother had been the daughter of an elderly lord who was once chief advisor to the crown, a young girl by the name of Margaire Severe. She and their father had grown up at court together, so their marriage, arranged when they were quite young, was a welcome union for all. Observers at court had described James as a shy and uptight little boy and Margaire as an exuberant child, rather the image of the perfect lady. Their differing dispositions suited each other well, like two sides of a coin, and soon after they were wed Margaire gave birth to James III. However, the pregnancy was fraught and troubled, resulting in a diseased, sickly child, limbs misshapen yet faculties intact. A series of miscarriages followed, and many years had passed before Eadlyn's mother was able to carry a child to term once again. That child had been her.

"Was my father truly so inept?" Eadlyn asked of her grandmother, thinking of the widespread rumors of his failures. It made her bristle to hear even though she had never known him.

Dame Vena Kenworth sighed, her gnarled hands gripping the back of a chair.

"My son was not a very able man, try as he might. He was too susceptible and too frail, rather unfit for the throne." She paused for a moment, wide mouth working to form the words. "I…I regret my part in his rule. I…pushed him. Too hard. It was not easy to see our house be so disrespected by those–those upstart Haywoods, and my rage was greater than my consideration for my son."

Eadlyn did not want to hear more. As she had grown older, she had learned the tale of her father's downfall well enough from the murmuring lips of jesters and jackanapes. As the raids had continued, King James II became increasingly prone to lapsing into states of melancholia where he would not be able to rise for nearly the

entirety of the day. Many thought him ill, but there was never anything physically the matter with him.

That is, until his body was found one frigid, unyielding winter day, fallen from his tower window, smashed and broken and bent like a ragged doll. A king brought to a low and bitterly bloody end.

“I wanted revenge,” her grandmother continued. “I pressured him to retaliate, but he was firmly invested in peace at all costs, as was his wife. Many thought him weak for this, but I have never seen a man so stubbornly committed, much to my irritation at the time.

“I think it’s time you heard all,” she said after a pause, her voice becoming gravelly and unmeasured as she continued the tale.

“His death broke your mother. Dear Margaire, already so frail, gave birth to you shortly after her husband passed away, during which time your brother, already a man grown, had assumed the throne.” Eadlyn had heard bits of this account from James, from what little he said about the genesis of his rule, when his disease had begun to manifest its hostile occupation over his body, an ever-advancing foe.

“Lady Margaire began to experience anxiety attacks, which would lay her flat, and her health was not good. Yet she clung to you with the unyielding aspect of a mother’s love, insisting she nurse you.”

Sometimes Eadlyn would fancy she could recall a blurry, milky face, with lovely curls and honeydew eyes, looking down at her. She clung to those remembrances, the only memory she had of the woman who had brought her into the world.

Dame Vena sunk into a chair across from Eadlyn, who remained determinedly upright, hands folded in front of her as she listened. She felt that this sudden flood of information was a testament to the newfound worthiness of her position. Her

grandmother could finally confide in her, and she could be trusted to keep confidence…but it was ominous all the same, a Kenworth legacy of failure laid bare.

"Yet her love was not enough; her body betrayed her till the end," Dame Vena Kenworth continued. "One day an attack rendered her senseless as she held you, and she dropped you on the floor, where you hit your head and fell into a coma."

Eadlyn shuddered involuntarily at the brutal detail and the almost cavalier way in which it was told.

"When she came to, your mother was distraught, nearly incoherent. Nothing could alleviate her despair, and when young James visited her, his diseased face only distressed her further. Depressed she had an ill son and convinced that she had condemned you to a life of woe, if not an early grave, she had a heart attack in her sleep and died.

"By the time you finally woke, her eyes had closed forever."

Eadlyn heard her in silence, conscious her grandmother was looking at her intently to gauge her reaction. She could not fathom the life her mother had lived, once so full and bright, turned tattered and wasted like a ship dashed to pieces on a rocky shore. She could not pretend she felt no small amount of guilt at her part in Margaire Kenworth's death now that she knew the truth. She waited for the sharp stab of pain, the kind she always felt after seeing James, but it never came.

She had never known her mother, so how could she know what she had lost? Eadlyn had often been told, by sage tutors and preachers, that grief is love lost. But she had never even been given the chance to love, so how could she grieve?

Her mother felt so distant, as illusory as the blurred memories of her face.

What I would give to properly miss you.

"I will honor her memory, grandmother," she said solemnly.

"Spoken like a true monarch," Dame Vena exclaimed, standing and striding over to her with surprising dexterity for her age.

"Your brother tried the best he could, but he inherited his passive streak from his father, which limited and hurt him. But *you–"* she gripped Eadlyn's shoulder fiercely, eyes boring into hers like a fervid falcon– "*you* have the fire in you, untempered and burning hot. You are our hope, my dear."

Eadlyn felt undone. This woman, whom she loved and respected, seemed more concerned with their family name than with her own brother's welfare. It made her wonder. How far exactly had she pushed her father? Was it perhaps, to his breaking point?

She felt her eyes, like curtains, were being opened, true natures revealed. Could she still trust her esteemed and beloved grandmother? If she could not, what else did she have? The answer echoed ominously in her mind. *Nothing*.

No, Eadlyn thought, *I have myself and my will.*

Emboldened by that thought, she parted with her grandmother and strode confidently towards the council chamber. As she neared, she heard curious, coquettish shrieks and answering lecherous guffaws emanating from its doors. Struck with foreboding, Eadlyn reached the door and pushed it open, prepared for the worst.

It came. Sitting nearly naked on the long table that normally contained papers and letters of business, were two women: prostitutes, if Eadlyn had to judge. Their languid bodies were spread for the eyes of the lords to feast on, and that they were, eyes hungrily following every curve of hip, leg, back, and breast. Even Lord Poteat, normally so demure, was captivated, though his eyes shifted guiltily from them when he saw her enter.

In the middle of it all sprawled Lord Mard, humpbacked and heavy, a glutton in every sense of the word. When he spotted Eadlyn, standing grave and horrified at the entryway, he gave a shout and pointed at her.

"You see, *Your Grace, this* is how a woman pleases!" He wiped away a spot of drool on his chin and lambasted her. "Not whatever you fancy yourself–our ruler? Fit to give us orders like a brazen bitch!" Lord Eldren belched out a laugh and Lord Winsor gave her a quick, sly smile, eagerly watching for her reaction as if she were a fascinating specimen of study.

Lord Poteat had glued his eyes to his lap, ineffectual and hesitant, looking like a man caught with his breeches down. Suddenly, ridiculously, Eadlyn wanted to laugh. Maybe they *were*.

If you bow your head in shame, why do you let this go on? she thought, raging inwardly.

Taking advantage of her speechlessness, Lord Mard continued on.

"I thought we could give you a lesson, since you seem so unfamiliar with the art of knowing how to please. These girls–" he slapped one on the rear– "they know what the people want and how to give it to them. They know what they are fit for, don't you?" he called, addressing them.

The pair tittered, glancing nervously over at Eadlyn, who felt she was made of stone.

Lord Eldren began playing with one of the girl's locks, her plaits long, wavy and red.

Like hers.

"They sure know their way around this table better than you!" he cried at her, pinning her with a lustful stare.

Without a word, (she would not dignify this with any response, giving them the satisfaction of having provoked her) Eadlyn spun on her heel and left with a swish of her cloak.

She pounded down the hallway in a fit of rage, incensed, her feet taking her brusquely to her brother's door, where she entered without thinking, the door banging behind her in the wake of her flurry of fury.

James sat up, alarmed, his bedsheets tangled in his knobby legs; his long, gaunt face was ashen, yet his pale green eyes were coherent with a vague understanding that something was terribly wrong.

"Eadlyn, what is it?" He implored, automatically trying to stand to comfort her, when, realizing he was too weak to support his own weight, he let out a sigh and relented to his swaddled prison. Seeing him in this state vexed and anguished her further, and Eadlyn wrung her hands, twisting her rings spasmodically along her fingers, each wrench giving her pinpricks of pain. *It is not his fault. It is not his fault,* she told herself, again and again.

"Please, sister, speak; you torment me." He looked as tormented as she felt; she noticed his graying shaggy hair had thinned and his neck was further riddled with spots.

"I only wanted–" she started, before her throat closed on her, preventing words from forming. With an effort she gulped, trying to remain as poised as possible for his sake, for she was already regretting disturbing him so abruptly and unduly.

"I have tried to act in your stead, brother. But the lords, they rebuke me." The words poured from her like hot, sweet poison her body was glad to be rid of as she explained the events of the last two council meetings.

James Kenworth listened gravely, turning paler and paler; when she relayed the incident with the prostitutes, he buried his face in his hands.

Eadlyn crossed the room and carefully went to her knees, her dress pooling around her. She put her elbows on the bed, stretching out her hands to grab her brother's in her own. "I don't say this to upset you, brother. I want to help our family, that is all. Soon you will be well, when Sir Lockmore finds you a cure and returns." This thinking was as wishful as the sorcery that slunk in the Land of the Whispering Shades, but somehow saying it aloud seemed to pacify her brother's agitation.

"You are to be regent?" He finally asked, voice low and worried.

Eadlyn nodded and squeezed his hand. "I would like your blessing, my king."

James shook his head, some of his old sternness stealing back into his mien. "Look what you have already suffered, Eady. I will not sanction more of this, even to save our family. I cannot bear to send you to those vipers, while I lay lame and insipid on this wretched sickbed."

Eadlyn let go of him, stricken.

"So you think I am incapable?" she cried. "Grandmother believes in me."

"What a great advisor she makes," James returned with surprising venom. "Her husband, my father, me, all cast aside by her. It will be you next, sweet one. She will–" he paused his speech as his body was wracked with coughs. "She will not protect you."

"We have no other choice, how many times must I say this!" Eadlyn felt overtaxed and feverish, with no patience for half-measures. "I do not need protection, I will and I must take this on. For us, for *you*. Please, brother, I need your support. With it the lords may be cowed."

The seconds stretched sluggishly by as Eadlyn leaned over her brother's sickbed, earnestly searching his face, silently begging him to give her this. Yet he could not look at her. He slowly turned away and fixed his vacant eyes on the wall, staring without really seeing.

Eadlyn drew back her arm and slapped him across the face.

James hardly reacted, almost as if he had been expecting it. His ruined face jolted backwards with the force of the impact and knocked into his headboard, his eyes dazed. The look he gave her was so pained, so anguished, Eadlyn had to look away.

She rose as if caught in a tempest, seething tears of horror springing to her eyes. The former Kenworth King sat there, quietly sad and bedridden, just like their parents. He could not protect them, he would not even help give her the means to protect herself. Briefly she wondered if the nicknames given to him in his middle age were true: that James the Gone was truly absent, never to return.

I cannot believe that, she told herself as she fled the room, covering her face and sobbing. *What had she done?*

CHAPTER 12:
twisted confrontations

ARA

Ara had been as good as her word. In the week leading up to her wedding, she had regularly snuck baskets of berries, fish, and bread down through the tunnels to the orphans of Hovel Hill, as she began to call them. She felt a kinship with them; nowhere else could she be more herself. She and Henry played riddle games, thumb wars, and even spent an afternoon playing catch with a large onion she had brought. She found him smart and inventive, and even Enoch, usually so reserved outside of her company, began to warm to them. Here Ara could almost forget her husband to be, Idran Daune, his face lurking in the halls of the castle, continually trying to speak to her alone and whisper in her ear.

She had tired of the entire Haywood host, and wanted to be rid of them. They had availed themselves of every possible opportunity to take advantage of Lord Slade's hospitality, and had been staying at the castle for so long now that even her father's face showed his displeasure, growing ever more worn and lined. Part of her was disgusted by the unpreparedness of her house, and she was sickened by the perpetual waiting.

Yet there she remained, trapped in a veil between two worlds–her old life and new. The unknown grabbed at her with a twisted grin.

But Ara knew she must take steps to prepare for her impending departure, as the orphans depended on her. It was after a quickly planned trip–they could not stay long and had to leave at the dawning of the night, for Enoch was expected to sit in on Lord Slade's council that evening–that Ara decided to confront her father.

She found him sitting in their library, with his head bent over a scroll. It was a rather secluded place, usually not crowded, giving Lord Slade ample time for undisturbed concentration. His hand fingered his prominent forehead and his dark

brows were furrowed as he muttered to himself, eyes scanning the page with startlingly rapidity. So engrossed was he that he startled when Ara appeared at his shoulder; she glimpsed the word manticore written in bold at the top before he quickly rolled the parchment up.

"Goodness, you sprite, you snuck up on me." He was using his parental voice, his words soft-spoken and his tone warm. The light of the room was dim, despite it only being afternoon, as thick velvet curtains covered the windows and rows upon rows of shelves containing all manner of scrolls and bound volumes lined the walls. Smoke from candles and dust clouds made the air hazy, and blots of dried wax stained the mahogany table at which her father sat.

"Father, something must be done to help the orphans in the villages. Put it on your council tasks." She had no time to waste on trivialities.

Lord Slade sighed, rubbing the whiskers that had sprung up on the side of his face–a result of a couple days' lapse of shaving. She had often evinced that reaction from him over the years. "Ara, we have orphanages set up to foster children who have no one of their own–"

"It's not enough, father, they're overcrowded and have been expelling those that inconvenience them, I've seen it, I found a group of them starving to death in a shack and–"

She stopped–she'd said too much.

Lord Slade peered at her, bringing his face to hers. He was one who liked to be eye-level to those he was conversed with.

"What's this? How have you been to the lower towns?"

Ara reddened slightly, but remained stubbornly silent. She would never give up her secret to the tunnels, though her father may know the entrances anyway.

"Ara," he chided, "how have you been slipping away from us? And with the wedding so near? Must I double the guards–add one to your door at night, perhaps?"

"NO–" she objected hastily; this was not how she had wanted this conversation to go, and could not afford being unable to leave her room this night, not when Henry and the rest were expecting her.

Her father chuckled and patted her hand. "You are spirited, daughter. I've always loved that about you. But you must be conscious of the risks you take."

"This is not about me, father!" Her voice began to rise, earning her a disapproving look from a stooped elderly gentleman reading in a nook. "You must help them, provide more aid, expand the care, give more food from the castle stores–"

"Why so urgent, my dear?" Lord Slade asked. "I will of course consider this, but these changes take time and resources. It must be approved by the council, coordinated by the coinmaster and the builders, officially made an edict, and decreed."

Ara could feel her anger mounting. "There is no time! Soon I will be gone, and with me the help I provided. I–" She felt a lump form in her throat and she could say no more.

"Shh, daughter," her father soothed, wrapping his arms around her and gently stroking her hair. This comfort left her defenseless.

"I am doing what you ask of me, just please *please* do this for me," she cried into his laced cream shirt.

"Okay. Okay." He reassured her repeatedly until her tears were spilt, a well dried up. After a few moments shame made her cool, and she straightened and extricated herself from his embrace, standing erect before him. She was disgusted and could not bear another minute in his sight. She loved him and did not want to leave him.

"Father, promise me," she said, gazing at those dark, intelligent eyes, trying to read beyond their remorse.

"I swear." He said, some of his old authority ringing in the oath. He opened his mouth as if to say more–

She whirled around and quickly left him, harried and spent. She paused in the hallway, trying to slow her agitated, quickened thoughts. She could not afford to hear sympathies from her father, whatever he had planned to say. She could not take it.

Wiping perspiration from her brow, she gathered up the folds of her dress, a proper plum color today, profuse and billowing, and started to walk on, when a slapping sound of flesh on flesh made her pause.

She darted towards the noise–too hastily–for as she turned the corner she found herself in the corridor where the Haywoods were lodged. At the end of a long, forlorn hallway, blackened like an old ruin, a pinprick of light appeared.

Ara made her way towards it, wary and creeping in the shadows.

Another slap, followed by a stifled cry. Ara stood stock still, heart pounding. She was quite overcome and filled with an unidentifiable sense of dread, but she knew she could never be tranquil until she uncovered the source of the conflict.

When she reached the corridor's end, the light she had seen was filtering from the door of a chamber, which had been left ajar. Reluctantly, and in spite of herself, she leaned forward.

It was a grisly sight; somehow even more so than that of Henry's flapping arm. Her husband to be, Idran Daune, stood in the doorway, grappling with a small, terrified looking maid. Her lip was oozing blood and on the upper part of her forehead a bruise was blossoming like some putrid flower. Idran was dressed crisply in navy, but the struggle had untucked his shirt and ruffled his sleeves. His hair was unkempt and as desperate as the hands that grabbed the maid's arms, trying to pin her down. He was all harsh lines, his figure dark, tall and imposing, his alluring face set in a sneer.

“Stop–struggling–” he grunted, trying to lift her dress as she writhed and twisted frantically, her plain face smeared with abject terror.

Ara was biting her lip so hard she felt it had permanently lost its color and would thus be devoid of life from this moment on. Her fear was clouded by rage, which eclipsed all sense of reason. She ran into the room.

“STOP!” she screamed with all the force of her might, her frame trembling and her hands balled into fists at her sides. Her hand crept towards her knife.

Idran instantly sprang into action, throwing the maid aside and advancing toward her, lithe and predatory. “Begone!” she shouted at the maid; the poor thing dashed from his chambers a mess of bitter tears, and he and Ara were alone.

“My little wife…” Idran purred, so close now she could smell his minty breath. He reached out and gently put his thumb under her chin, tilting her face upward to his. He was breathing heavily.

Seized with panic, Ara jerked out of his grasp. With a gasp of outrage, Idran tried to trap her with his arms, but she was quicker. She turned and kneed him in the groin, and he let out an agonized moan, doubling over in pain before falling backwards onto a patterned rug. He looked up at her, mouth gaping, eyes frenzied orbs, devouring the life within.

“I will kill you, you wretch!” He howled as Ara sprinted back down the corridor, eyes wide and unseeing, her face frozen in a spasm of tortured disbelief. Her limbs were moving but her mind was stuck on the image of him with that servant, of him coming towards her, of the look in his eyes when he vowed he would end her life. Her hand spasmodically gripped the hilt of her knife.

Her horror amplified as she felt the reverberations of his pounding footsteps charging behind her; he was right on her trail, she could feel his panting, hot breath bearing down her neck.

If she were caught–

I know the castle better than him, she thought, feverish and determined. *I am of the labyrinths this place was built on.*

And so she was. She flew around corners with hurtling abandon, cutting them so sharp she slammed her shoulder against the jagged edge of a wall. She winced and cried out as the skin was scraped from her body, but still she did not slow.

She neared her chambers; she felt a whoosh of air past her ear as Idran lunged for her–

–she pelted inside and slammed the door shut behind her, twisting the lock.

Just in time. His fists pounded against the wooden door frame, and he was yelling something, but she was too panicked to make it out…it melted into incoherence.

Ara whipped out her dagger and stood crouched by the entryway, ready in case he broke the door down. She held it out in front of her with both hands, shaking.

The doorknob twisted and writhed like a man being tortured and burned, pulsating with a strange energy.

A breath. *Like Noam taught me,* she thought.

She did not know for how long she waited, limbs clenched, heat radiating from her body, but eventually the noise subsided. Idran seemed to be growing bored of her.

Finally a short, thwarted "ugh!" left his lips and he sighed.

"All in good time," he grumbled, voice receding.

Silence.

Ara turned and pressed her back against her door, slowly scooting down it until her butt rested on the floor. Her knife fell from her slackened grip and clattered to the ground. Panting, jagged, sweaty hair sticking to her face, she forced herself to move and crawled across the room.

This time, as she collapsed on her own bed, no tears came. She felt hollow, spooled from the inside out like the pumpkins they would carve for Hallow's Eve. She stayed there until the sun dipped behind the horizon, unsympathetic to her plight. Ara half expected it never to rise again, so desolate was her state of mind.

Who to turn to? Noam, that answer was obvious, but somehow the thought of trying to explain to him what she had seen and endured filled her with a wriggling discomfort. Abruptly, not knowing from whence it came, a memory of her first flowering resurfaced.

A little over a year ago, when she had discovered the blood leaking from her, at first she had thought she was dying. Her mother had told her this was a blessing, but with the twisting of her stomach, harsh and hurting like thorns, Ara found that hard to believe. It had been her sister, Dainya, who had pressed a cold cloth to her forehead and told her how to prevent it from leaking down her legs.

Suddenly Ara's ribs panged so sharply she put a hand to her heart, afraid she would burst to pieces, undone from the inside out. She needed her sister; she must talk to her and tell her what had happened. She had offered her support once before, maybe she would again, despite Ara's previous rebuffing.

But first, Henry Nickles and the orphans of Hovel Hill awaited her.

She had made them a promise, a promise of aid, and it was one she intended to keep. Her determination to help them burned fiercer than ever–she must have action; she felt waiting like a limp, bedraggled flower would only diminish her further. In this way she could make a difference: her existence was no longer limited to a lady of a house or a silent bride to be. After a few deep, cleansing breaths, she gathered her wits and her courage and left the safety of her room to seek Enoch.

~

Ara's arms ached and her temples throbbed with stress and overexertion as they hauled baskets laden with food through the dingy tunnels, but she welcomed the strain, even reveled in it. Determinedly closing her mind to the previous events of the day, she focused on the winding turns ahead and the footfalls of her brother marching loyally beside her, holding a small candle aloft.

She had been pleased at Enoch's willingness to contribute to her efforts. He had obeyed without hesitation her proposed midnight excursion; she sensed he was much more willing to bend the rules when it served a purpose. She hoped he would remember this, and her, as he grew into manhood and assumed the seat of Knollwood.

Rounding the final corner of the tunnels, the shadows stretched and writhed like demented demons. A grasping hand emerged on the wall, and Ara let out an involuntary cry of fright, turning and half-expecting to see Idran closing in on her with his corrupt stench–but of course it was only Enoch, looking frightened at Ara's outburst.

Embarrassed, she trekked ahead with wild abandon, thrust herself and her cargo through the small door, and snuck through the rutted lanes of Hovel Hill until she creaked open the shack door. She half raised the basket over her head, expecting cries of gratitude and joy at their arrival, only to find the orphans huddled together, already eating and smacking greased lips with relish.

Henry looked up, spotted her, and bounded over, his prominent teeth showing through an unabashed, cheeky grin. It was the most elated Ara had ever seen him. She dropped her basket in order to shake hands, and stiffened when he pulled her into a hug. She was half supporting his weight as he clung to her with sticklike arms.

"I did it, Ara," he cried jubilantly. "Me and some of the others–" he pointed to a couple older boys and girls standing on the outskirts of the group and watching the little ones nourish themselves with pleasure– "we caught some rabbits tonight." He peeked over her shoulder, seeing the baskets, and exclaimed:

"And more provisions! With this we'll be good and set for a long while. Maybe you're a lady after all," he said slightly slyly as he reached over to ruffle Enoch's hair.

Ara smiled, feeling the dark pit her stomach lessen slightly. "You already know I am."

She paused. "I…may not be able to visit for a while."

Henry looked at her sharply. "Why not?"

"I am to travel away from here," she said, and, seeing the stricken look on his face, she quickly amended, "only for a little bit. I've asked my father to help and Enoch will still be here for you all." Her brother nodded solemnly to her words.

"I do not know your father." Henry folded his arms.

Ara sighed. "He gave his word." She sank to the ground and shifted her legs so they crossed one another. Henry and Enoch followed suit.

"I'm sorry I could not do more," she finally said.

Henry knocked his shoulder with hers, gently. He gestured to the paltry group gathered around the rabbit meat. "We are not helpless, you know."

"We know," Enoch spoke up. "But we can do so much more for you, you should see our kitchens, they are bursting with smells and sweets and–" he cut himself off, blushing and embarrassed.

"What Enoch means to say," Ara said, choosing her words carefully, "is that our home offers much more than we can fully appreciate, and we want to share that with you, as much as we can."

"That's admirable," Henry remarked, picking up a piece of hay and flicking it across the room. "But we'll never see the inner gates, let alone the castle you speak of. We must be content here."

Ara surveyed the meager furnishings of the shack. They had been able to build makeshift beds with the dirty linens that had been left to hang unwanted on the streets

and the feathers Ara and Enoch had brought from the castle. Now a space had been cleared for eating, and a small candle sputtered in the middle of the circle of orphans like a tiny beacon of hope. It was a pitiful existence, but they weathered it, as best they could.

For a moment she was seized with the strange temptation to stay here, to leave her life of luxury behind, but the thought filled her with more uncertainty than she could take, as well as no small amount of shame. Who was she if not a Slade? What would happen to her house, her brother and sister and parents, if she shirked her marriage now? She felt Dainya's voice in her head: *Duty gives you power. Trust me.*

"I made this for you," Henry said, tearing her from her musings and poking her elbow with the pointed end of a small figurine.

Ara took it from his hands; it was a small, crudely whittled wooden dragon, with a stout snout and a scaled back and tail.

Her fingers closed around it. "Thanks," she said, humbled by his generosity.

"And this for Enoch," Henry continued, handing to him a melted circle of metal that somewhat resembled a crown.

"Thank you," Enoch mumbled, cheeks pink.

They fingered their treasures for a moment longer before Henry once again broke the silence.

"There's something else," he intoned, his voice and demeanor changed. Ara was instantly put on her guard.

"What is it?" She instinctively gripped Enoch's arm, not sure if she could handle any more unwelcome news.

Henry jerked his head to the side, eyes moving towards the back of the shack, where a small exit flap had been nailed to the section of the lower wall where the wood had rotted away. From there they passed through, Ara dimly aware of the other's eyes on them as they stepped out into the clear, moonlit night, the sky glittering with stars.

But Henry's eyes were not heavenward; they were fixed on the ground, at a little mound of earth, rounded out and protruding like a small, makeshift hill. At the head of this hill, two small sticks were propped vertically, crossed in a tiny, neat X. Realization struck Ara like a bolt of lightning.

"Who?" she whispered, now gripping Enoch's hand, his little fingers sweating and trembling in her own.

Henry's eyes were red, though no tears fell onto his breast. "One of our little girls, Maisie. She was brought low by fever. And we–" his breath rattled with suppressed grief– "we couldn't save her."

Enoch clapped his hands over his eyes as if to will a bloody, moonlit spectre away and began to cry in earnest, a distressed wail erupting from his mouth. Ara could picture the little girl in her head; she had matted hair, and would often give Enoch a wildflower when he visited. One by one, he had replaced the flowers from the castle garden with her heartfelt gifts, keeping all in a slightly meager, demented bouquet on the desk in his chambers.

Ara rubbed his shoulders, feeling numb. The toll of the day had extracted too much, she could not find room in her heart for yet more grief. Ever tempestuous, a dull fury began to rise inside her–

The next she knew she had wrenched away from her brother and was flying at Henry, beating his chest with her arms, crying, "Why didn't you tell me? We could have gotten a healer, or found a treatment!"

Henry pushed her away. "How could I get a message to you, from down here up to that unfeeling black mound of rock you call a castle!" he yelled. "I never know when you will come or when you cannot, or how long you will be kept away, and now you say you do not know when you'll be back!"

Enoch rushed forward and tried to separate them, but Henry grabbed his shoulder and dragged him to the side. He glared at Ara, his lower lip wobbling, and she felt the deepest pang of shame. Her wrath at last had been unleashed–on the one person who had not deserved it.

"That was wrong of me," she mumbled, trying to remember her manners.

Henry sighed, a tear dripping down his nose, and reached up a skinny arm to scratch at the mane of brown hair drooping down his neck. He nodded in assent.

Ara went over to Enoch, who was still shaking, and gently shushed him, pulling him to her side. "I am so sorry," Ara said, knowing the words were an insufficient balm, uttered in a vain attempt to staunch the heavy bleeding of a fellow heart.

"We must get back." *What else could she say?* She had never been good at goodbyes.

Henry nodded again. Ara and Enoch turned their backs to him, stumbling up the muddy, treacherous path back to the lopsided street. She could not bear to reenter the shack, to look upon the others and witness their brief moments of reprieve when she was unsure that she would ever see them again. But she turned back one last time, to behold the solitary figure of an orphan boy standing next to a simple, makeshift grave.

"Farewell, Henry Nickles," she whispered, before leading a distraught Enoch towards the tunnels, a prison extracted from the roots of nature.

As they wove their way through the underground labyrinth, try as she might, she could not get her little brother to calm down. She felt that his tender nature made him especially susceptible to bouts of intense grief.

So severely shaken was he that he dropped their candle, where it promptly extinguished, leaving them in utter darkness. His breaths grew wild, his footsteps uneven and frantic–Ara could feel the terror and despair radiating from him in palpable waves; it infected her.

She was holding his hand, as she was wont to do when he was distressed, but he kept trying to tug from her grasp. Ara's disquiet was heightened by pervasive gloom around them–without the aid of even a speck of light, she felt they may be left to wander the twisting maze forevermore, lost souls.

She began to feel their way back–her palm running along the damp earthen walls, tracing their bends as best she could. Some of the barriers surrounding them were hard stone, others compact moss and dirt, still others the dark obsidian of the castle walls…but when she felt the cold sting of metal, her hand slipped along its edge and retreated with a hiss of pain. Wet flowed slowly down her fingers; she was bleeding, how much she did not know.

A felt the–now familiar–rising tide of panic take hold of her, threatening to burst.

Ara lasted the blood, sucking it from her fingers and trying to judge the damage of the wound, all the while conscious that they had somehow taken a very wrong turn, for never before had she come across metal. She took a hesitant step forward, ignoring Enoch's petrified "What's wrong?" and found that the metal wall was not a wall at all, but a gate, barring their way. She felt along the intricate steelwork just to be sure, and afterwards turned to her brother.

"We've gone the wrong way."

She sensed, rather than saw, the trembling of her brother's limbs. A dull thud sounded behind her as his legs gave way and he collapsed to the tunnel floor.

"Enoch, are you alright? Enoch? *Enoch?"*

No answer. Ara pressed a quailing hand to the dusted, cold floor, trying to ground herself.

Then, a horrible rattling, clanging, and scraping of metal on metal. Ara thought of the haunting grumpsnarks and grindarks of her fables, not coming to join her revels after all, but coming *for* them…they were found at last.

She blindly reached her hands out, expecting groping shadows, creeping claws, slavering jaws and eyes to emerge from swirling fog, but there was nothing there at all, nothing but the–

–earsplitting crunches that stuck Ara's ears as the rods of the gate crunched in on themselves, warping and twisting like malignant spines. She put her hands over her ears, hunching over, the blood from her hand smearing across the side of her face.

When the noise did not subside, she relented her ears to its din and began to crawl away from the dying gate in front of her and back toward where she thought her brother lay.

"Enoch?! Answer me!" Desperate, she stretched out her hands—

–and latched onto soft curls. Ara felt along her brother's small, round face until she gripped his hands in her own. She gasped in surprise; their joined fingers were searing hot, and vibrating.

"Enoch, what–"

His breaths were heaving, he leaned his head down so it rested on her chest; she felt his forehead, it was clammy and dripping with sweat. Something was off, they were surrounded by this *energy*–not a malignant force exactly, but something pure, and powerful.

Aghast, Ara patted his little head.

"Ara, what's happening?" Enoch gasped out. She could not respond; she did not know. She thought she had felt–something, something that made her think of what she had once read in the pages of her fables…something that had once resided in the fingertips of their ancestors…

Could it be? The metal lay before them, a melted, smoking ruin.

"Did you see what did this?" She pressed, shaking him. "*Answer me.*"

"I–I don't know," he gasped.

"You never touched it?" she pressed. She knew she hadn't. He shook his head.

Ara tried to impel him further, but her questions floated drearily over his head, left unanswered.

We needed a path, and this has given it to us, was all she could think.

From then on, Enoch spoke little. As she led him past the melted, twisted globs that had once been a gate, she quickly realized they had found a shortcut, for soon they reached the winding stairs that led back to the passage of the fruit painting and began to ascend.

Ara had thought she had taken all she could this day, but this revelation had upended almost every rational thought in her mind. All she had left were impressions: fear, awe, disbelief, and curiosity mixed and whirled inside her like spellwork.

The painting opened on its own for them, and without questioning it, Ara thrust herself into the light. She hastily closed the portrait hole, the pears and pomegranates winking at her as if they knew something she didn't.

Blinking blearily, the first thing she did was turn to examine her brother.

Enoch was pale, his dark brown hair sticking up on all sides, his grey eyes alight, his expression feverish and wild.

"Ara?" His voice was small, and scared.

She shook her head and put a finger to her lips. This was best discussed alone, without the possibility of prying eyes and ears. Enoch followed her without protest.

As they rounded the corner, the candelabra that perpetually sat in front of the painting like a stalwart soldier began to rattle. It trembled. Then it fell over, clattering to the ground, its light extinguished.

The corridor descended into darkness.

CHAPTER 13:
now, for the truth?

DAINYA

She and Harland returned to the castle in silence, horses trotting side by side, devoid of the urgency that had taken them across the windswept and lonely rustling grasses. It was still dim, yet the dark was slowly giving way to a faint blue in the east, rising from the corners of the world like a streaming ribbon. The pink breath of dawn would soon be approaching, gliding over the castle and transforming into a warm yellow glow.

They dismounted and led their horses by the reins back to the stables. Dainya softly stroked Shadowdancer's mane before giving her over to the stableboy. She looked on wistfully as her mare was led away, knowing the pocket of comfort she had found in her sojourn was too at an end.

As they neared the inner gates, the ease Dainya had felt in that field slipped away, and found herself unsure of what to say to the Haywood heir before her.

"I bet you think you are clever for this," she finally remarked.

He gave her a clumsy, absurdly exaggerated curtsy. "Had to make sure you weren't eaten by manticores…Oh, I forgot. That's our forest." He snickered at his own joke, raising his brows and looking down at her, almost as if awaiting her approval.

She was about to shove at him when movement caught the corner of her eye. They had been walking past the part of the castle that housed the kitchens, and from the windows within issued light from dripping candles. Passing within that light were two identically mussed heads of dark hair, one slightly taller than the other. With a swish of cloaks they rounded the corner and disappeared out of sight. The corridor went dark.

Dainya stopped abruptly, and it was several paces before Harland noticed and turned around, peering at her suspiciously.

"Not planning another escape, are we?"

She shushed him, waving him away with her hand. He frowned, absently running a hand through his golden curls.

"What's going on…?"

"I saw something." She paused. "I'm going to investigate. If this is what I think it is…" she ground her teeth. *What were they thinking?*

"I am going with you," Harland insisted.

"No. I can handle my siblings myself." Without waiting for an answer she marched off to where she suspected Ara and Enoch had disappeared, leaving a disgruntled Harland Haywood behind.

Dainya darted inside the castle, head swiveling measuredly as she tried to catch a glimpse of figures moving in the pitch darkness of the corridor; this quickly proved impossible. She nearly tripped over a fallen candelabra, and as she hopped on one foot, her toes smarting, she thought she heard a pattering of footfalls ascending the winding staircase that led to the upper floors–their family chambers.

Though a stranger to the act of stealth, Dainya was capable of an agile speed, and soon she found herself within earshot of the hushed voices of her siblings. She was about to make her presence known and give them a good scolding, but upon hearing their words, which finally crystallized into coherency like mist to ice, she kept in the shadows, wanting to understand all before revealing herself.

"Ara? I'm afraid…" Enoch was saying, voice trembling, cowering.

"I know," Ara responded, and Dainya was struck at the heightened emotion in her voice, the surprising vigor of her step. She was holding aloft a small candle, likely having grabbed one from a brazier along their obsidian walls, and her hand was trembling: with excitement or anxiety Dainya did not know. Perhaps both.

Puzzled and intrigued, Dainya followed them to Ara's room, where her sister sat promptly on her bed. Dainya clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her cry. With her face upturned to the light, Ara's gaunt face was covered in dust and blood, and Enoch's was likewise smarting and dirty; their hands were raw and scrubbed red. A tinged smell of metal and something else, something pulsating and tanged with an odd vivacity, lingered, almost emanated from them. Concerned, Dainya was sorely tempted to burst in and demand answers, but an odd sense that they may not reveal all to her stayed her hand.

Ara looked up at her brother, who stood almost helplessly before her. She nodded toward Dainya, who leapt aside into the dark blanket of obscurity, thinking for one horrible moment her sister had seen her, but she only said, "The door."

Enoch moved to close it, and as it clicked shut gently, Dainya pressed her ear to its hard wooden surface, too curious to feel shameful.

A soft flump sounded from within; Enoch had taken a seat next to their sister.

"Enoch, this is unheard of, if what I think is right–but I can't even be sure what I saw was real–Oh, how can it be true?" Ara rambled excitedly.

"Are you hurt? How are you feeling?" she asked her brother urgently.

"I feel…fine I guess," Enoch said quietly. "It's just my hands…"

"Mine are raw too. Here, let me see…"

A pause; Dainya had to strain to hear her brother's next words.

"What do we tell mother and father?"

Footfalls reverberated through the closed door, like as not Ara had begun pacing.

"Nothing, we tell them nothing, Enoch. I can't even make sense of it…"

Dainya imagined her sister putting her hands on her hips, a mark of defiant thought, a making up of her mind.

A sigh. “This…it’s so rare, it might frighten them, and others. They won’t understand it, or even believe us. So we aren’t going to tell them.”

Sounds of protest.

“Okay, okay, at least, not yet.” Dainya heard a resolute rustling within, and the heavy thud of books on a hard surface resounded.

“I’ve read all about it in my books, Enoch. I can help us through this.” *Through what?* Dainya wondered, now thoroughly perplexed.

“But you’re going soon.”

No reply, Ara seemed to have ignored this comment.

“Okay…(the flipping of pages commenced)… okay! Here it is. The Paranorm Trifecta’s Seven Orders of Study. This is it, Enoch! I think the answer to what happened down there lies within these pages.” Ara’s mettlesome voice reverberated throughout the room.

What on earth did a coven of magicks have to do with anything? Dainya furrowed her brows, irritated with Ara for her constant preoccupation with her legends and myths.

“What do you mean?” Enoch asked. Dainya rolled her eyes; it was just like him to indulge her.

“I *mean,”* Ara began, punctuating her words, “that what we just saw was inexplicable. Metal melting and twisting with no one but us down there, it doesn’t make sense. But what if there *was* an explanation? What if there was something, some power, that could make it happen? Something we thought buried…”

Ara was talking hastily, as if seized by some fervid inspiration.

“No,” Enoch shouted with surprising vehemence, suddenly seeming to understand. “I don’t like this, it’s not right!”

Dainya still could not grasp the essence of the conversation–what was Ara saying? That they had somehow seen…what? Magic? What a ridiculous jape; she couldn't believe she was wasting her time with this. The prank was going too far, even for Ara. She was going to scare the wits from the poor boy and then who would be heir?

"You're right to be wary, Enoch." Ara's voice was surprisingly gentle. "Magic was once the cornerstone of Labentis, and since it has been driven from our realm, there have always been those–the power-hungry, the desperate, those grasping for meaning, or for faith, who have searched tirelessly for it. They would use it if they could.

"But I won't let that happen, Enoch, I won't, I promise you. I will keep our secret."

Soft sniffles came to Dainya's ears, followed by a soft creaking of the floorboards. She imagined Ara holding Enoch, rocking him gently back and forth, her face hidden from her brother's sight and plastered with a wicked smile at the prospect of another successful dupe.

Dainya didn't know why she stayed there, pressed against the door, listening to nothing but a heavy silence. Some part of her felt inordinately downhearted, surprisingly hurt at being left from her sibling's embrace, though she knew she had done nothing deserving of it as of late.

She waited for the curtain to fall, but even after many minutes it had not. She was tempted to either burst inside or walk away. Indecision left her immobile, a tightrope walker on an ever-thinning string, and before she could act, Ara spoke again. The spell broke.

"I think it was you," she said softly. Dainya knew that tone, it was as genuine as her sister got. She is not playing a farce after all, she realized sharply.

"*Me?!"* Enoch cried out; Dainya pictured Ara nodding her head vigorously.

"Who else? There was no one but us down in the darkened tunnels."

The tunnels?! Oh, they were in for it, Dainya thought peevishly.

A hesitant murmur of assent. “Maybe.” His voice was so sweetly uncertain, Dainya felt a pang for her brother.

“Try to do something now,” Ara implored. “Harness your emotions. Latch onto what reaches out to you, don’t shy away from it.”

A moment passed before anything happened. “Reach out your hands and dig into yourself!” Ara kept saying, to no avail. Until.

An odd breeze threaded past Dainya’s legs and into the room, and Ara let out a jubilant shout.

Dainya had had enough. She twisted open the doorknob and marched inside, or tried to, but when her eyes landed on the sight before her she curtailed the movement, astounded and halting.

The air which had whooshed past her had coalesced into a pillar, and in that monument stood her little siblings, their hands aloft. Enoch looked pleased and astonished, smiling in disbelief. Ara stood at his side, her dark choppy hair blowing in wild gusts, harried in her movements as she reached over and emptied the feathers from her pillow, where they latched onto the windy inferno and took flight, spinning and flying in unnaturally pristine circles. She was staring in exultation and agitation at her brother, who seemed to Dainya to be in the middle of some…sorcery.

It was some time before either noticed Dainya. Enoch was first to spot her, and when he did, he gave a shout, startling his sister. The shimmering air dissipated and the feathers fell to the ground, like birds without wings–dead before they hit the ground.

Ara whirled, following his gaze. Her expression was impossible to describe–relief, guilt, fear, and defiance all flashed in her countenance with startling rapidity.

“Enoch, go to your room,” Ara said, eerily calm. Enoch wended his way out swift and true as an arrow, eyes downcast and humbled as he passed his oldest sister. She

watched him go as if he were a stranger, rather than someone she had known all her life. She could not reconcile what she had seen with her innocent, naive, and petulant little brother. Once so normal, now he felt as foreign as the Spirits that lurked on the edges of the living world.

Trying to remain in control of the situation, she arched a brow icily at Ara, looking to her for answers.

"You can't tell," she burst out. "No one can know. No one but us."

"I don't even know what it was that I saw."

"Magic, Dainya!" Ara rushed towards her, her face, still marred with dried blood, tremulous and thrilled. "He has magic!"

Dainya scoffed, turning away. "You think the stories are true, and we are descended from those who once carried this power, and…what! That Enoch is a savior reincarnated to bring House Slade into glory?!" she sneered. All her dutiful observances, her sacrifices, her mundane, *human* toiling, and suddenly a ten year old boy usurped it all with a flick of his hands.

"Not a savior, Dainya," Ara insisted. "This is a burden. We must help him carry it."

"And what about my burdens? What about *yours?*"

That stopped her tread; a pall darkened her face; her fingers twitched at her sides. A leftover gust threaded through the room, making Ara shiver. She suddenly looked young and scared, her usual ingrained confidence fled like a vanquished ally.

"It's not about me right now," she spoke each word haltingly, yet clearly she was itching to get something from her chest.

"No, something is bothering you. Tell me. Is it about Idran?" Ara cocked her head in surprise at Dainya's adroit guess, lower lip wobbling. Dainya braced herself. She did not do well with people crying.

"What did he do?" She pushed, her tone a grade slightly more severe than she had intended.

Ara launched, or rather, stumbled, through a confused story involving Idran Daune in a grappling match with a servant ("Male or female?" "It was a girl.") and him advancing on Ara afterwards, causing her to flee.

"Did he touch you?" Dainya questioned sharply, feeling carved from marble. She dreaded the answer.

"He–he tried to," Ara said, slow tears trickling down her face.

Dainya crossed her arms, magic momentarily forgotten. A solution to the Daune problem had been brewing in the back of her mind for some weeks now; she felt it was time to act at last.

"Listen to me," she said to Ara, "I will handle this. You'll stay here and care for Enoch. You *won't* marry that brute, you hear me?"

Ara's body convulsed and heaved with the force of her anguish, and it pierced Dainya to see her carefree self brought so low. Duty was for her, not her elfish, slender sister. She was not suited to it.

"Father, he w-would never agree." She choked out.

She may be right, Dainya admitted to herself. The entire reason it was Ara and not her being married was to show a measure of defiance to the oppressive Samuel Haywood, something she could understand. She must persuade Lord Slade to listen, not only for Ara's sake but for the sake of her *own* future. For what would she be if she lingered here at Knollwood while her newly-enchanted prodigy of a brother assumed the throne? The eldest Slade, forgotten and wallowing in lost potential.

"Never mind that," she finally responded. "Go see to Enoch, I'll deal with father." Dainya picked at the scabbing oozings of blood on Ara's profile, causing her to flinch away and give her a dirty look.

Dainya cracked a grin in spite of herself. “Take care of that blood.” Ara gave her a half-hearted, solemn salute as she collapsed back on her bed, feet kicking back and forth. *She won’t do it,* Dainya thought in fond exasperation.

She retreated to the door, but turned back one last time to see her little sister, thin and barely a woman grown, wrap her arms around herself as if to ward off unwelcome spectres and thoughts.

“Ara?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

She turned quickly away before her sister could respond and shut the door behind her.

~

The following morning saw her up with the dawn, walking restlessly through the corridors, perpetually gliding along bannisters and sliding down stairways. From the windows of the highest tower she could see the vast expanse of villages below, smoke from their huts mingling with the sleepy grey sunrise. She thought unaccountably of her moonlit ride of yesterday, and of Harland and his annoyingly cloying manner before pushing him away to focus on two simple yet daunting aims of the day. She wanted to first discuss with her mother the distasteful prospect of magic, and thereafter she would be free to make her idea on preventing Ara’s impending marriage bear fruit.

The tasks before her enlivened her; when she had studied her face in the mirror that morning she found her round face flushed and dark eyes flashing. She had pinned her raven hair back into a smooth, silken wave, and as she crossed the courtyard she thought proudly of how it had retained its shape over the long course of her passage through the castle. A little thing, but one that she could control and master, groomed, tight, and rigid.

Dainya passed through shrubs and flora as she wound her way to the heart of the castle gardens, hoping to find her mother there, for she often sat among the buzzing insects, sharing in their hummed gossip as she read. Her hopes were realized when she came upon a quant figure turning the pages of a large hardbound volume. Lady Jane Slade's long, thin brows were quirked and her posture relaxed, for no one but Dainya could observe her here. She bit her thumbnail as she turned a page, and Dainya instinctively wrung her tongue over her chipped front tooth.

"Mother?" she said, as softly as possible so as not to startle her.

Lady Slade turned, and the expression on her face was placid, as if she had not fully returned from her revere. The corners of Dainya's lips quivered into her downturned smile; she had seen so little of her mother as of late and had forgotten how much she missed her company.

"Dainya!" She exclaimed happily. "Yes, darling, what is it?"

"I wanted to talk to you about, well, magic. I mean, I know Ara loves the legends, but why do you cleave to the tales in such a way? I've just been curious lately, I guess." With Ara it was so difficult to broach a subject, but with her mother she found it easy and painless.

Lady Slade patted the seat next to her perch on the wooden bench. Dainya sat.

Her mother reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear, searching her face with a curious concern and warmth. "This is something I would have expected from Ara, not you," she said delicately.

Dainya looked down at her lap. "I know. But will you indulge me?"

Her mother smiled, eyes misting as she reminisced. "As a girl I loved books growing up, but none could capture me more so than the tales of elves and goblins, dragons and magic–in them I found a world much richer than my own, which at that time consisted of dusty shelves and empty coffers. I wanted to believe there was

something of its like in this world, if only I looked hard enough. I guess it was the nostalgic child within me." She laughed gently, amused.

"But you never found it," Dainya supplied.

"Not for a long while," Lady Slade admitted, nodding. "I had thought finding love with your father and having you had been magic enough for me, that is, until I became pregnant with Enoch."

"Enoch?" Dainya said, disquieted. "What does he have to do with it?"

Her mother patted her hand, patiently chiding. "Give me a moment, I will get there."

She sighed and looked up at the birds flying in loops overhead. "When you're desperate, your state of mind becomes warped, like memories over time or stale fruit left out to rot. So was I at the advent of my third pregnancy.

"I had yet to give my Ballard a proper heir–" Dianya flinched imperceptibly– "and I knew I would soon be past childbearing age. As I grew with child, my senses became dulled, and my superstitions awoke in a delirium-filled fervor. The night hung still like bated breath when I, my skin sweat soaked yet icy, stumbled from my chambers, beyond the castle, through the grasses, and out onto the white sands of the Strip of Bleached Bone."

Dainya listened, rapt, for her mother had a distinctive flow of narration that both soothed and enticed.

"My ill-advised object was to reach the Land of the Whispering Shades, and I hoped the Spirits would listen to me there, and bestow on me a healthy baby boy. All I remember from that night was a full wolf-moon hovering, its maw casting an orange shroud over the sky.

"Ballard was hysterical when he and his patrol found me at the border the next morning, curled among the sands, cold to the touch, shivering, and near death." Her

mother chuckled wryly, and Dainya looked over at her, slightly stunned at her display of mirth.

"But somehow, the Spirits blessed me. I regained my health and delivered the healthy baby boy I had wished for. Your brother, Enoch." Lady Slade looked significantly at Dainya as she said this, making her bristle.

"That was the work of healers, mother, not magic," she refuted, insistent.

"How can you know?" She spoke it as if wondering the answer herself.

Dainya threw up her hands. "Magic is unnatural! We have to focus on practical, tangible things we can actually *understand* in order to find answers. The solution isn't in praying or groveling to some unknown entity, but in our own hard work and ingenuity." Suddenly fervid, Dainya arose and placed her hands on her hips, pacing before coming to a stop in front of her mother, who had not moved but was observing her, head tilted.

"Look what happened to grandfather!" she cried. Many years ago, Lord Ballard's father, the easygoing, adventurous Eauvan Slade, had headed an expedition into the elusive lands of the west, never to return. Dainya's father blamed his disappearance on magic, and from then on he abided strictly by the law and counsel of his advisors, because Eauvan had not when he had decided to brave the uncharted shores of the Shades. The story lay heavy and bleak in Dianya's mind as she pictured her genial grandfather overcome by sorcery, selfishly harbored and devastatingly wrought.

"Magic is not to be trusted," she reaffirmed, glancing sidelong at her mother as she did so.

Lady Slade surveyed her carefully. "Everything in our realm serves a purpose, Dainya. I believe magic is a part of this connection. It too has a role."

"Only if you choose to believe in it."

Her mother dipped her head. "True. Only if you choose to believe."

"Thanks for sharing that story, with–with Enoch. You must really be grateful for him."

"I am. Just as I am for you," she replied gently.

Dainya twisted her lips, hoping it resembled some sort of expression of appreciative recognition, and left her mother free to dive back into the leatherbound pages of her book.

Once more she found herself wandering, yet it was a significant apprehension that now dogged her steps. She had not liked her mother's story, a tale which seemed to lend more proof of Enoch's unnatural ability. And her belligerent insistence at its merit, after all that had befallen her family from the plague of enchantment!

You also came from sorcery, if the histories are to be believed, a small voice insisted, but Dainya angrily shook her head, battling with herself. But it was no use agonizing; this was something out of her hands, so Dainya instead bent her thoughts to the calamitous notion that was marriage.

She worried her lip, both wanting and fearing to seek him out. She hated his ugly scar and the way his eyes unwound her with their mischievous glow, and she trusted him even less. But oh, faint hope! If she could claim his rose at last, she could save Ara. Part of her thrilled at the thought of having the Haywood heir as her own, but Dainya pushed it away, unsettled.

She did not even have to look for him, for they met in their usual happenstance way. She was just crossing the doorway to the council chambers when Harland emerged from the room opposite; a storage closet where they kept their extra weapons, unused, dusted, and decaying, the remnants of a time of war.

Brown eyes caught hers; they changed, but she could not read their expression. Without a word, he was before her, curls and chin coiling downward to carefully regard her. Dainya's breath hitched, and she endeavored to compose herself, for she did not

know why she was thus undone. Perhaps it was the daunting proposal she had in store for him. It was certainly not the way his features: strong nose, stern countenance, even the red of his disfigurement–once so irregular in her eyes–shone with the light of the afternoon sun.

"My Lady." His usual address. "I trust your sibling are well? You left me so, ah, abruptly last night, I was truly worried something was the matter." He put a hand over his heart and gazed at her with upturned brows. She could not tell if he was in earnest; the enigma was sinister.

Her face must have hinted at her discomposure for Harland softened his demeanor and took hold of her elbow, gently steering her to one of the arches in the arcade that surrounded their courtyard. A partition rested under its opening, he leaned on it, elbows hovering over its edge and hands folded, gazing out over the vast array of greenery. She wondered how much of it ever sprouted in the north.

"You do not have to tell me what's wrong," he finally said, oddly benign, "if it's a private family matter. I am well versed in its like."

What did he mean? Nevertheless, the admission spurred her on. "Idran cannot marry Ara," she said, as fiercely as possible.

He leaned back his head and looked at her with bemused skepticism. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yes."

He sighed. "Ever poised and solemn, you are. I cannot draw you out, make sense of you."

This surprised her. "Nor I you, with your joking riddles and elusive slinking about. You have not even been at dinner these past three days."

He clicked his tongue. "Noticed, have you?"

He had disarmed her, Dainya thought with irritation; she must win the conversation back.

"Why did you give me your rose, Harland?"

He blanched, looking almost apprehensive for a moment, before his expression cleared. "So this is what this is about? You wish me to claim you?"

No, I wish to claim you. "Do not think so well of yourself. I am doing this to spare Ara, it is the best solution."

"What is, precisely?"

"You know. Marriage. Betrothal. Call it what you like."

He laughed, sharply. "Ah. I see…" He rubbed his thumb along his lip and straightened, brows furrowed, the muscles in his arms tensing as he considered.

"It is the original union your father wanted," Dainya pushed.

It was the wrong thing to say. Harland sneered slightly and his eyes bulged as he huffed and shook his head sardonically.

For a moment, fear took hold of her, thinking he may erupt, but it never came. Instead, he deflated, and the same forlorn look he had harbored in the darkened glen beyond the castle walls grasped him, malignant.

"It is the union I want, too." She forced herself to say it, to admit it, hoping this would sway him, prepared to cringe and make her escape if it did not.

He stood very still, peering at her in his enigmatic way, and she reddened under the scrutiny. He muttered something she did not catch, which she asked him to repeat.

"You really care for me?" Odd was his glance, and he fidgeted with his sleeves.

What to say to such a direct query?

"I…do."

Dainya could no longer deny what she felt, however much she had tried to fight it, however dismayed she might be at the slivers of affection that pin-pricked her heart. She had warned herself against him, his faults were many, she was not quite sure she could trust him–but what choice did she have? She felt in some odd way her desire had been

justified at last–for now, here he was, the very means with which to save Ara and fulfill a newfound duty: to her sister and her heart.

An equal mix of triumph and sadness flashed in Harland's eyes; he let out a breath and rubbed a hand down his face.

"You would accept me?" was quietly spoken.

"Do not ask me, ask my father." Glad to be back to the brunt of business, she hurried on.

"You must go to him and ask this of him. Tell him it is what I wish, tell him of Idran's character, which you know well, and how it would be at Ara's peril for her to be bound to him. Tell him, *vow to him,* that this is all the Haywoods will ask of the Slades, and he need not fear that acquiescing will weaken his position." She pierced him with her gaze, and his lips quirked upwards.

"You drive a hard bargain, Dainya Slade. Or should I say, because it seems soon to be, Dainya Haywood?"

He paused, mirthful, as Dainya folded her arms and glared.

"Okay! I relent. It is too soon." He held his hands up. "You wish me to pledge my fidelity to you, and give my word this will be honored to dear Ballard?"

"You will call him Lord Slade. And to answer you, yes, that is precisely what you must do."

"Why do you not go to him with this request?"

"He will not listen to me, he never has," she remarked with bitterness. She felt angry at the prospect that her father would more likely agree to a fellow, future lord's proposal than her own, and ashamed she could not handle this herself, like she had promised Ara.

"You think he will listen to me?" Harland seemed incredulous.

"We must try, Harland!" Dainya pronounced passionately. "Idran Daune is a poison that will crush the life from my sister as if she is a broken bird. We cannot give him that chance."

Before she had thought differently, for the wedding had already been in place, and she had found it inadvisable to disrupt the order of things. Now, she wished she had acted sooner.

You had not known what to do then, she told herself. The possibility had grown in her mind like a planted seed.

"We," Harland wondered aloud, "we! If we are allies, and I commit myself to you, you must swear loyalty to me as well, to prove you are trustworthy."

Dainya braced herself. "What do you wish?" *A kiss? A blood pact? What does his puzzling mind value?*

"I sell in secrets. From you, one thing in particular…*What happened last night when you left me?"*

She studied him; he was deadly serious. "I do not know," she tried.

He tsked and sharply turned his head away. "We are to be family soon too, you are aware? Does that not make me privy?"

A pause.

"Or do you not want to be joined with me after all?"

Dainya's mind raced, images flashed in quick succession through her mind–Enoch, looking eerie with his hands raised and air swirling round him, Ara's bleeding, crumpled frame as she told of Idran's assault, the lost, devastated look on her father's face when he first spoke of her grandfather's end…Enoch free and cured from his cryptic curse, Ara safe and laughing, still at Knollwood where she belonged, she and Harland side by side, crowns on their heads, her own children heirs, proper ones, the way she should have been…

Harland was looking at her expectantly.

Now, for the truth?

CHAPTER 14:
the wedding

ARA

Days had passed and still no word from Dainya. Meanwhile, Ara's life had become like the living, writhing inferno she had once read punished bad souls. Nearly two months ago, when her fateful engagement was first announced, Ara had simply refused to receive any kind of instruction from her parents, but now, since her wedding day was at the end of this week, her mother and father had begun giving her joint lessons in the council chamber in order to prepare her for her "new life". They were grueling, tedious tasks that involved etiquette, proper forms of address, needlework, manners, customs she must adhere to in the north, and ominous mentions of the momentous occasion of "the wedding night". The only thing that remotely interested her were mentions of the Forest of Grotesqueries, but mostly she spent her time resistant and stubborn, staring out the discolored glass of the windows and wishing she could be with the people who truly needed her.

She had set Henry's whittled dragon next to her box with the knight on it from Noam, who was the only person besides Enoch who had been capable of cheering her these past few days. Every time he passed her in the corridors or stood guard outside her lessons he offered her a smile, a pat on the shoulder, or a word of encouragement. Best of all was when he had presented her with a tiny emerald stone, the very color she had been so searching for in the banks of the streams of Knollwood. She kept it with her at all times, along with her dagger, and occasionally would urge Enoch to try to levitate them, hoping he could.

Since that emotional night in the tunnels, her brother's powers had been frighteningly mute. She wondered if she had been wrong…but quickly discarded the notion. He was the male heir of Knollwood, it made perfect, simple sense. She wanted it

for him, maybe more so than himself, and she could not bear to be disappointed in this. Ara had not pushed him hard, as the frequent chidings of her parents from her own lessons rang in her mind at all hours, and instead tried to offer him what comfort she could. Besides, he had lessons of his own to attend to.

Enoch seemed to have calmed, but sometimes he would lapse into disconcerting quiet that reeked of uncommunicable grief and strife. In those moments, she would take him in her arms and hum one of the songs their mother had once used to soothe her, softly lulling him to a fitful sleep.

Ara was thinking of her little brother as she approached the council chamber for yet another session, but stopped short when a figure emerged from a stairwell at the end of the hall. It was an obscure, winding one she did not normally traverse, for it only led up to the rookery and was a long and dreary climb. She hid behind an arch, and, after being struck with a peculiar sense of foreboding, watched as the figure neared. Tall, muscular, slightly winded from the stairs, he tugged at his golden hair as he bent his neck downward, studying what seemed to be a slip of parchment.

It had been long since she had last glimpsed Harland Haywood, for he often took supper in his private chambers where it was said he allowed only his uncle, Sebastian Haywood, for company. Brimming with anticipation, Ara watched as he gripped what seemed to be a letter of correspondence in his hand, a cloud passing over his face as his eyes moved across the page. Whatever it contained, it seemed unwelcome tidings. Leaning as far from her hideout as she dared, she glimpsed his face in full: his mouth was taut and grim, he seemed wrought to his most irate, but she thought she saw a glimmer of fear in his large eyes as well.

He passed her without observing her, caught in a web of his own musings. As he did so, his hand swung down to his side with the letter clutched in his grasp, and on it Ara glimpsed a red waxen miniature of a manticore–the seal of Lord Samuel Haywood.

Pondering this, she slipped inside the council chambers, where her parents were waiting to instruct her on how to hold a ladies court, one of the many future duties that awaited her as Idran Duane's wife. But she was abstracted, the sneaking Harland Haywood and the undivulged contents of his correspondence occupying her mind and leaving a corrosive, acidic taste in her mouth.

She had to warn Dainya that he was not to be trusted–but she never got the chance. Time ticked on stubborn and rancid, its stink as unyielding as that of the fish being prepared en masse in the kitchens to be served at her wedding feast.

When she finally lay her head down, her pillow did nothing to soften the dull blow which the knowledge she was to be married on the morrow dealt her. The week had slipped away, and with that Ara's hope. Her stomach felt empty, like a gaping pit, though she would have preferred that it swallow her up than be confined to the polluted, embittered embrace of Idran Daune's arms.

It seemed all that was left was to go on. With that dismal notion she began to drift off, but not before a final thought passed through her wearied head, as melancholy as the gloomy glow of the moon–

Dainya, have you failed me?

~

The gown shimmered white and wraith-like, as phantom as the bride to be born. Ara shivered as servants wrapped her in the unfamiliar, vapory apparel, conscious of her mother's watchful eye overseeing like one of the three ancient fates. It was this white dream, come at last, that so blackened her thoughts, this ghostly shimmer of a new, displaced life that made her gasp ghastly in feverish anticipation of great change. She felt restless and ruined, but she desperately clung to a gritty hope like one drowned clawing for the water's surface, it nestled within her like the dirt on the fingernails of a dead man crawling from the grave.

Ara kept wishing fervently for her sister, but only her mother was before her, cupping her cheek and pronouncing her “pure as the snow of the north.” She felt anything but–with her hair woven neatly into a braided bun, a flowing veil settled atop her head, and the beaded, beautifully embroidered dress sticking to her skin, she felt more dirty than when she had crawled through the mud and grime of the tunnels and Hovel Hill.

This was not her, this docile girl, with her pinched pink cheeks and inscrutable long face, who did not seem to care for the monstrously anguished, upbraided revolting of the heart within; in fact, it saw her wobbling on the precipice of a jagged cliff, her feet slipping beneath her…and pushed her off into nothingness.

This usurper’s hands were folded neatly as she neared the closed, barred entrance of their great hall; this stranger’s eyes were fixed and blank as the magnificent doors were opened for her and she processed down the endless expanse of the room, alone and disconsolate.

Ara dimly acknowledged the splendor surrounding her: braziers were burning high with colored purple flame; the rafters overhead were bedecked with garlands of flowers in striking lilac, magenta, and canary yellow; the long dark tables on either side of the room were covered in berries and fig leaves, roasted pig and smoked fish, their eyes cleaved out and glittering obsidian gems stuffed in their place. Lesser lords and surly squires were seated in rows along these tables, all eyes turned upon her, gouging her from the inside out. When she reached the front half of the room where the tables ended, the usually great empty space was filled with higher nobles who stood surveying her from upturned noses and brooding, formidable knights whose armor glinted and glowered at her as she passed.

At the head of the hall stood Idran Duane, grimacing humorously at her in his cruel, harsh way, a navy–the color of the Daune seal–doublet fit tightly over his chest. To

his right was his elderly father Sir Carlon, and next to him stood Harland Haywood, dressed dashingly in a blood red tunic. Ara searched achingly for Dainya, but she was nowhere to be seen. At the center of it all stood her parents, Lord Ballard and Lady Jane Slade, resplendent in garments of a deep, royal purple. They smiled at her with a tentative benevolence, and as she neared the dias on which they stood, slightly risen over the rest of the congregation, her father extended a hand to help her ascend.

With a frightening briskness the ceremony began, overseen by a drooping old cleric who forced her to face the groom and extend her right arm so that their hands grasped each other's forearms. Ara avoided her intended's eyes, and kept trying to turn her head to where Enoch and Noam stood, slightly off to the left side of the dias, close to her parents, but she could not manage it. Her dress was too restricting, and this, coupled with the ferocity of Idran's grip, nearly drove the breath from her body. She tried to exhale in quick, quiet gasps; she felt her head dipping forward as she strove to stay upright; her eyes brimmed with tears she frantically willed to remain unshed.

Her left hand reached for her dagger that she had managed to slip under the tight seams of her bodice, and its steel presence gave her comfort.

The cleric bid them pledge vows to one another by repeating his words. Ara did not register what was first spoken until Idran squeezed her arm and said:

"Behold my oath that if I take anyone to be my wife I shall take you if you will yield to me."

Ara remained silent, her jaw clenched and her eyes wide. She did not know what to say.

"Behold my oath that I should be at your disposal," Idran hissed at her from the corner of his mouth.

"Behold my—"

A strident clatter of metal resounded; the crowd turned their heads in unison, and out of the corner of her eye Ara saw it–an arc of violet flame seared her vision as an armored figure stripped a torch from its brazier and let it fall to the ground. The figure had slipped back into the crowd before Ara could catch his face. She searched amongst the petrifying glints of steel for the offender. To no avail.

"What is the meaning of this?" Her father's voice boomed as voices began to murmur uneasily.

Is this Dainya's doing? A hopeful strain lifted Ara's heart. *Let it end,* she thought.

She glanced up at Idran–he too was occupied with hunting for the source of the disruption. She took advantage of his preoccupation and ripped her arm from his before turning to search for her sister.

Instead her eyes fell on Noam; he was silently yet rapidly moving towards her, his hand hovering over the sheathed sword at his side. Her brother had melted into the shadows, her mother looked strained as she agitatedly fingered the necklace at her throat, her father furious and unnerved at the interruption.

Another clatter, another brazier fell, flames began to lick up the sides of the embroidered curtains, all consuming.

Chaos began to erupt as people shouted and jostled one another in their hurry to leave the ceremony. Looming over her, Idran was seething and seemed to have momentarily forgotten his bride–she took her chance and rushed towards Noam, straining. Decorum abandoned, the hall had become a mess of swirling silks and pointed hilts, but Ara focused on Noam's determined gaze, his flat face twisted with intent, his swelling arms reaching out to her–

–she met his embrace just as a swarm of bodies converged around them.

Her father was yelling and trying to restore order, pointing a wobbling finger into the crowd as Noam dragged Ara away from him and her mother. She clung to his cold

metal chest, her thin veil, as wispy as the rays of the moon, still streaming over her face, confining her view.

She knew something was terribly wrong–but what she could not discern. The dark purple flames continued to consume the elaborate tapestries that had depicted the lazy airs of the south and crisp woods of the north, filling the room with a treacherous haze.

Ara began to tremble, pressed against flailing arms and panicked cries. All was in disarray. She twisted against Noam's grip, reached a hand up, and ripped the veil from her head, her scalp tearing as she pulled out a chunk of ragged dark hair in the process. She let it fall to the ground, where it was trampled and torn apart by the fray.

Finally.

And then, she saw it.

A figure was moving rapidly towards her father, where he stood upon the dias, still trying futilely to restore command of the room.

It came up behind him, dark with shadow. It raised its arms high above its head.

Ara screamed, but her voice was lost amidst the mayhem. She wriggled from Noam's grasp and tried to launch herself towards him, eyelids blown back in shock.

A great broadsword emerged as if from a nether realm and swung in a deadly arc–

–and cut off her father's head in one fell swoop.

His body fell in slow motion, a puppet with its strings cut.

A dull ringing in her ears.

Ara felt her knees give way. Noam gathered her in his arms; she saw the dark spark of her father's crown as it tumbled from the body and came to rest at his killer's feet.

Golden were his curls, deadly red was the defaced scar upon his face, and with it mingled the dark drips of her father's blood. Harland Haywood stood over his body, an unpalatable conqueror.

Ara screamed again; she felt it tear from her throat like a demon unleashed, but she was helpless, helpless as soldiers coated in red and silver stepped from the shadows, surrounding the meager forces of the Slades. The fire raged about them.

Heard high above the tumult was the keen, tortured sound of her mother's wail. Lady Slade fell to her knees and bent over her husband's prone, perished form, shaking with distress.

Ara raised her arm and struggled against Noam's platemail, trying in vain to reach her as she was borne further and further away.

Her mother had risen to her knees and was looking up at Harland, her perfect poise replaced with a monstrous contortion of the features. She would flay him with her eyes if she could.

Harland remained motionless, sword weeping blood. He was breathing sluggishly, his countenance haggard and ill, his eyes almost feral as he took in the carnage.

He raised the weapon once more with difficulty, holding it over her mother's breast. The swordpoint trembled, hesitated, inches from the fabric of her dress.

A moment of gut-wrenching unsurety.

Then it dipped, and plunged into Lady Slade's chest. Her mother fell with a sigh, hit the ground hard, and went still.

"NO—" Ara howled, clawing at the prison of Noam's arms, beside herself with fury and grief.

"Stop," he implored, voice low and insistent. "We must flee here."

"No…." she sobbed, pounding at his chest. "No…." She lapsed into incoherency.

"This castle is under control of House Haywood, by edict of my father, Lord Samuel!" Harland's ragged voice rose over the cacophony of struggle as tables were upended, boots stamped out fires, and ironed fists smashed into the faces of those few still struggling.

He was urgently surveying the room, searching for something….Ara dug her head into Noam's chest and pressed her eyes shut. She knew he was looking for her.

When she opened them again he was striding purposefully across the hall. Panic gripped her. She lost sight of him as he disappeared into the throng. A couple of moments later he emerged, pulling a little boy by the arm. It had not been Ara he sought after all.

The boy's face turned towards her and she turned to stone. She knew that frightened look, that mussed dark hair…those big grey eyes.

"ENOCH!" she shrieked, resuming her frantic struggle. "ENOCH, *ENOCH!"*

"Please…" she whimpered, losing stamina, a mess of tears. "Do not take him too, not my brother…"

It did not seem that Harland wanted to harm, instead he kept hauling Enoch towards the exit doors. A horrible thought occurred to her. *Did Harland know their secret?* And, ever reverberating in the back of her mind: *Where is my sister?*

Her brother's little face was frozen in an expression of disbelief, slack jawed and gaping, eyes glazed over in stunned shock. He did not fight; instead he went along like a rag doll, his feet dragging and stumbling over rubble, running blood, and spilled juices of fat from the forgotten feast.

Someone threw the door open for Harland Haywood and a bit of blue sky filtered in. Ara watched desperately as the pair passed through, their silhouettes intertwined as Harland's arm lifted a sagging Enoch. She stared in anguish as her brother vanished from view, her heart writhing against the brittle cage of her ribs.

The hall smelt of tears and sweat and tasted of blood and ash; everything was charred into an unrecognizable ruin. Chairs were overturned, breastplates and helmets lay smashed, and towards the dais the Haywood knights had rounded up the last of the resistors–they would be looking to them next.

Noam picked her up in his arms and charged toward the far wall, where he lifted a fire-blackened curtain and rammed his shoulder into a block of stone. It slid open to reveal a hidden passageway, one knew only to the Pincharions that Ara had not yet discovered.

“He will be back for you, make haste, make haste!” He practically shoved her at the hole, and she tumbled through. His armor clinked against wet stone as he landed beside her, quickly running ahead. She followed in a frenzy, rage filling her so intensely her hands began to vibrate. She felt as if her skin had been ripped from her face, and only a bloody mess of bone and blood and marrow and orbs that were once her eyes remained. Her jaw was clenched, a stormcloud brewed within. Her mind clanged with a single thought:

Not to be trusted not to be trusted not not NOT I knew, I KNEW–

Soon they emerged in a dim hallway close to the stables; Noam grabbed her hand and gently guided her forward. Thudding footsteps and the chink of swords clashing resounded, echoing around them, eerily distorted.

“There you are!” A voice from behind yelled in triumph. Ara’s insides froze.

“Leaving so soon? We hadn’t even finished the ceremony!” Idran Duane’s voice was taunting as he drew his sword, placed it hilt up and leaning on it as he casually surveyed her with those cold, flinty blue eyes.

Ara ripped her dress in her urgency to grab her dagger. She grasped its hilt and held it out in front of her, pointing it at him with both hands. Just like before.

Idran chuckled slowly, shaking his head. He tossed his sword up in the air and caught it, before brandishing it at her, tip first.

"I once promised I would kill you, do you recall?"

To his credit, Noam did not falter. Without hesitation he pushed Ara behind him and drew his own weapon.

"What would prompt an…*honorable* young man such as yourself into killing his wife?" he asked calmly.

"We aren't married," Ara said, gazing at this gutted groom before her.

"Yes…a minor mishap," Idran mused. "You see, when Harland told me I was not to have you, I cannot say I was very pleased. No, no, not pleased *at all.*"

Abruptly he smiled and darted forward to strike; Noam moved to stalwartly block his blow. "But then he offered me Knollwood instead," he said cheerfully. "Idran Duane, warden and keeper of this very castle. Can you imagine it?"

The idea of this castle, her home and her House, in his hands was enough to make Ara want to tear him in two. A strange fire coursed in her, she felt it around her, pulsating with a strange energy.

Both men began grunting with effort as the fight became more ferocious. Ara watched their twists and parries intently, trying to find an opening. Idran was still dressed in his groom's outfit, he had no armor. And when he raised his right arm to slash, his armpit was exposed…

Ara gripped her dagger, ducked under Noam's striking blade, and lunged. She drove its point into Idran's underarm, stabbing and then ripping it back out with all the force of her hold. Blood spurted in a deliciously thick waterfall, and a wrathful grin of satisfaction stole over her face.

Idran yowled in pain and struck out in an uncontrolled lunge; his sword caught Noam on the side just as the other man's blade swooped down across Idran's hand,

cutting off two of his fingers. The weapons clattered from both men's grasp, sliding across the floor and out of reach. Idran had doubled over with pain, clutching at his deformed limb; now he looked up and glared at Ara with red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes, veins bulging. He was biting his lip so hard it was bleeding.

"When I take you for myself" –he grit his teeth– "*and I will,* this sword will not be the only one that sheds your blood."

Ara spat in his face. It trickled down his soot streaked skin and congealed in the pitifully sparse whiskers above his lips.

Not if I kill you first.

She may–nay, *would* have done more, but Noam yanked her away.

"Leave–him–" he gasped, chest heaving from exertion, adrenaline from the fight fast fading. Ara relented, the possibility of capture too iminent.

They half ran, half limped from the scene.

~

It was ages since she had awoken to that eerie phantom dress, it was ages since she had seen her parents murdered and her brother taken from her. Time stretched thin over her in a horrible blanket of cruelty. Her eyes were dark holes, empty and drained. Her fingers tingled with an odd verve.

Her sister was likely dead, and their castle was a smoking ruin, overrun by villainous usurpers. Gone were the Slades, all except herself.

As Noam silently lifted her onto her steed, she made herself a promise: she would wreak a deadly vengeance. She would get her brother back even if it meant her own death. What was death to her now? It clung to her skin as they galloped away to the west.

I will reclaim my house, she vowed. *I will never feel home again.*

CHAPTER 15:
the tipping of the scales

DAINYA

Her feet bounced against the bottom of the wagon in a humdrum of impatient activity, causing it to rattle. Despite the sleek black ornamental accents adorning the horse-drawn carriage, to her it felt a prison. She would much rather be mounted on Shadowdancer, but the journey was long, and Ara was to be coming with them. Dainya smiled softly to herself. Her sister had always been hopeless on a horse.

She anxiously ran over in her mind the tumultuous events of the past week. She had given Harland very, very specific instructions on what to say to her father about their proposal; so determined was she that he adhere to all her demands that she instructed him to repeat what she had said verbatim until it reached the deepest pit of night and they had to retire.

This routine was repeated for several days before she was satisfied. Harland had not made a willing pupil–he often appeared preoccupied and antsy, and kept mumbling to himself. Sometimes he would look at her with an expression of such poignant anguish she glanced away, uncomfortable.

When the eve of Ara's wedding finally came, they could prolong the proposal no longer. Disliking that this crucial audience was out of her control and still slightly distrustful, Dainya had met him in the early morning and waited outside the doors to the council chambers after he had slipped inside, giving her a wink and putting a finger to his lips. Dainya rolled her eyes; he should know that she was ever scrupulous and did not need to be hushed.

She was about to put her ear to the door and listen in when she spied a small crevice at the top of a pillar. Shimmying up it, she found herself in a small nook that might have been a perfect fit for Ara, but for her was small and cramped. Nevertheless, it

offered her a vision of the throne room, so she huddled there and pressed her eye to an opening, squinting to get a glimpse of the figures inside.

She heard the pair of low, deep voices before she saw them. Then appeared her father, striding to the council table and seating himself heavily, rubbing a scraggly beard that had taken over his chin and looking harried. Hovering over him was Harland, tall, erect, shoulders thrown back; he spoke to him softly, gesticulating with his hands.

"My Lord, I know the hour is early, thank you for granting me an audience," Harland said, voice smooth and dripping like honey.

"Of course, of course," Lord Slade responded, waving a tired hand that said *get on with it*.

Without preamble, just as Dainya had insisted, Harland launched into their proposal: Ara was in danger from Idran, he and Dainya had grown to care for one another and would request to be married instead so Ara could be safe.

"It would be an even match, unlike Ara's unbalanced union," he finished. Dainya mouthed the words along with him, nodding to herself in satisfaction. Harland's effortless charm impressed her; he spoke persuasively and with confidence, almost making her believe the sentiment behind the words was real.

"And this was my daughter's idea, you say?" Lord Slade spoke up, studying him keenly.

Harland nodded. "Yes, my Lord, she was most adamant."

"She cares for you?"

"She has said so."

A bout of silence, broken only by the distant chirping of birds just breaking their fast. Dainya waited in breathless anticipation, they had him, she knew it–

"It would most please my father," Harland remarked, almost to himself, in an audible tone of delighted triumph.

No. Dainya reeled back in dismay. *He has ruined us*.

Her father flared, just as she knew he would. “Lord Samuel, you say? Did he put you up to this, to insist that his original terms be accepted? Despite the plans we had made?” His voice began to rise in his agitation.

Harland spread his hands, sensing his mistake and trying to placate him. “No, my Lord, I only meant to suggest it would be beneficial to both houses–”

“Yours more so than my own!” Her father intoned harshly, his pride pricked. “You have come to my lands and my castle, taken advantage of my hospitality, in order to seduce my daughter! And she has fallen for your tricks!” He rose, and pressed his finger into Harland’s chest, scowling.

Dainya’s eyes had widened before she narrowed them in scorn. Did her father really think so little of her? That she was some lovestruck ninny? Was that all she was good for? *Look what I had done to the stableboy, Theodore!* she wanted to cry, *I sent him away, always upholding my duty and honor!* She crouched immobile, torn by anger, and forced herself to refocus on the conversation unfolding below.

Harland chucked, mirthlessly and derisively. “How dare you. Of what you speak I am innocent.”

But her father was not done; a dragon had reared its terrible wings within him, and its fiery fury roiled in his eyes, threatening to burst.

“How do I even know she agreed to this? You would take from me my firstborn, my most dedicated and conscientious child, upon whom I rely?”

“She did not wish to speak to you, fearing you would refuse her–”

“So you took it upon yourself to go in her place, is that it?” Dainya could not believe what she was hearing. She, professed as valued and respected, in a better position to plead their case? How could she have misread her father so?

Lord Slade sighed, as he was wont to do, and leaned on the back of his chair. “I suspect Idran Daune is a cruel man; I am growing old, not blind. But I am a man of my word. Preparations have been made, the wedding is on the morrow, if I called off the union I would be breaking faith with the Duanes.

“I must hope that Idran will be tamed and tethered in marriage, subdued…” he trailed off.

“You don’t really believe that,” Harland interjected, but Dainya’s father went on without acknowledging he had spoken.

“-and if he is denied this union, the full force of his scorned self and wounded pride will turn upon our house, upon my daughter Ara. I cannot risk that menace, the man is too unpredictable.”

Precisely why my sister cannot be chained to him! Dainya wanted to scream in fury, but Harland merely stood mute, quietly accepting the decision.

“My father will not be happy about this,” he said finally, infuriatingly calm.

Lord Slade turned away from him. “Your father is more like those monsters that lurk in his forest than he thinks.”

The expression that transformed Harland’s face in that moment was indescribable. The eyes staring at her father’s back had blown wide, looking mad yet ironical. An odd smile twisted his face as he murmured,

“Don’t I know.”

Snapping out of his unpleasant revere, Harland strode towards the doors, blonde curls flouncing. As he slipped out, he turned over his shoulder to give one last warning.

“Tread carefully.”

And he was gone.

A desperate mutiny was taking place inside Dainya as she turned to see Harland march into the corridor, viciously scratching at his scar. Canon booms beat her heart and

splintered wood cracked her bones as a dismal realization took hold: all she had planned was unraveled and shattered in a cloud of egotistical wrath.

She hunted Harland down, cornering him in the training yard, where he was hacking at a straw-stuffed dummy in vicious strikes, a brewing pall contorting his features. Composed as he had appeared before her father, clearly it had been a facade of forced calm.

"Harland." He turned, staring so blankly she wasn't sure he really registered her.

"I assume you heard your father's verdict," he said, voice flat and resentful.

She approached him, reached up and gently grabbed his chin, and pulled his face toward hers.

"The plan goes on," she said, steeling herself and looking at him with deadly seriousness.

His face twisted, and he disentangled himself from her, gazing sullenly at the ground.

"Get Ara. Whatever it takes," she insisted, trying to pin him with her gaze, but he avoided her eyes. "Understand?"

"I–I can try." Harland murmured, lacking conviction.

Dainya wanted to throttle him. "Do not try!" she seethed, "*DO* it!"

"I will be there, too. I will assist you in freeing her from this," she continued, but Harland's gaze snapped to her as she said this, slightly panicked.

"No, you cannot!" He settled himself with an effort. "The task you give me will not be easy…" Suddenly he smiled and pulled her in by the waist, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear. He was leaning close with hooded eyes, long lashes falling over rich brown orbs. "I am to protect you," he murmured, stroking her cheek. Dainya worried her lip, looking up at him uncertainly, but her retort was lost to her as he gently pressed a chaste kiss to her lips.

"You will wait to receive us," he whispered, titling his face back slightly from hers, strong, thick nose brushing her own. "You must be our escape, our refuge," he said, beguiling and assured, holding her close. He glanced off into the distance, where a slight breeze was shaking the grasses, his face mirroring the darkening gray clouds that had sunken into the tapestry of the sky overhead.

"Who knows what may come."

Now, sitting restlessly in the carriage, outside of which one of the guards she had paid off with an inordinate sum was waiting to whip the horses into action, Dainya repeatedly and anxiously smoothed her gown over her knees. It was a beautiful silken shade of deep magenta, one that she had rarely worn. She had packed her things, as much as she could carry, and had stolen into Ara's room for some of her possessions as well, including her box of stones and an odd, crudely made wooden dragon that had been sitting next to it. She had even grabbed a book of fairy tales, one where the pages were most torn and thickened by bended corners and memories of happy perusals.

As the minutes dragged on, Dainya began to doubt. How was she to leave the only home she had ever known for the distant cold of cheerless northern shores? Abandoning her parents, departing from her brother, perhaps forever? Was she dooming them to a silent existence of tormented misery, broken by their betraying daughter?

I am choosing my destiny, she reassured herself. *And I am saving my sister*.

She looked out the carriage window, which was slightly fogged. Surely the ceremony had long since started. What was taking so excruciatingly long?

She peered closer. Something was wrong. Darkened purple smoke was being emitted in great gusts from the hall. She lunged for the handle, crashing open the carriage door and leaning halfway outside it.

Her ears perked, clashes of a distant commotion reached her, as well as the smell of burning and melted metal. A great crashing noise resounded, and she startled, twisted her foot where it rested on the cushioned seat. She winced.

A beat. Another. A breathless, pounding heart.

Then, the entry doors to the inner gates crashed open and Harland came sprinting towards her. His scar seemed to burn with a deadly glow, blood splattered the side of his face, he was gripping an inert, tiny figure. *Ara*.

Dainya exhaled in relief, and ran out to meet them…as she got closer, her face fell in baffled confusion. Cradled in his arms was the limp form of her brother, soot scouring his profile. His eyes were open and lolling, disoriented and petrified.

"*Where is my sister? What happened?"* Dainya demanded, alarmed, while reaching for Enoch. Harland shouldered past, grunting with effort, and she trailed behind, jogging to keep up with his flashing strides.

They reached the carriage and Harland thrust himself inside, Dainya following closely. He set Enoch on the far side by the window and rubbed a hand on the seat, leaving behind a dark streak of dirt, soot, and blood.

Harland slapped the front side of the roof to get the guard's attention, screaming, "Drive, *DRIVE*!"

They hurtled through the outer gates and into the wobbling cobblestone streets of the lower villages, bouncing in a confused medley of bumps.

Panicked and angry, Dainya accosted him.

"Tell me what's going on!"

Enoch leaned his head on the corner of the carriage, dazedly unaware of his surroundings. Harland sighed, lifting his hand in the air before him, where it trembled and shook violently. What had that hand seen? What had it done?

"I'm so sorry, Dainya," he said, voice crusted with deep misery. Dainya reached up and took his hand in her own, lacing fingers, but her grip was tight and unyielding. Demanding.

"What?" she said urgently. "What's going on? Is my sister alright?"

Harland shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said hollowly. "I only could rescue Enoch from–" his voice broke.

"From what? What happened? We need to go back!" she cried, straining for the door. Her voice rose uncontrollably. "STOP–STOP! ST–"

Harland's hand covered her mouth; it reeked of ore and ruin.

"Shhh," he soothed, removing the oppressive limb and reaching up to stroke the back of her head with aching tenderness.

Dainya jerked her head out of the way. "Speak *now*, or I'm throwing you out of this carriage."

Harland looked grave, but something else lurked behind his eyes, something she could not pin down. "It was Idran," he said finally. "I always knew he was troubled, unpredictable. But this–this was beyond anything I had seen. He set fire to the place, everything was chaos, the smoke–I could not breathe in it. I could not find Ara, but Enoch was lucky enough to wander into my grasp." There was something odd in his voice. He stopped, glancing over at her little brother, still holding him in a vice-like grip while Enoch remained inert.

Dainya reached over Harland and gently shook his shoulder. "Enoch? Are you alright? Enoch, did you see Ara? Is she alive?"

His big gray eyes were heart wrenchingly sorrowful and owl-like as he quietly shook his head. Tears started to flow unbroken down his plump cheeks as he began to cry silently, shaking.

He had never looked more powerless. Dainya tried to soothe him, switching places with Harland–who had been sitting in the middle, separating them–to take her brother in her arms.

“Enoch, what about our parents?”

Stillness, nothing except for the clattering of carriage wheels. Harland stiffened beside her.

Her brother said nothing, just stared wildly up at her as if she were a ghost. Dainya pressed her forehead to his and squeezed her eyes shut, leaning away from Harland and his bloodied hands, despair and disappointment leaking from her.

She tried to rationalize; if she could figure out how to go forward, she may yet be saved. Who ruled in Labentis had always been an unremitting balancing act, a tightrope waiting to snap, scales waiting to tip, footholds ready to slip…she was weary of the endless conflict, the tireless loop of being crushed under its cogs.

Almost all that had led her down this path was gone, lost aims and foiled dreams trodden underfoot. Dainya gripped her brother’s hand and stared out the dreary window. A faint glimmering of stars and traces of constellations were beginning to emerge, hearkening to the waking of the night long before it had fallen.

They turned a jagged corner and Dainya glimpsed the castle of Knollwood one last time as it and those she had loved slipped silently away.

CHAPTER 16:
the crowning of justice

EADLYN

Her hand still stung with the memory of her wrath, lifted up against her defenseless brother. It sweltered and ached under her gown, but the physical pain did not trouble her–it was the havoc resulting from her wrought, unchecked temper that rendered her steps as downhearted as the worn stone staircase she climbed.

She had traded in her usual pearly cerulean gowns for a stately, almost pompous one of emerald green. She had insisted on the color, as it was her brother's, and would signify to the people she meant to carry on his legacy and his rule as regent. Indigo and white jewels inlaid the dress, making it cumbersome; she struggled to lift the lengthy folds as she ascended, trying valiantly not to trip over her own feet.

The official coronation ceremony had been her own request, much to the surprise of all, even Dame Vena Kenworth herself. But Eadlyn saw the way clear, and she could no longer back down. Her pride would not allow it, and neither would her determination to right the corruption festering in these very walls, much like her brother's disease. This daunting task of rule was for no one but herself.

Only yesterday had news reached her via one of their spies on the outskirts of the north that Knollwood had been sacked, and House Slade's castle and lands were now in the hands of Samuel Haywood. Idran Duane, the youngest Slade girl's intended husband, had been named its warden. The tidings were grave, and ominous.

"Is any Slade still living?" she had inquired of the messenger, a ragged looking knight, half dreading the answer. She pictured the small, sweetly curious faces of Lord and Lady Slade's youngest children as she remembered them from the Tournament of Roses, and prayed that the Spirits had not taken them.

It was not to be. She wrinkled her nose in disgust as she replied, “Only the eldest daughter. The parents, and, like as not, the two younger ones, were killed in the blaze.”

Had Harland Haywood returned to Bridgewall with the eldest Slade? she had asked, receiving an answer in the affirmative, though their return was shrouded in secrecy and little of the woman had been seen since.

Eadlyn immediately took the news to her grandmother, who received it with a vindictive shout and a great raising of clenched fists, overcome with a frightening temper. Eadlyn let the blow fall, not yet daring to speak aloud what they both knew: with the Slades under their control, the Haywoods would look to them next.

“We are more precariously positioned than ever before,” her grandmother rasped at last, rapping her knuckles harshly on the surface of the council room table. “With your brother indisposed…”

“I must act,” Eadlyn interrupted. She had thought things over, and now went about explaining her plan. A show of strength was needed. And so began preparations for coronation as regent.

Eadlyn had implored everything be taken care of quickly, while she spent all of her long, tiresome days locked up in the council room, deliberating. She needed allies. The Slades were overrun, and the Haywoods were gathering their strength…enemies, enemies pressing in on all sides. They were caught in the middle of a noose, the knot growing tighter by the minute.

She buried her head in her hands for several moments, feeling chillingly alone. She had not yet told her brother the news, fearing what it would do to his health. When she finally looked up, her gaze fastened on one of their many windows. This one overlooked the north, where dark woods lay…but beyond that, a glimmer of blue.

Eadlyn rose and walked over to it, placing a ringed hand on the limestone frame as she surveyed the unfolding realm below. There it was in the distance, Dreymond’s

Loch, the roiling, icy lake, the formidable fortress no one dared to cross. There would be no point in it anyway, unless you wanted to meet the tribe of hard hearted Iceshorn that had settled there even before the Great Civil War, a group, it was rumored, renowned for their prowess in pillage and plunder.

There would be no point. Unless…

~

Eadlyn reached the balcony only slightly out of breath, and waited in the shadow of its arch for a moment, hands on her hips and head down, panting and bracing herself. The site she had picked for her coronation was an audacious spot. Below her, in their splendid courtyard, awaited nearly a quarter of Crescent Grove; the richest lords and the poorest beggars alike had come to see her claim King James's crown. Anticipating her entry on the balcony were the council members, a small guard of knights, and her grandmother.

Her russet hair had been pulled back into an elaborate twist and inlaid with golden drops; her head waited to receive the crown. She gathered herself and glided forward, into the light where all could behold her, thinking of nothing at all, nothing but the warm afternoon sun warming her face. She turned it upwards, jewels glinting in the glow and hair blazing fire, listening to the excited bustle of the assembled crowd below. There were some gasps, murmurs, and shouts, but no exclamations of jubilee reached her ears. An uncertain silence fell; they waited to see if she would address them.

She had not planned to. Expectantly gazing at her from the edge of the balcony, surrounded by the sturdy stone railings carved with knights and queens and kings and witches was Dame Vena Kenworth, her gnarled hands holding a dark, velvet green pillow. Atop it rested an elegant golden crown. It pulled Eadlyn in, almost intoxicating in its lustre, but guilt mangled her insides…she thought of her brother.

No man in your position would hesitate, she thought. *This would be their birthright. What was she if she could not claim this power and only reveled in its burden?*

Eadlyn hesitated; her grandmother noticed and beckoned her, her wrinkled frame going rigid with displeasure. But she did not move, stuck between the crown and the hush of the people below her, even as her grandmother's eyes bulged in their uncouth way. She turned away from the crown's gleam.

"People of Crescent Grove!" she shouted, reaching the balcony's edge and leaning out over it, hands gripping the stone head of a queen and the swordpoint of a knight inlaid into the rails.

"I come before you today to take my place as regent of House Kenworth! I come before you not as your ruler, but as your defender!" Her constant, incensed worry and fear from the past two months came pouring from her in a fountain; the people gazed up at her in surprise at her direct address.

"Yesterday I received grave tidings. House Slade has been ruptured, devoured by the greed of the Haywoods." Groans and gasps erupted around her, and the lords of her council started and began to whisper feverishly to one another. She took a perverse delight in their agitation.

"Lord and Lady Slade brutally butchered, good men and innocent women and children struck down and burned alive!" she cried, turning back to the crowd, voice rising with fervor.

"We must keep Labentis free from their tyrannical grip! I promise you, I will not rest until we see them torn down, and House Kenworth restored to its former glory!"

The crowd rallied and roared beneath her, marking their assent, a mess of churning bodies. Arms reached up towards her as flowers and hats and helms were vaulted into the air.

"On the morrow, I leave for Dreymond's Loch. I will be the first to sail across its perfidious waters, to go beyond the Dying Shores, and to meet the Iceshorn. I take with me a small fleet of ships, able fighters, and my own strength of will! I vow we shall succeed, and–this I promise you! –I will bring back allies so we may fight this foe!"

Another roar of approval. Eadlyn's grandmother was looking at her in shock, but a hint of fierce pride lingered in her eye.

Eadlyn raised her fist in the air, the long sleeve of her gown flapping in the wind like a banner of her own.

"To justice!" she cried.

"*JUSTICE!"* the crowd echoed, bellowing. Eadlyn turned to her grandmother and nodded, and she came forward. When she stood before her, Eadlyn knelt.

"I, Dame Vena Kenworth, in the stead of King James Kenworth the Third, do hereby crown Lady Eadlyn Kenworth, firstborn daughter of King James Kenworth the Second and Margaire Severe, acting regent of Crescent Grove!" Dame Vena raised the crown high above her for all to see before assuredly placing it on Eadlyn's head.

Eadlyn felt its weight descend upon her as it settled into place. It was not as heavy as she had thought.

She stood slowly, primly, chin raised, and faced the people she was to rule.

The noise was deafening.

~

King James Kenworth's chambers were still and quiet as Eadlyn entered them, in an almost frighteningly stark contrast to the roar of the coronation crowd. Her boisterous adrenaline had faded, and now she was hesitant, weighed down by the events of her last meeting with her brother. Thin white curtains were blowing softly; the windows were open yet the candles were lit. The atmosphere in the room felt pious, like a vigil was being held for Spirits, rather than the immobile, resting figure of her brother.

Her brother who had raised her, never marrying, never having any children of his own. Living for her, dying without her. Eadlyn crossed the room and fell prone at his bedside, crying quietly. She must leave him. She did not want to leave him, her very heart pulsed against it.

His forehead was clammy as she reached up and gently stroked his hair, his locks laden with years left unlived. His eyes were closed as he slept, almost peaceful. It looked too much like death.

She looked at his spotted, flaccid face and reached up to press a kiss to the cheek she had struck.

Her crown tilted from her head; she caught it before it could fall, fingering it and looking down at its smooth golden grooves. She set it in her brother's folded hands.

"Take care of it while I am gone," she whispered. "May it give you strength in my place."

And then, so softly she could not tell if she had spoken the words aloud or merely thought them with all the strength of her soul:

"I will make you proud of me."

END PART ONE.