

BEWARE  
THE  
NIGHT

JESSIKA  
FLECK

*Swoon* READS

SWOON READS  
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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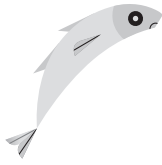
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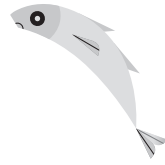
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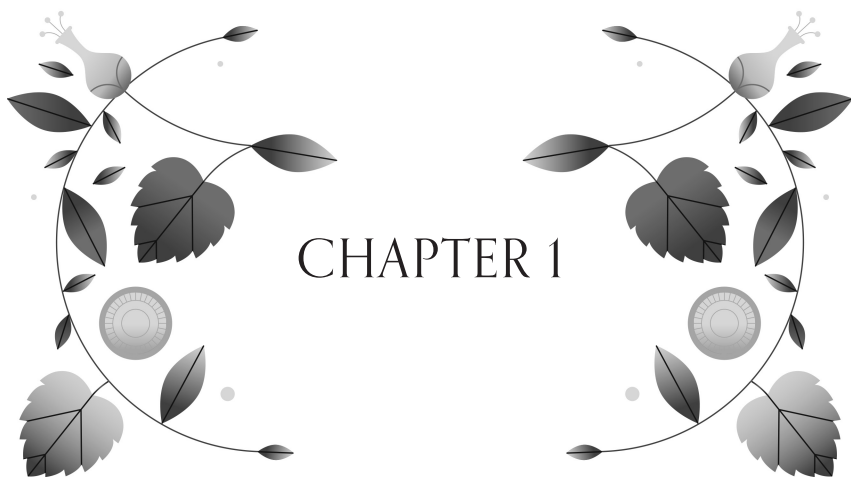
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FOR AINSLEY & SIERRA.  
AD ASTRA, MY LOVES.





## CHAPTER 1

*Crack.*  
My jaw.

The snap echoes between the walls of my skull as white-hot pain shoots down my throat and into my ears, pushing water from my eyes.

One shaky whimper flees my lips. Just one.

His boot—now a vise with the ground—clamps my cheeks between the hard grate of its sole and the sharp, icy gravel beneath me.

Snow drifts down, sweeping me with cruel, frosted kisses.

The Coliseum is taller, more menacing, than ever. This time, I'm the cause of all the commotion.

Down here, the large stone arena orbits me, the traitor, mocking the Sun instead of honoring it. Each towering arch surrounding me is an ashen rainbow, cracks and all. And below each arch, the stands are crammed, stippled with faces like small dewdrops piled on grass. The Coliseum is strong as always, but today, it's suffocating, the unbreachable walls yards away yet closing in on us.

We're positioned front and center, the main attraction: a girl and her executioner. Our stage: snow and dirt. Our audience: the blood-hungry citizens of Bellona.

I'm numb and frozen and burning all at once. Long strands of red-tinted hair stick to my forehead and hang over my eyes. Blood trickles

thick from my nose down the back of my throat. It tastes of tin. I spit it out and blood sprays the snowy ground.

The crowd cheers.

“More!” several shout as one.

“Traitor!” a woman calls out.

A child lets out a high-pitched “Off with her head!”

Mass laughter ensues.

They lust for this, are entertained by it, feed on and frenzy over it.

But all of that is background noise. At this moment it’s only me and one other—the Imperi officer who holds me with the intensity of his eyes. Each fleck, each shadow. I know so much and so little of those eyes.

Tears collect in my own, blurring his image. Bloodying every memory. It’s better. I can’t stand seeing him.

As if on cue, the gray clouds break. The Sun shines down, casting a fiery ring around us; a spotlight illuminating the place where I lie and my executioner crouches over me, his boot at my jaw like a hunter with fresh-killed game.

The Coliseum quiets.

All of Bellona hushes.

A newly hung banner flaps in the wind, the red words IN SUN’S NAME, THE IMPERI WILL PROTECT YOU FROM THE NIGHT distorting with each whipping gust.

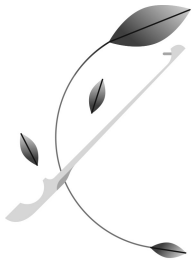
“Veda . . .” My name cuts through the silence as a whisper in my ear.

I strain my eyes to see past his exterior. To find the boy I thought I knew so well within the enemy. But I can’t begin to pluck a single piece of him from the fray. Instead, my sight settles on the altar, the slate pedestal to our right, the large sacred hourglass suspended above. Red sand fills the bottom bulb.

A single bell rings.

It’s time for the finale.





## CHAPTER 2

### BEFORE



The icy hand of early morning slaps my face the instant I step outside. I gasp and then force an exhale that leaves gray clouds hovering on the other side of my lips. It's dark. It's freezing. I'm breaking the law.

Quickly, quietly, I make my way from shadow to shadow toward the woods. My face stings with numbness, my nose already tingling, but I ignore it. I've gotten used to that, ignoring discomfort, because there's always something more important. This morning, it's bait.

The one bait that trumps the worms I sell at the market. The worms do fine, but the fish are tired of them, fewer and fewer biting with each passing day. And who are they to be so picky? It's a free meal after all. But Poppy and I need to eat too. And right now, our hunger trumps stinkin' finicky fish. It also trumps the law.

Not only am I out before the Sun, but I'm headed to the Hill, the Dogio side of the island. The side Basso folk like me aren't supposed to wander. If we're found near the Hill it can only mean one of two things in the eyes of the law. We're either stealing or looking to steal. No one gets lost on this island; it's too small. No one walks around after dark; it's too dangerous. If I'm caught by an Imperi guard, I have no excuse. If I'm caught by the Night, I die.

A branch snaps in the distance and I skid to a stop, hiding behind a tree. For a moment I question everything. Can Poppy and I continue

living on scraps if I don't catch any fish today? The cellar is emptier than ever. Even the mice have moved on. But is this truly worth it? My stomach grumbles in answer.

Yes.

A plump mud beetle will assure me at least one decent catch.

As I keep to the edge of the woods, steering clear of any lamplight or main walkways, I can't ignore the crudely posted signs. Paint on parchment. Some of it still fresh and sticky.

Names . . . Photos . . . More and more Basso have gone missing. Taken by the Night. Snatched from their beds or from tunnels or while sneaking around after sunset, forced into illegal deeds to stay alive. A gust of wind blasts from nowhere right through the trees above me, casting leaves down like heavy raindrops. I startle when they hit me, but as fast as they've fallen, I brush them away, silently cursing the cold breeze for scaring me. For reminding me of childhood bedtime stories.

*When evening's wind laps through the trees, the Night's light footsteps hide 'neath the breeze.*

I force away the shiver.

No.

Fear is a luxury I can't afford at the moment.

Besides, how many times have I gone out before morning bells? Countless. How many times have I encountered the Night? Never.

Making my way deeper into the woods, I take in the crispness of impending winter, the clean smell of snow that hasn't yet fallen but brews someplace not far off. The canal whispers to my right. At first, it sounds like a warning, hissing *stop*. Then it quickens, the rush of water urging me to *move*.

I stop when I reach the pond, which is only a small pool off the main canal that runs like a thick vein through our island. I crouch, my knees sinking into cold, damp earth. The mud beetles always nest in the soft dirt near fresh water. Not only is the soil richer on the Dogio side of the



island, there's more fresh water. It'd take me days to find a mud beetle in the dry, unforgiving sandy stuff we Basso call soil.

Pulling my blade from my belt, I use it as a shovel. As I dig deeper and deeper, a black, iridescent beetle scurries and burrows farther into the ground. But before I can claw my fingers in to pinch the thing, a sound steals my concentration.

Just below the whistling wind, footsteps crunch over dry leaves behind me.

My heart lunges into my throat and the words . . . *the Night's light footsteps hide 'neath the breeze* . . . repeat on a loop in my mind.

I search my surroundings. Too quickly, the gray of night is churning into early morning indigo, shadows showing all over the place, distorting everything around me into Imperi soldiers sent to arrest unruly girls who leave before the morning bells. Or worse. Because there's always worse.

The footsteps crunch again. Closer now.

I tell myself to focus. To pay attention. "Look sharp," Poppy would say. But all I can picture is the brutality of the Night. Of bedtime horror stories about heathenish, moon-worshipping monsters cloaked in black like death. How they snatch children from their beds and put them to work underground, milking mud beetles and feeding the toes of naughty children to snakes and fanged groundhogs.

*Bait, Veda. Bait.*

With a deep breath and clumsy fingers, I claw my way into the ground in search of the pest. Determined, dirt caking my hands, finally, I get ahold of what I know is a mud beetle, its spindly legs fighting for dear life. With a gentle yet quick pinch, I yank the bug out of the earth and shove it into a jar. One'll have to do. But it's alive. Fresh is always better.

Fast as I can, I throw the jar in my bag, wipe my hands over my wool shawl, and shove my gloves on to cover the evidence. Step-by-slow-calculated-step, I inch my way to a tree and duck behind it.





Another loud crunch sounds. If it's an animal, it's large.

My breath catches.

I wait, silent as night itself, not daring so much as a long breath. As the Sun rises, I use the increased light to check the small hourglass slung around my neck. Holding the metal frame between my finger and thumb, I strain to see that the brown sand has nearly reached the one-hour line. Only a few minutes until the all clear.

Dropping the pendant, tucking it back under my shawl, I peek around the tree trunk, allowing one eye to sneak a look.

Whoever or whatever it was that made those footfalls is gone. I want to think it was an animal, a fox or deer. But sense tells me I'd have heard it run away. Even an Imperi soldier at their sneakiest would have made more noise. No, this was something stealthy. Something heavily cloaked. Sly and devilish.

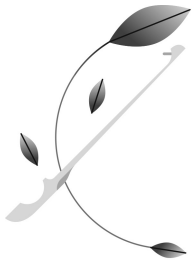
Rumor is the Night melt into shadows like pitch in a crack, taking whomever they can skewer their bony fingers into right along with them. Usually unsuspecting Basso like me.

I shiver.

The Sun's risen.

Morning bells ring. Quick as I can, I flee the forest and make my way to the Hole.





## CHAPTER 3



My feet tread lightly along the stone streets, buildings towering on each side like the walls of an enormous labyrinth. Promises of *I'll meet you at morning bells* nag the back of my mind. But there was no time to meet Nico when there was bait to steal and fishing holes to get to.

Faster still, I wind my way through alleyways and over bridges. Despite the cool morning, escaped hair sticks to sweat dewing the back of my neck. Not daring to slow my pace, I gather and twist it all into a thick rope, tucking it back under my knit hat.

I don't stop until the alley opens into a large square. It's nothing but a bit of open space, all cracked stone and an old, dried-out fountain, vines growing up and over it. A tunnel, its mouth wide and dark, closes the other side into a dead end. I stride across the square, standing tall, readying to face what every Basso fears: this damn tunnel.

Like a grim warning, two altars flank the entrance. One is a Sun altar, no different from any of thousands filling corners and crevices all over Bellona. Piled on top of the stone pedestal is a framed image of the Sun; an hourglass; and a small bouquet of sunrise flowers, the red-yellow petals browned, long dead. Mounds of candles, many of them lit, are stacked atop melted wax that flows the length of the altar like a waterfall. Various types of shells have been stuck into the wax as if barnacles on the rocky shore of the Great Sea. At the base, several offerings have fallen—a

couple of soap carvings, a large rusty nail, a walnut still in its shell, and a ball of string.

I kneel before the altar, close my eyes, and ask the Sun to guide me through unharmed.

I search my pockets for something to offer. With nothing but lint, the hourglass quickly sifting, I hastily take off a glove, ball up the pilld wool, and make a small bead of beige fleece. I leave the blessing next to one of the shells. Then I scoop the rest of the trinkets—discarded prayers—up off the ground and pile them back on the altar for good measure.

I try to ignore the other altar, but my curiosity gets the better of me. It's an altar to the missing. These have been popping up on more and more corners as the Night grow increasingly aggressive. Photos, scraps of paper, personal mementos, and other items overwhelm the top and are nailed and pinned up and down the sides of the wooden structure. Hanging above it is a fresh missing persons bulletin, several names scrolled beneath the large red block letters that read BEWARE THE NIGHT!

The tangled black yarn of a doll's hair catches my eyes before I force myself to glance away and refocus on the task at hand. The tunnel. Fishing.

The tight passage snakes through the bottom of the old housing building like a dark secret, the entrance a crumbling mosaic archway.

I light my lantern, take a deep breath, and enter.

Several paces in and it's already pitch black save the flickering of my lamp. The lights mounted along the walls are out, meaning one of two things: The unpredictable generator is down or they've been destroyed again, the bulbs busted by the Night.

Lantern in hand, I try my best to be as quiet as possible, but my boots squeak with each step as lures and hooks jingle from my belt.

One third of the way through, I round the corner, and the opening at the end of the tunnel pops into view like a heavenly beacon sent down



from the Sun himself. I'm desperate to make my way there, but it's still so far.

Before I can bolt toward the light, quick footsteps dart between the tunnel walls and my chest. "Who's—" I bite my tongue and a bit of metallic warmth blooms inside my mouth. I skid over gravel and run toward the exit.

The footfalls get closer.

I run faster until the steps are on my heels and heavy breath hits the back of my neck.

I skid to a stop, pivot, and punch whoever it is straight in the stomach, their momentum helping me out, but stinging my knuckles something fierce.

There's a groan of pain and the shadow doubles over before my lamplight.

"Gah . . . Blessed . . . Sun . . .," he coughs.

"Nico?"

He glances up at me, dark eyes watering.

"What the hell?" I say.

"I . . ." He pauses to catch his breath and slowly stands. "I was just . . . trying to catch up with you."

"Well done." I fail at holding in a small laugh.

He glares.

"What? You don't get to be mad. *You* scared me!"

His expression softens. "All right . . . It was stupid."

"Not to mention mean."

"Fine . . . Mean *and* stupid."

"Indeed." I won't admit I'm comforted by his sudden presence. And not only because my chances of meeting my end decrease exponentially with a Dogio by my side.

"Speaking of mean . . .?" Nico holds up his hourglass so it dangles in my face from his forefinger.

"I was detained." I wiggle my mud-caked fingers in his face.



“Come on, Veda . . .” He breathes my name as a disappointed sigh, eyebrows slanted into an exaggerated V. “Again?”

I shrug.

“You promised you wouldn’t anymore.”

I lift an eyebrow. “No, I didn’t.”

His jaw goes slack. “Yes, you did.”

“No . . . I promised I wouldn’t leave during the night anymore. And I didn’t. I left in the morning.”

“Before the Sun was up.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“I told you I can get the beetles for you. Jars full.”

“And I told you no.” He glowers, but the way he works at the corner of his lower lip, I know he wants to smile too. “Hey.” I take a step closer and adjust my gear over my shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t meet you. It’s just . . .” I pause to choose my words carefully.

Before I can get out the thoughts I’m struggling to form, Nico takes my hand, brushes off a bit of the mud, and finishes the sentence for me. “. . . You had more important things to do.” He looks straight at me through the dim lamplight, his eyes near-black, lashes thickly folding above them. Despite the darkness, I can distinctly make out the indent of the dimple on his left cheek. It shows deepest when he’s happy and when he’s disappointed. Pretty sure he’s not happy.

We’re both silent a beat too long, the wind howling in the background.

Nico places his hand on my shoulder. Layers below, my skin tingles with welcomed warmth. “You could have asked me to come along.” He always says this. “Let me help you.” He says this even more often.

“No.” And I repeatedly refuse his offer. “We’d both be in trouble if caught.” Nico’s brow furrows. “Actually, I’d still be the one in trouble.” I tap his Dogio badge.

“Veda . . .” His voice trails off because he can’t begin to argue.



But I'm sure to change the subject before he tries. "Why are you wasting your time at the Hole anyway?" I continue toward the exit.

"I told you . . ." He leans in, reluctant grin dancing at the corners of his mouth. "My Sun, Veda, don't you ever listen?"

"What's that?" I bite the inside of my cheek to fight a smile.

He shakes his head but laughs under his breath. "I'm going because James is assisting with the hourglass. I promised him I'd watch, say hi after." Ah, right. Nico's young protégé. Dogio are assigned a mentee as part of their training or something. As if going to school nonstop through their sixteenth year isn't enough, then they mentor (basically more school), and eventually either join the Imperi or apprentice and take on a profession. So, basically, school from birth to death.

"We definitely don't want to miss that, eh?" I say.

"Exactly. A promise is a promise." He eyes me, but instead of the disappointment I expect to see, Nico takes the burden of my fishing basket off my arm and clasps my hand in his.

I hesitate at his touch. The fact that I want to hold his hand and the fact that I know I shouldn't wage a small war.

But here in the dark, not a soul around, I close my fingers over his.

And for the first time all morning, I breathe.

OPENING INTO THE Great Sea, the Hole is a water-filled cavern, the shape of a crescent, tall ridges rising up around its perimeter allowing for a natural platform for fishing.

Just to our left, the Crag, a peaked, dormant volcano, rises out of the ground like a hooked claw, shading one half of the Hole so it appears to be a quarter moon. The dormant volcano is off-limits, forbidden after the first war and the mines the Imperi buried in the sand surrounding it to protect their weapons cache inside. Supposedly many mines were never found and might still go off if stepped on just right.

"The boundaries are this," Poppy would say. "If the Crag hits the sand



with its forbidden shadow, you're too close." The rule was further hammered in at school when we went on that side of the island to collect clams: Never step in the shadow of the Crag. As if the moment your toes hit darkness the entire world would erupt in flames. Still, no one ever dared.

Bodies cram from one end of the horseshoe-shaped fishing hole to the other. Like small strokes in a smudged, heavily layered painting, faces blur and blend until they're only stipples of color. A sea of variegated, earthen hues. My fellow Basso.

The tide is high, but the water is calm, glassy, with one blinding line of light streaking through the middle as the Sun strikes down from the cloudless blue sky. If I squint just right, I can make out the dark silhouette of the Island of Sol; the tall arches of the Coliseum are dark, empty cavities, a series of large jaws yawning toward the Sun.

We arrive and an Imperi soldier slams the gate closed directly behind us, the bolt locking with a loud click of finality, announcing no others will enter. He then rings a loud bell to announce fishing will soon commence.

Nico and I immediately part ways. With a slight nod and a smile, he moves toward the viewing pier above, where Dogio and Imperi officers sit, as I find a good place to fish.

Once settled, I look for Nico, but he's blended into a sea of black, red, and gold.

Above the fishing ridge where the Basso stand, suspended from an iron frame is an hourglass. It towers no less than twenty feet in height. Positioned before the hourglass, fists at her hips, is the Imperi Regent of Fisheries. She's tall, slender, with a long, slick braid that stands out over the shoulder of her crisp black suit. The Imperi government crest, similar to Nico's Dogio badge, a gold embroidered sun, is loudly emblazoned over her heart, setting off the delicate, golden thread that webs her crimson sash.

As the Head of Fisheries counts down, four Imperi soldiers—all wearing black uniforms and boots—tip the hourglass. From high atop



ladders, they heave a rope and pulley, sending black sand spilling down the glass bulb.

This is when I spot James. He's in a similar uniform, but with a flash of red round his waist—an officer in training—and all of twelve, he proudly coils the rope into perfect circles. Nico sits in the front row, eyes intent on his mentee, red scarf piled high around his neck. When James steps away from the rope, hands tucked behind his back, Nico stands and says something into the boy's ear. Nico seems so proper, so important, standing shoulder to shoulder with the other Dogio. At the same time my stomach spins at the sight of him, my hands squeeze into fists around my pole. This version, while strangely alluring, is at constant odds with the Nico from the tunnel moments ago. The Nico I know so well.

And who is this version? Truly?

I'm both dying to know and terrified to find out.

For now, I'll keep him at a distance. Closely observe the Dogio version as if he's some other person and continue digging deeper to know the boy who holds my hands in tunnels and adores my grandfather almost as much as I do.

Surely, at some point, they meld into one.

Nico catches my eye, and my breath hitches like I've been caught thinking about him.

Which I have.

Then, subtly, so inconspicuous only I'd ever notice, he arcs his thumb over his heart, *Ad astra, to the stars, no troubles, be well*. Both my Nico and this version use the gesture to convey at least ten different expressions.

Ad astra . . . That sign . . . I'd never seen anything like it until the day I met Nico. We were tiny underneath the canopy of trees next to the pond behind his house. It was then, when he didn't turn me in for illegally fishing on Dogio-owned soil, when he ran his thumb over his heart and spoke those two words, that I understood I could trust him. It was then I knew we'd always be friends. Always be together.

But that was a lifetime ago.





I give him a slight grin and quickly glance away, realizing I'm the only one down here paying any mind to the Regent and the Dogio. With everyone's focus on their own poles and nets, finding a good spot, now is the perfect time to dig the beetle out of my bag and bait my hook.

Kneeling on the ground, surrounded by gear, I reach into my bag. When I find the small jar, I open it and pull the beetle out, skewering it with my hook.

Saying a small prayer to the Sun for one good catch, giving thanks for the plump beetle, I set my sights on a particular spot. I can tell it's deep, the perfect home for a large fish.

As I pull back to cast, something cracks to my right, breaking my concentration. I know that gut-wrenching sound.

I turn to find the glassblower's apprentice kneeling over what is now two pieces of a fishing pole.

When he glances up, our eyes meet. I see him around the island from time to time; we schooled together the few years Basso attend school before learning a trade or beginning work. Mostly, I remember him as the boy who threw rocks to scare the birds out of the trees in front of the glass shop. I yelled at him once to stop, and he sent a handful of rocks my way. I haven't spoken to him since.

I glance back at the bird bully, and he's actually trying to mend his pole with his line. *He can't be serious.*

He looks back up at me. His knit hat slumps lazily down the back of his neck, and blond hair peeks out over his ears, but it's his eyes that catch me. They're brilliant. Like silvery-blue agate. "I'm not so great at this," he says, holding the two sad pieces of wood up, clearly at a loss.

"Seems that way," I say, smiling, wondering if he knows who I am. Remembers the child version of me yelling at him to leave the damn birds alone. That I specifically remember. Poppy wasn't always the best influence. "Here." I dig into my pocket and pull out a small ball of twine. "You can try to mend it and hope you don't hook anything too heavy, or it'll snap again for sure."



Reaching for the twine, his hands are worn as if from hard work, the sleeves of his tattered muslin shirt rolled up to his elbows. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

When I glance toward the hourglass, Nico’s there. His eyes are already on mine and he motions toward the sand, how it’s quickly dwindling.

I’ve wasted several precious minutes helping the bird bully mend his probably hopeless fishing pole. Focusing back on that spot in the water, I cast my line and hit my mark.

“Should do the trick.” The bird bully breaks my concentration, but I don’t take my eyes off my line. “At least for today.” I watch from my periphery as he holds his fishing pole out in front of him and bends it back and forth so it bows without giving but still moans angrily.

“Dorian.” He shoves his hand out to shake mine.

“I’m Veda. Glad it helped.” Our hands only touch for a second when, without warning, I lurch forward, my line taut like wire. Dorian lunges and wraps his arms around my waist, keeping me from falling into the water. I barely get a second to catch my breath and say thanks when my line is jerked toward the edge again. Dorian makes to grab for my pole, but I dig my heels into the ground before he can try to help. “I’ve got it!”

He steps aside.

I skid closer to the cliff, but use my body weight to counter the monster of a fish. I will not lose this fight—Sun knows we need this beast roasting over our fire tonight.

My pole creaks and whines a painful cry, threatening to crack in two.

Dorian steps closer. “You still got it?”

I don’t have time to answer, but I know I’ve got it when I spot the creature flop at the water’s surface. It’s a true beauty.

The palms of my hands go raw, my legs are about to give, but I hold strong. Taking a long breath in, closing my eyes despite it going against every instinct I have at the moment, I heed the first lesson Poppy taught me about fishing . . .



*I wait. I listen.*

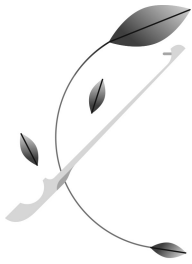
The sea stills and the beast finally tires itself out.

I open my eyes to find Dorian staring right at me, but I don't have a second to spare on him because the fish is so heavy it takes all my strength and attention. The beast is a long-whiskered pantera, and as I pull it in, the line cuts into my palm. Ignoring the blood trickling from my hand, I drop the fish to the ground. It jumps twice before I snare it under my boot; I can't stand to watch them suffer.

Long whiskers limp, near-black scales like inky ice, the beast is still. Jagged teeth poke up from its mouth, pushing its snout into a permanent snarl. It's one of the loveliest ugly things I've ever seen.

I recite a silent prayer, thanking the beast for its offering, the Sun for his blessings. Gratitude is the root of all living, Poppy taught me. Take nothing for granted. Without appreciation, he says, all humanity is lost.





## CHAPTER 4



Nico and I meet on the other side of the gate to the Hole, under the same tree as always. He tags along most days, but his excuses for being here are growing thin as his Dogio engagements only increase. Sure, today he had a valid story to be at the Hole, but what will he come up with tomorrow?

“How was James?” I ask as Nico approaches.

He smiles proudly, showing the deep dimple in his cheek. It’s adorable when he’s happy. Nico’s smile: one of my favorite sights in the world. “Nervous, but he did well.”

“You went over it enough with him—he could probably do the motions in his sleep.”

He laughs. “Sort of—he said he dreamed about it last night. Maybe I was a little too hard on the kid. He’ll make a fine Imperi officer in a few years though.”

At the word *officer* my stomach falls. My smile must falter because Nico’s dimple disappears. Expression replaced with concern, he steps closer. “What’s the—”

“I’m fine.” It’s like an automatic response these days.

“The Imperi stuff?”

I shake my head and shrug, but . . . “There’s no point getting into it.” I glance over his shoulder. “Especially not here.” His friend Arlen is

quickly striding toward us. Always in a hurry. Always dragging Nico off to one thing or another after fishing, like clockwork.

“Denali!” Arlen shouts Nico’s last name. “Blessed be the light!”

“Blessed be the light.” Nico throws the greeting out even though he’s still facing me. He then takes a step away and frowns, disappointment showing in his dimple. Raising his eyebrows, he turns toward Arlen. “Let me guess—my father sent you.”

“What can I say; he knows who to turn to to get things done.” So humble. “Hey, Veda.” Arlen makes sure to stare several seconds extra at the place where my shawl is unraveling. “Blessed be the light.”

“Blessed be the light, Arlen.” I sort of smile by setting my mouth into a hard line, because he’s perpetually two steps behind Nico. Always spying over Nico’s shoulder. All thanks to Lord Denali. Since Nico’s father can’t be sure his son stays on task himself, he’s employed an annoying substitute. “Where to today?”

Arlen laughs. “Where to today . . .” He seems to size me up to see whether I’m being serious or not. I’m not. Of course, I know what event Nico’s being summoned to instead of attending his usual mentoring classes, but I keep the guy hanging for fun by shrugging. “Ever. Sol. Feast.”

“Oh . . . Right.” I catch Nico’s eye. He folds his arms over his chest, avoiding eye contact with me, probably to hold back a laugh.

“Are you serious, Veda? It only happens every year,” Arlen goes on. And on . . . He talks about how he’ll forgive me for not remembering . . . That he forgets Basso don’t celebrate the great feast when everyone brings blessings of lavish food and prays to the Sun to please shine throughout this dark night . . . That when it does happen—and it will happen, *Arlen believes, he truly does*—the Sun will finally snuff out the Night and their evil ways for good.

We should be so lucky.

Meanwhile, Nico and I are communicating without words. He raises an eyebrow, what I assume to mean *Are you and Poppy ready for tonight?*



I give a slight nod. *Kind of. Are we ever?*

He smiles softly, more concerned than pleased. *But if you'd only let me help . . .*

*Yeah, right. Like you could. Like your father would allow you to be five feet from your front door tonight.*

*You're right. I hate that you're right . . .*

Or something like that. We've had this conversation before, so it's easy to fill in the blanks.

"Enough about all of that—I've got bigger news," Arlen says, breaking into my and Nico's silent conversation. "I've done it. I've joined!" He flashes a piece of paper and a badge in Nico's face.

The surprise in Nico's eyes quickly fades into an enthusiastic smile. I can't tell if it's genuine or not. "Arlen, you chose the army! You'll make an excellent soldier."

"The best. First step, soldier. Next step, get chosen as heir. Then . . ."

"The world ends," I mumble. They both hear. Arlen ignores me; Nico stifles a laugh. It's been all the talk among Basso and Dogio alike. Who will the Imperi High Regent appoint as his heir? When will it happen? How? It's unprecedented that a Bellonian Ruler doesn't have family to pass his ruling duties along to. And knowing High Regent Raevald, it'll be a grand spectacle when it does occur.

Dogio like Arlen are foaming at the mouth for the chance.

Basso are terrified someone like Arlen might be appointed.

Nico doesn't talk about it.

"*Regent-in-Training Rivera*. You've got to admit"—Arlen pins the new soldier's badge to his chest and then smacks it for good measure—"it's got a nice ring to it." He turns and faces Nico. "Now, to talk you into—"

"Veda—" Nico turns to me, so blatantly cutting Arlen off, it'd be comical if it wasn't one of the only things we ever argue over. "That fish you caught today . . . Arlen, you've got to see it!"

I show Arlen the beast of a pantera, and he proceeds to tell me about the time his uncle caught one five times as big. It's then I notice, aside



from his new, shiny badge, he's also had his hair cut. It's much shorter than usual, no longer sticking out over his ears, and mimics the same fashion as the other Imperi soldiers, which makes sense. When he's finished with his own fishing story, he checks his hourglass and hurries Nico away.

"Later, Veda!" Arlen calls over his shoulder. "Happy Ever-Sol!"

"We don't . . ." But he's already gone.

They disappear behind a copse of trees when, not a minute later, Nico comes bounding back, calling something to Arlen about how he's right behind him.

I'm crouched over my basket, shoving the monster of a fish back in when Nico bends down next to me to help me close the flaps. He leans in, breath so close the warmth brushes my cheek, sending my stomach into yet another spin. "Tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow."

"Be careful tonight, Veda."

"Always."

"Promise me you won't go out before the Sun again? Just not tonight, please?"

"I promise." And I mean it this time.

He gazes into my eyes for a lingering second as if searching for the truth in my words, and when satisfied, he turns and leaves, disappearing a second time around the corner.

In his sudden absence, everything tumbles down around me. I can't believe it's been an entire year already. Last Night of Reckoning, the Night used fire as their weapon of choice, ravaging several villages. The time before, they swooped in like shadows, taking a record number of Basso from their homes, never to be seen again. No telling what this year will bring.

Imperi Regent Raevald explains that the Night want one thing more than anything: to create as much fear as possible. With fear comes power. But we aren't to fight back.

Fighting back would incite all-out war.



And the Sun doesn't want war.

Not yet anyway.

Maybe he will after tonight's Dogio feast. Because if soul after soul vanishing doesn't make an impression, a five-tiered chocolate cake and the words *Blessed be the light* surely will.

I gather my things, stand, and take all of three steps when I'm tapped on the shoulder. I turn to find Dorian holding his hand out.

"Your string."

"Oh yeah. Thanks." I reach out to take the ball of twine, and when I do, my bag slips off my shoulder, pulling the neck of my shirt to the side with it. When I lean forward to take the string, stuff it into my bag, Dorian's eyes linger. Just below where my shirt tie has loosened, the material folds over, exposing my skin. More specifically, the jagged scar that stains that spot. I adjust my shirt to cover it back up, meet his stare. There's no avoiding how blatant the moment is.

His eyes quickly dart away, then veer back to mine. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to . . ."

"It's fine. Old injury." It's not *that* low on my chest but is still a little uncomfortable to talk about.

He nods, now staring at the ground. His neck and ears have gone red. "Hey, thanks to you"—Dorian clears his throat—"my uncle and I will eat tonight."

Our eyes meet again. "Well, that's something." I smile softly.

"You headed home?" Dorian motions toward the tunnel, pulling off his hat and running his hands through his hair, which is disheveled on one side and shaved on the other. Still, as much as he's changed, I can see the little boy I remember from childhood and I can't help wondering if he still pelts birds with rocks.

"I am . . ." I glance toward the darkness. "Well . . ." I begin walking. "See you around." *Bird bully*. But maybe the name no longer suits him. I mean, I don't jump in ponds wearing nothing but underclothes anymore.

"Do you mind if I walk with you?" Dorian shudders. "I hate that





damn tunnel.” But he gazes my way, narrowing his eyes. “Unless you’d rather walk alone? I can’t imagine this tunnel worries you too much after the way you hooked that fish.” He raises an eyebrow. “Most grown men I know would have let the thing go, pole and all.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I can be a bit stubborn when it comes to fishing.” But the fish is impressive, I can’t deny it. “Normally, I’d brave the tunnel, but I walked most of it alone this morning. I think I’ve had my fill of adventure for the day.”

He laughs. “Right.” Lighting his lantern first, Dorian then glares toward the tunnel. “Shall we?” He glances over.

I nod and we enter.

The tunnel seems to go by faster on the way back, Nico and I always notice. We’ve decided it has something to do with heading closer to home instead of away from it. As if our feet move more quickly.

But it’s not the case this time.

The tunnel is a decent five-minute walk, and today I feel every second of it. I can’t remember the last time I walked it side by side with someone I didn’t know. Not to mention the kid who used to terrorize birds. And it’s too late to turn back.

It takes me the first fourth of the tunnel to come up with a topic of conversation (glassblowing) and the second fourth listening to Dorian’s response (he’s been learning the trade for years . . . He loves it when he can make his own creations . . . Hates it when he has to make fancy wares for the Dogio . . . Seems a waste . . .), so the next time there’s an awkward silence between us, we’re maybe halfway through.

Thankfully, some of the lights have been replaced so it’s not black as night like it was this morning. Still . . . I hadn’t thought this through fully. Being alone with Nico in the dark is as natural as fishing. But being with someone else . . . Some other boy . . .

I panic.

“Give and Take?” I ask.

“I’m sorry, what?”



“Oh, Give and Take . . . It’s a game. You know, for conversation?”

He slows. “Wow. Is it that awkward?”

“No, I just . . .”

He flashes a wide grin under the flickering light above us. “It’s one of my favorites. Fair warning: I’m good.”

We’ll see about that. “Challenge accepted.” A question flies out of my mouth. “Do you still throw rocks at poor defenseless birds?”

He stops dead, clutches at his heart, and stares right at me. “Brutal.”

“Oh . . . Too personal? Should I go easier on you?” I smirk. Just a little bit.

Quickly recovering, Dorian adjusts his knit cap so it’s tipped precariously to one side. “Pfft! You didn’t say you were good too.”

“I didn’t feel the need to.”

“Touché.” He fights a smile by glancing away.

We resume walking.

“Obviously, I’d hoped you’d forgotten my sordid past.” He side-eyes me. “Yes, yes . . . I used to throw rocks at birds. In my defense, I lacked parental guidance. My uncle meant well, but I was a handful.” Dorian pauses, staring ahead as if lost in some distant memory. “As for your question? No. I do not still torment the poor things. Not for years.”

“I’m so relieved to hear it . . . For the birds, of course.” I nod, satisfied, and begin to toss another question his way before he steals the turn, but he beats me to it.

“I remember you too, you know . . . Hair a ginger rat’s nest, a bit of dirt always smeared cross your cheek, sea salt stuck to your clothes.”

I shake my head and laugh, part embarrassed, part surprised he’d remember such detail. “I used to skip school lessons to fish at the beach. I’d wade in up to my waist, get soaked to the bone. Poppy was forever torn between scolding me and encouraging me.” I glance over, furrowing my brow. “That wasn’t a question. You’re stalling.”

Dorian throws his hands up in mock surrender. “It was my lead-in to the real question . . . Poppy . . . Your grandfather?”



“My grandfather, yes.” I raise an eyebrow at his sad attempt. “Didn’t you say you were good?”

Dorian laughs. “You’ve had a long day.” He glances at my fishing basket. “Figured I’d go easy on you.”

I nod, eyes narrowed. “Of course.” He either can’t think of a question or is afraid to ask what’s truly on his mind.

We finally exit the tunnel into the square. I adjust my hat to shade the Sun as he extinguishes the lantern, hooks it to his bag. While he’s distracted, I seize the opportunity. “What’s your favorite glassware to make?”

He swears under his breath, gazing over at me, feigning shock, his expression humored. “I thought the game was finished!” He crosses his arms over his chest. “Who’d have thought . . . the Protector of Birds is downright vicious at Give and Take.”

I shrug. He knows full well it’s not finished until the person who started it declares it, the cheat. But again, he’s stalling. I stare without a word.

“All right . . .” We start walking toward the south Basso village, bypassing the market. “I like making most things, but what do I love crafting? Tiny figurines. Usually animals.” He fishes something from his back pocket and presents a tiny black piece of glass from his open palm.

I pluck it from his hand and hold it up toward the light. The thing is so small yet so incredibly realistic—the tiniest of shimmering scales, gills, even small whiskers glisten under the Sun. “Pantera . . .,” I whisper.

“Thought you’d appreciate that. I always bring one fishing for good luck.”

I’m still staring, turning it over in my hand, studying the miniature version of the fish I caught this morning. “The detail is . . . unreal.”

“Thanks. That’s my favorite part. The challenge of the details. When I get it right, it’s really rewarding.”

I smile, handing it back.



“No. Keep it.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Please. As a thank-you for helping me out today.” He smiles so it reaches his eyes, and I can’t possibly refuse.

“It’ll go on my altar. A prayer for future pantera.” I tuck it safely into my pocket.

“Good. I actually went through a fish phase. Made so many that sometimes I pass them out to kids at the market.” I realize I’m staring over at him when, I swear, the slightest flush overtakes his cheeks. He clears his throat. “I mean, I pelt them at stray kittens.”

I laugh. “I knew it! The truth comes out.”

He laughs back, the flush traveling down his neck; something about the image of him giving small blessings in the form of glass trinkets to children is irrefutably endearing and instantly warms my own face.

“Ah! I’ve got one!” Dorian nearly shouts, pulling me back into the present and Give and Take. “What’s the story with you and Nico Denali?”

“Oh . . .” I don’t know why the question catches me like it does, but my pace slows.

“I’m sorry . . .” Dorian backpedals. “It’s none of my business. Got caught up in the game.”

“No. Not at all.” I quicken my steps, force myself to stand taller. “First rule of Give and Take: Nothing’s too personal.”

“Right.” He nods.

Our boots crunch over gravel as the stone path turns more rugged and I try to collect my thoughts. “Nico and me . . . It’s hard to explain. We’ve known each other since we were kids, when none of this”—I motion down at my clothing—“really mattered. Or, at least, we didn’t realize it did. He’s always there for me. Always the first to stand up for me. He’s my closest friend.”

“It’s nice you have someone you can trust. It’s important.” But I recognize the skepticism in his eyes as if he doesn’t buy it. As if he’s wondering



what's possibly in it for me . . . for Nico . . . that could be worth the scrutiny we must face. Questions of *What do you expect to gain?* And *How the Sun does it even work?* *Don't you know your days are numbered?*

Or maybe those are my own questions.

"I'm very aware our friendship is risky," I blurt out.

If he's surprised by my change in tone, my sudden defensiveness, he doesn't show it. "I've found sometimes risk is worth it." The Sun sends rays through the trees, casting an iridescent sheen over his already ghostly eyes as he cocks one eyebrow up in a knowing way. Like he's read my mind. Which he has. And like he knows it. Which he does. I glance over my shoulder and cut off our connection.

Now I'm the one clearing my throat. "I'm just a few houses down, there with the lamp still lit."

"Ah, good." He makes to turn and leave.

"Hey," I say, and Dorian looks back. "Thanks for the walk."

"Sure. Thanks for the game. Rematch sometime?"

"Definitely."

He removes his knit hat, unleashing his hair. The longer side is light, the color of the Sun at midday. It's a mess of waves, in complete contrast to the stubble of the shaved side. Raking his fingers through, mussing it even more, he smiles and shoves his cap into his back pocket.

I realize I'm staring and I catch myself. "See you around." I give a half grin, then turn away and head toward home.

A fresh BEWARE THE NIGHT OF RECKONING poster nailed to a nearby tree steals my attention and it hits me: Somehow, beyond all reason, I'd managed to forget what day it is for a brief moment in time.

Without thinking, I glance back.

He's still standing there, all tall and messy haired, and hands shoved into his pockets. "Be safe tonight, V," he calls, his tone gentle, concerned.

V? No one's ever really given me a nickname before. "You too . . ." I try to match his tone. I give a half wave and surprise even myself at how quickly I bolt through the front door, shutting and locking it behind me.



It's not the abruptness of my actions but the butterflies fluttering in my gut that shock me. It's a feeling only associated with Nico. Until just now.

I pause, my back to the door, and think on his nickname for me. V. I turn it over in my head a few times and decide I like the familiarity of it, the simplicity of it, when I look up to find Poppy marching straight toward me, arms piled high with wooden slats, his words a running tally of tasks to be completed.

As comforting as it was to lose myself in Give and Take and pantera fish and the flutter of butterflies, there's no escaping reality.

At sundown, the Night will attack.

POPPY AND I SKIN, clean, and cook the pantera fish in record time. The beast provides enough to barely satiate us now and salt and store for later. But we don't get to enjoy the small feast, not really, because we're eating while boarding up the windows, covering what little furniture we have with old canvas. We jar the fish, store the firewood (last year the Night used it as kindling to stoke the fires), and wrap up breakables.

Everything is moving smoothly until, when I run to the shed for more lamp oil, I find the can's bone dry.

"Already? It goes so quickly," Poppy says when I tell him. "We have candles."

"Not near enough," I say, tipping the basket so he can see the three lonely candles at the bottom. "This won't last us a quarter of the night. We have to get oil."

"I'll quickly run to the market," he says. "I need to pick up more canvas anyway, for the kitchen table." I decide not to tell him it probably won't make a difference. If the Night get in our home, a bit of fabric isn't going to protect anything.

"No, no, I'll go. Plus, I need to pick something up."

"Veda . . ." He knows what it is, but doesn't chide me because, though he'd never admit it, he looks forward to it all year.



“Poppy . . . We both know I’ll be much faster. You should stay here and keep preparing.” I look toward the windows, the walls: Everything from curtains to the few framed photos we have hanging needs to come down. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

He grumbles under his breath, but finally says something that sounds like, “All right . . . Be quick . . .”

I fill my bag with jarred worms and fishhooks for trade. As I bound out the door, Poppy shouts, “Be careful and get back here fast, eh!”

“I will, I promise!” I call back.

FAST AS MY legs will carry me, I travel from our village into town. I make it to the market just in time to trade worms for one of the last cans of lamp oil and pick up the handful of candied lemon I’ve been saving months for. Sunrise bread. I bake it once a year, the morning after the Night of Reckoning. Traditionally, it’s supposed to have a lemon custard inside. Poppy could never figure out the custard—his was more a glue—and we’d end up throwing that part away. When I started baking it, I bypassed custard altogether and added the candied lemon slices. I place them into a perfect ring right along the middle of the round loaf, so when cut into, each slice should have a sunshine-lemony surprise. It’s cheaper and easier and it’s been tradition ever since.

Unfortunately, the sweetshop is packed with Dogio and by the time I buy the candies and head to the fabric store it’s already locked and boarded up for the night. I swear under my breath for Poppy’s sake, but we’ll have to make do without the canvas.

When I turn to head home, a strange sight breaks my stride.

Imperi soldiers are pasting more warning signs, but also something new. Fresh, white postings cover the sides of buildings, are strung along the fence around the market like garland. JOIN THE IMPERI ARMY! they say. I walk closer to one of the papers. DOGIO AND BASSO



WELCOME. INQUIRE AT IMPERI HILL. I read it again just to be sure I'm truly seeing it correctly.

Dogio *and* Basso.

Unheard of. Basso have never been allowed to serve. Never.

Then it hits me: The Night must be stronger than ever, a huge threat, if the Imperi wants Basso to join their precious army, to break the rules of society as we know them. Faith in the Sun seeing us through this must be at an all-time low.

A hammer sounds in the distance, startling me, just as a woman's laughter slices through the air. Who the hell could find anything enjoyable at a time like this?

I'd like to spit in her general direction, but, heeding Poppy's warning, I start back toward our village.

Not five steps forward, I encounter the woman whose laughter set me on edge. Actually, several women, men, and children. All draped in their finest black, red, and gold. Carrying packages and food and gifts up to the Dogio side of the island.

Ever-Sol Feast.

I actually did forget about it. Oh, how Arlen would love to tease me over that.

The woman laughs again.

I glance around the side of a building at her, at the procession. I suppose there is joy to be had this evening. You just need live on the right side of the island to find it.

As if from the very pit of my soul, something clicks inside me. I'm not sure if it's the woman's jubilant cackling, the golden sheen of her dress, the fact that the Imperi is finally allowing Basso to join the army now that they really need us—like they're doing us a favor—or the stress of an impending Night of Reckoning, but I follow the crowd.

I need to see for myself what's so great. What is so funny that the woman in gold would laugh all the way up that hill?





I stick to the woods a good distance behind, not daring a step onto the path that leads to the Dogio village. Tree to tree, shadow to shadow, avoiding where the Sun shines through the branches, I sneak like the sneak I'm being, following people I shouldn't follow to a place I know I'm not welcome.

But I'm not ashamed of my sneaking. I am worried I'll get caught. I'm a bit concerned I might run into Nico, and there's no excuse that would ever suffice for my being here now. Yet I keep following. For once, I'm not questioning my desire to know more about these other people I share this small island with. I always keep to my own Basso business.

Not this time.

But the woman has stopped laughing. In fact, I've lost her completely and I realize why. Two by two, the Dogio procession snakes right through Nico's front door—into Denali Manor—with an endless round of *Blessed be the lights*.

I stop behind a nearby copse of trees, stealing glances when it's safe. The inside of Nico's home—which I've only ever seen through the windows from the pond out back—is ablaze with the golden brilliance of a hundred candles. Guest after guest leaves their gifts of offering, blessings for the Ever-Sol Feast, on a long table near the front door. Some gifts are immaculately wrapped, tied up in gilded ribbon; others are on display: sugared fruit and fresh breads and cheeses piled high in baskets. It's then I realize my mouth is watering from the aromas alone.

And I hear it, the woman's laughter. It's so distinct, airy and light and jingly like cheery bells. Before I can spot her, the door slams shut.

Glancing to the Sun, then the hourglass round my neck, I realize that if I'm quick about it I've got just enough time to go around the back to steal one more peek.

And I get more than a glimpse.

The back of Nico's home is all windows. The place spreads up and out like a table-topped hill. The roof is rich red clay tiles, and the grounds are protected by a black iron fence. Glass extends floor to ceiling, the Sun



invited to shine directly in to greet the Denalis each morning. Many Dogio houses are built this way, with the Sun in mind.

Our cottage is surrounded by forest, the Sun only finding its way to our roof midday, nothing to warm but a thick slab of cracked stucco.

As I make my way closer to the fence, boots crunching over fallen leaves, hidden by the shadows of trees overhead, the chatter grows louder despite the windows being closed.

Then a chiming—metal fork against a glass—and all goes silent.

Tiptoeing closer, I'm only one short step away from the fence, barely concealed by the trunk of a tree, when the low murmur of a man's voice cuts through the quiet of late afternoon. Inch by inch, I move out from behind the tree until, if I squint, I've got a perfect view of Nico's family at the head table and the beginning of the feast.

Lord Denali welcomes the crowd who sits before him at round tables adorned with gold linens and even more candles, centerpieces a cascading of fresh sunrise flowers, crystal flutes filled to the brim with the same sunny, candied lemon slices I just spent a small savings on (for six pieces).

After a short speech, Nico's father bows his head in thanks, but he continues speaking. Nico sits to Lord Denali's right, and when his father motions to him, he stands. Taller than his father by a good three inches, Nico squares his shoulders and nods, agreeing with whatever Lord Denali's saying. And I find myself dying to know what that is. So much so that I've moved out from behind the tree, completely exposed, my head nearly shoved right through two bars of the gate.

Still, I can only make out every few words, and without any context, they're nonsense. And I know it's getting late . . . And I know Poppy'll wring my neck . . . And I know I'm being reckless and stupid by sneaking and eavesdropping and staying out long past when my grandfather expected me home.

Yet, I don't move.

I'm frozen.

Because Nico's caught my eyes.



Across the countless Dogio focused on him, his father's announcements, blessings, and sunrise flowers, his backyard with the garden and trellises, and out to the tall iron fence that closes it all off, I swear, Nico sees me.

A bit of shame mixed with a deep blush creeps up into my face, and I scramble to leave, but not before I spot the woman in the gold dress. She's seated, her back to me, right before the closest window, and when she turns her head, showing a wide, genuinely gleeful smile, it hits me as if it's been there all along. It's not a punch line I've missed. There's no riddle to crack. She's simply happy. Content on this very same night Poppy and I will board up our home and hide for our lives from the Night.

And it's all wrong.

I run the whole way home, not once looking back.

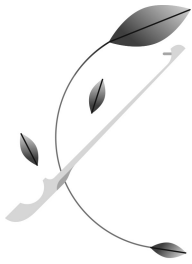
Vesper bells ring mere minutes after I slam our back door shut. They sound three rounds on the Night of Reckoning.

Three.

Two.

One.





## CHAPTER 5



Once I close and lock the door behind me, Poppy's right there with the boards to reinforce it. As he hastily hammers nails into the wall, almost catching his thumb more than once, my conscience pangs with the guilt of how stupid it was for me to waste time spying on Nico, on the Dogio feast. How Poppy must have been watching each grain of sand drop through the hourglass waiting for me to return.

Worse, right beneath the guilt of worrying him so is a sickening humiliation over being caught by Nico, which only makes me more ashamed.

And all of this on the most dangerous night of the year.

The Night have lived in opposition of the Imperi, hidden underground in what's believed to be a complex series of tunnels, for as long as the Imperi have been in power. Since before the Great Flood that overtook our island on this day centuries ago.

Dogio celebrate with candles and sweets and sunrise flowers.

Basso huddle in their boarded-up homes.

The Night have their Night of Reckoning.

And the Imperi guard their weapons cache, the High Regent, and powerful Dogio citizens and villages like Nico's.

Honestly, who knows what came first—the Imperi, the flood, the Night, the Sun himself? I just want Poppy and me to live through to first

light. To have food on the table. To not have to work all hours in order to afford six measly pieces of candied fruit to stick in the middle of a yearly loaf of sunrise bread.

A final series of bells echoes over the island the moment the Sun fully sets each night—vesper bells. Tonight is no different.

“Downstairs. Now—” are Poppy’s first and only words after he shoves the hammer through his belt loop. He then crams a chair under the door handle and checks to be sure I’m carrying the lamp oil I was sent for what feels like forever ago.

His expression alone—tired, concern lining his forehead—is punishment enough for my sneaking. When this is over, I’m going to catch him a fish twice as big as the pantera this morning and then cook his favorite stew to go with the sunrise bread.

I pull the rug that covers the basement door aside, as a series of windows breaks from somewhere down the street.

It’s begun.

And it was a night similar to this that my parents were taken. It was the attack that spurred the first war. The Night surfaced, revolted.

Somewhere during those hours of terror, they snatched my mother and father up in the dead of dark. Dragged them away and tortured and killed them in Sun knows how many horrible ways.

Poppy blows out the lamp on the kitchen table, the sudden blackness sending a visceral shiver down my back. I force my fear, my nightmarish memories conjured from Poppy’s stories of the last time he saw my mother—his daughter—aside. He’s only once spoken of my father. And in an expletive-laced rant under his breath, no less. Poppy didn’t know I was listening outside his door when he lost his temper. There was mention of my father, that my parents died before they could marry, and that if it wasn’t for *him* maybe things would have been different. Not too long after, I worked up the nerve to ask him about it. He apologized that I’d overheard, that he’d used such language. There was truth to his words,



he admitted, but also explained he'd been angry and missing my mother. My grandfather completely buried the subject from that moment on.

Aside from that memory, I know nothing of the man.

Vincent. His name was Vincent. That's all I've ever gotten out of Poppy.

I've not been able to glean a whole lot more out of my grandfather about my mother either. She was kind. Brave. We share the same dark red hair. There's only one photo of her in the house, stuck in an old book Poppy likes to read about sea navigation. In it, she's standing tall, strong, holding a weapon she used for hunting. An atlatl, Poppy explained when he caught me staring at it one afternoon. It's a long wooden thrower with a hook that flings thick, sharp spears.

She also used it to protect her and Poppy against the Night.

I slide open the wood-planked basement door. We hurry down the ladder, Poppy pulling the carpet back over, locking the door behind us.

Within the cellar is one lantern, a jug of water, jarred food, and a couple of blankets.

The space is cramped, no larger than a broom closet, but it's the safest place right now. Last year when several homes burned to the ground, the only saving grace was that the families hid in their cellars. They lived. If you don't have a cellar, on this night, you know someone who does.

I stare across the short distance to Poppy. His eyes are heavy; he's probably exhausted from the work of getting the house boarded up, worrying over me cutting things much too close, on top of laboring the day away selling worms at the bait stand.

I wish I could give him a barrel of candied lemon.

"You sit," I say, pushing the one stool toward him. He doesn't protest. I hand him a blanket and I sit on top of the other on the floor. "Will they ever stop?"

"Afraid not," Poppy says through work-weathered hands as he rubs his eyes. "Not until they get what they want."



“What more could they possibly want? I know they hate us, but to what end?”

“Power, my Veda. It’s all about power.”

“I don’t get it. Who the hell cares about all that?”

Poppy snorts in that way he does when he agrees with me and also eyes me for saying *hell*. “The Night. The Imperi. Those who already have it and fear losing it.”

I roll my eyes. “At least the Imperi protect us . . . Sort of.” But do they? Sure, they’d insist they do, but with each day that passes, each morning I have to sneak out for bait, it feels less true. More and more I can’t help but feel we’re just pawns to their king. We do all the work while they roam wherever they please, laughing and celebrating, bellies full of candied lemon. Yeah, they’ll recruit us to fight, to tend their gardens, to bake their bread, but never—never—to share their gold-linen-adorned table.

“Mmm . . .” Poppy nods. He takes my hands in his and is about to say something, go into one of his stories from my childhood, probably, when there’s a blast above. What I assume is the back door, those boards Poppy so hastily used to barricade it, left a mess of splinters on the floor.

The noise travels down into the cellar, rapping against my ribs. Poppy’s eyes are wide, his forefinger hovering at his mouth. I blow out the lamp.

The world is painted pitch black.

Booted footsteps knock against the planked floor over our heads.

The darkness is so dense, so all-encompassing, I can’t see even inches in front of me.

More footsteps. There must be at least six Night soldiers marching around our home as we wait like sitting ducks below.

Something falls over. A shelf? Our kitchen table?

I pull my knife from my boot.

Poppy squeezes my shoulder as if reminding me not to do anything reckless or hasty.

A window breaks.



Another.

More boot clatter.

Another item crashes to the floor.

Then . . . silence.

My heartbeat is all I can feel. All I can hear, the *thump-thump-thump* between my ears.

I'm about to dare a whisper to check on Poppy when something slick and cool drips through the slats of the ceiling onto the top of my head. Then again.

Poppy must feel it too because he strikes a single match for light. I glance to his face, gasp, and then look down at my hands where I've wiped the warm liquid off my head. It's red.

Bloodred.

