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Steal not this book, dearest reader, By hands, piracy, or other means foul, Elsewise face the wrath of the gods, Or, worse yet, set Darkness on the prowl.

# BURNING CURIOSITY

was five the first time I asked my mother about the black door. The moment seared itself into my memory.

We were walking together through her soul, my hand in hers, the deep blue tiles of the place that was both hers and *her* as cool as water beneath my silk-slippered feet.

We'd done this for as long as I could remember, exploring her soul while our bodies slumbered, our spirits free to traverse the sleeping realm to which souls belonged. My mother would explain how people such as us—soulwalkers—could wander souls by night, and she would describe the gods. And yet she never mentioned the black door I always found in her soul.

On this particular night, I finally gathered my courage and stopped in the wide hallway, pointing. "Mama, what is that door?"

In my mother's soul, the sandstone halls were rosy, lit as if a fireplace burned merrily next to every stretch of wall. There

was no fire; it was my mother's warmth, her light. The walls were pale and smooth, perforated with airy latticework that revealed the glow of rooms beyond, as if there were nothing to hide here, while the long hallways with deep azure tiles beckoned like fingers, hinting at wonders just out of sight.

But the black door was closed tight. Its sleek black surface parted the creamy sandstone of the wall like a slick dark stone in bright water, the sinuous lines of its frame meeting in a point at the apex. It gleamed like midnight fire. Despite seeming to draw in the light around it, it lured me like a candle's flame.

By then I'd learned that fire would burn me . . . but only through touching it several times already. I'd never touched the black door, and I wanted to.

This dark, tantalizing danger didn't seem to belong in my mother's bright, inviting soul. My mother, her eyes narrowing, stared at the door for a moment, her jaw clenched, a look on her beautiful face like I'd never seen. There was resolve, anger, and yes, fear. I'd never before seen my mother afraid.

Turning away, she knelt before me, took both my hands, and said very seriously, "Kamai, you can never open that door. It's best if you just forget about it."

"But, Mama, you said I could go anywhere in your sleep house."

A smile tugged at her mouth. "My soul house, not my 'sleep house.' It's about time you started using the proper name: nehym." The word actually meant "soul house" in the old tongue. "And that door isn't a part of my nehym. It belongs to somewhere else. You must understand how these things work, Kamai, because someday you'll be able to walk anyone's soul at your whim and find what you will inside. But you must never"—

she leaned closer, holding my eyes with the liquid brown of her gaze—"open that door."

Trepidation overrode my curiosity. "Is it hiding something bad?"

She leaned forward to brush her lips over my forehead—lips, I would one day learn, that were the envy of both men and women. *Marin Nuala's lips*, I'd later hear someone say, *could unlock anyone's*. "Something very bad. Something evil. You won't be safe from what's behind it. It *wants* the door to open."

I was both intrigued and disturbed that the evil thing behind the black door could *want*, that it had desires . . . and that it was lurking in my mother's nehym. "What is it?"

She stared at me for a long moment. "I pray you'll never know." She stood and strolled the hall, away from the black door. Even here, where only I could see her, she dressed like a queen, her pale skin accented by a silk blue gown that swirled about her hips as she walked, her belt of fine gold links glimmering in the warm light. "Now, come, tell me what else I've taught you this evening. If you repeat it true, I'll give you a surprise."

I couldn't keep the excitement from my voice. "Will it be my own sleep hou—nehym?" I could learn quickly, when I had an incentive.

My mother glanced down, rare sadness in her gaze. "You don't have one, my dearest."

My feet ground to a halt. Everyone's soul was a house. It could be as dark, primitive, and dank as a cave, or as vast, ornate, and mazelike as a palace. My mother's nehym was as warm and welcoming as a sprawling country villa, but with so many halls and wings and doors, no walls in the waking world could have contained it. To not have my own made me want to cry until I got one.

"Do I not have a soul?" I asked.

"Of course you do, sweetness," she said, swiping away my brimming tears with her thumbs. "It's only that sometimes these things are hidden from us, kept secret, even from within." She placed two warm fingertips over my heart. "You don't have a nehym because your soul is so deeply asleep that no one can find it. No one can walk your halls and discover your secrets that way."

Something flickered across her face, like a shadow, and I knew she wasn't telling me the entire truth. Even then I had a decent sense of such things.

"It is good that it stays hidden," she added, smoothing down my hair, a tousled mirror of her own cascade of dark curls. "For it stays safe."

"Like from the evil creature behind the black door?"

She drew in a breath. "You're safe from it. But I don't want you to speak of the door or what's behind it anymore."

"Did you open the door?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder. "Is that why it's here?"

She shook her head. "No, my darling. It's here because you are. It follows you, because it knows that only you can open the door. But that's why I'm safe too, because I know you won't. Now, tell me what else you've learned this evening. No more talk of the other thing. Who can walk the halls of souls and discover the sleeper's deepest secrets?"

"People like you. And me," I added, with some satisfaction. "And priests and priestesses. But we're different from them, because we're soulwalkers." That was what my mother called us. At five years old, I didn't understand everything by far, but I at least knew for sure we weren't priestesses, since I found going to temples dreadfully dull, and this wasn't dull. And besides,

everyone knew that priests and priestesses could explore souls. No one knew we could.

"And what is a soulwalker, when we're asleep like we are now?"

"A spirit." Which was a layman's term for our cerebral, conscious aspect—just like the soul was our subconscious, but I didn't yet know any of those words.

"And who can know what we do?"

"No one," I said quickly.

"Not even Hallan and Razim, remember?"

I nodded with proper solemnity. Hallan and Razim were the closest thing I had to family after my mother, close to a step-father and stepbrother, though not quite. It had been difficult not to brag about my secret soulwalking ability to Razim, older than me by a couple of years, but I'd managed.

And now it seemed like there was a new rule that was just as serious, if not more so, than never betraying the secret of our soulwalking:

Never open the black door.

I didn't press her about it, because I wanted to believe it was as simple as that: I wouldn't open the door, and my mother and I would be safe. And maybe, if I learned enough about soulwalking, practiced hard enough, not only would I make my mother proud, but someday I would find my own soul.

"Now tell me the gods' story," my mother said.

I drew myself up as tall as possible. "In the very beginning of time, there was a husband and a wife, and they were surrounded by darkness."

"The Darkness," my mother corrected.

"That's what I meant. Darkness kept following them, trying to swallow them, so they always had to move. But one day, they were going to have a baby, so they stopped running. They fought the Darkness back to make a home for the baby, and then circled her every night after she was born to keep the Darkness away. They're our sun and moon, and their daughter is the earth."

It was a highly distilled version of the gods' history, but it was easy enough to remember. Simple stories for a simple age, and yet it was a story we all on some level believed. It comforted me to think of bright parents hovering over a sleeping girl's bed, keeping her safe from danger.

Despite that, I was already drawn to dark mysteries. And my question about the door had only left me with the burn of unassuaged curiosity. Later, I couldn't even recall what my mother's promised surprise had been, but I could remember the way my eyes drifted back, seeking one last glimpse of the black door.

I was nine when I first touched the door.

Razim drove me to do it. A guest was staying at our villa—well, my "stepfather's" villa, where my mother and I lived with him and Razim. My mother and Hallan weren't actually married, though they pretended they were, presiding together over Hallan's home of pale tile floors, arching doorways, mosaic-patterned ceilings, and fountained courtyards, buried in the coastal forest near the capital. It was a mask, my mother said, for who they really were, what they really did. But what it masked, I didn't yet know.

Early that evening, after our parents had gone upstairs with the guest, Razim and I stayed downstairs under the watchful eye of our tutor. A nighttime breeze wafted the sheer white curtains in front of the open shutters, letting in the coolness and the scent of flowers growing outside the windows. I was practicing my letters, but Razim was only pretending to read a book, *actually*  practicing a look of haughty adult boredom, the very picture of a young lordling in his new silk shirt embroidered in shades of deep red like his father often wore. When our tutor left the study to relieve himself, Razim's boredom vanished, revealing the boy of eleven. He grinned at me, white teeth and bronze cheeks glowing in the candlelight, and whispered, "I know what our parents are doing up there."

My mother had told me only that she and Hallan secreted themselves away with their guests for business.

"I do too," I said, glancing down at my paper and betraying the lie.

Razim smirked. "What are they doing, then?"

"Work," I said.

"I know exactly how they work," Razim said slyly. "My father told me."

I knew my mother would often walk in the souls of various guests, but I was never to tell Hallan and Razim, just as I was never, ever supposed to mention the black door. Not that I had much to tell about the latter. Whatever secrets my mother whispered about soulwalking, about the cities and people of Eopia, about the gods and half-forgotten myths, she wouldn't tell me anything more about it. As if it didn't tug at my attention whenever I soulwalked with her—and only her so far, never alone—despite my trying to ignore it. It was like a secret I had to keep even from myself.

But now Razim knew something else about the nature of their work.

"How, then?" I asked.

He leaned over the polished inlay of the wooden table, his black hair glinting, and whispered, "They have sex. I'll bet you don't know what that is." "I do too," I said, even though I didn't exactly. My mother had explained the basics, and that I wasn't to do any of it until I was older. Which was fine by me, because it sounded like a supremely awkward thing I never wanted to do. I'd had no clue that was what she was doing upstairs with the guests.

"What is it, then?" Razim pressed.

I looked down, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. "You get naked, and you, you know, do it. Down there."

Razim seemed disappointed that I knew even that much, and he leaned back. "Yeah, well, they do it with all sorts of people. My father has even done it with the queen consort."

I gave him a skeptical look. We didn't have a queen like we had a king, because the official queen, at least in absentia, was Ranta, the earth goddess, daughter of Tain and Heshara, the sun god and moon goddess. Just as Tain was the guardian of spirits and all things cerebral, as fiery and exacting as the sun, and Heshara was guardian of souls and the sleeping realm, as cool and mysterious as the changing, shadowy faces of the moon, Ranta was the beautiful guardian of physical bodies, and thus had married the first king of the land both to better protect the earth and to gain further protection herself from the encroachment of Darkness. No one had ever seen Ranta, of course, not even her husband, but every time a new king rose to power and took the sacred oath to the earth goddess, people swore they could feel her blessing settle over them like a warm blanket.

The king still had to produce heirs, and so he needed to marry a human woman as well, one who actually slept in his bed and stood beside him at royal functions. This was his queen consort, never equal to him in power but a powerful figure nonetheless. And so I found Razim's claim that his father had some relationship with the queen consort a little dubious. Important-

looking people often came to the villa to visit, but never anyone that important, as far as I could tell. I told him as much.

"That's because it's a secret!" Razim hissed. "She wouldn't come when someone like *you* could see her."

"Then someone like *you* wouldn't know for sure, either. I don't believe you."

I didn't want to, really. I loved Hallan, and we were all supposed to revere the king nearly as much as the gods. The king protected the land and Ranta, just as she protected us. Even if the queen consort wasn't his official queen, it seemed a poor way for Hallan to pay the king respect.

Razim shrugged and made a show of going back to reading. "Fine. You'll see. Maybe your mother will tell you the truth. And maybe she'll even let you in on a bigger secret. Why they're doing it with people."

My curiosity always got the better of me. "Why?"

Razim shot me one last grin before the study door opened and our tutor returned. "I can't tell."

I scowled at him and got scolded for failing to finish my letters. But it was too much for me. Everyone had their secrets—Hallan, Razim, my mother—and the black door hid the biggest one of them all. Except I could hardly even glance at it, let alone ask about it, with my mother always by my side in the sleeping realm. But perhaps if she wasn't near . . .

Later that night, I sneaked down the stairs and out the servants' door. The trek to the neighbors' wasn't difficult. I'd already learned that while my mother was occupied late into the evening, it was easy to slip away. As long as it didn't rain, which it rarely did outside of the wet season, or I didn't soil my dress too badly, no one ever noticed. Usually, I would just wander nearby, listening to the songs of insects and the soft snorts of the

horses dozing in the stable, or lie on a rock staring at the stars. But this night I walked.

The surrounding countryside, while blanketed in a scrubby, palm-filled forest canopy, was threaded with sturdy roads and further interwoven with sandy paths. We were close to the king's court, just a couple of hours by carriage outside of the royal capital, Shalain. Our king had shepherded in a new age of trade with other lands and thus prosperity for our island kingdom, and the orderliness of the countryside reflected that. I certainly appreciated the quick ease with which I found my way to what I sought.

Soon, I stood by myself in a neighbor's soul that was as rustic as a farmhouse, the rough-hewn stone walls and splintery wooden ceiling enclosing a space not much bigger than our entryway. My body lay in the sand under a bedroom window of their villa, napping behind a screen of palm fronds, close enough to allow my spirit to reach the sleeper. The body was the outer walls of a nehym, inside of which the soul unfolded like a maze, unguarded while the spirit slumbered.

The difference between the elaborate villa in the waking world and this farmhouse of a soul were stark enough to make me smirk. Our neighbor was definitely compensating with much bigger walls in the waking world. Not that they *knew* their nehym was tiny, and not that I should have laughed at it, since I didn't have one at all.

Solar, Lunar, Earthen. Cerebral, subconscious, physical. Spirit, soul, body. Those were the three aspects of the gods that made up a person, and I was missing one of them—or at least a nehym. But I could walk *other* people's souls.

And with access to everyone else's, I tried to tell myself I didn't need my own. I also told myself I didn't need Razim's

stupid secrets. Whatever Razim was hiding felt like nothing next to the black door.

Although I usually preferred darker, more mysterious souls, I wasn't disappointed by the simplicity of my surroundings. I wasn't even sure which of the neighbors this nehym belonged to. Since they weren't soulwalkers, as most people were not, their spirits weren't allowed in Heshara's sleeping realm while their bodies rested. And I didn't care to figure out whose it was.

I was only there for the door. I'd seen it, at least once, in every soul I had ever walked. It was always in a different place, even within the same nehym. I poked about on the lower level, but there wasn't much to see, no room for anything to hide, and so I started up the rickety staircase.

Nothing, not even my mother's dire warnings, could smother the curiosity that burned within me. Only *it* held the answers to its dark mystery.

Nevertheless, I was careful as I searched the nehym, following my mother's rules: I didn't shout or run, so as not to disturb the sleeper's peace. I didn't touch or move anything. I was never to do that if I could help it. Small adjustments would soon return to the way they had been, but if you moved too much, a soul could be irreparably changed . . . and thus, so could the person. Meddling like that, my mother said, was what had gotten soulwalkers branded as witches in the old days and burned alive. Priests or priestesses of Heshara, who had years of training built upon centuries of knowledge and wisdom, were the only ones openly sanctioned by the king to affect another's soul—or even to walk in one.

And of course I still planned on following the most important rule of all: to never open the door. But that didn't mean I couldn't touch it. I found it upstairs. I froze at first, and then stood, arms folded, frowning at it in challenge across the rough floorboards of a hallway. It was like a massive, fine-cut gem nestled in the crude stone. The black surface flickered in the dim candlelight, but the door itself gleamed, large, dark, and oppressive. It was like the glint of a glaring eye, a ruthless, crystalline, *intelligent* stare.

The impressiveness of it distantly reminded me of something, and it took me a moment to figure out what.

In human form, the god Tain was depicted as a towering, imperious man with dark skin and hair of bright orange flame, or simply portrayed as a giant eye of fire glaring out of the center of the burning sun. The goddess Heshara, when she wasn't the white-pale woman with her face half-shadowed, her midnight hair speckled with stars and her smile an untold secret, appeared as one of the phases of the moon, usually the quarter moon, equal parts dark and light. Less often she was the full moon, and even less the new moon, completely dark. But the darkness that stood before me was different even from that: Tain's opposite, as if an unseen eye were peering from the deepest part of the night sky.

I should have been afraid. But I wasn't.

I rubbed my fingers together, took a breath, and darted across the hallway. The merest brush of my fingertips was all I allowed. I expected the door to be hot, or even cold. Anything but what it was.

It was as warm as flesh and felt alive, even though it was the texture of glass. It thrummed like blood under skin. Clutching my hand to my chest as if burned, I fled back to my body, where I awoke with a gasp.

# HARD LESSONS

was twelve when I put my ear to the door.

Guests were staying at the villa again. Dinner had been long and lovely, with multiple courses of succulent seafood, coconut shrimp and spicy squid steaks with avocado, followed by a dessert of papaya pudding and cashew cake, all of it basking in abundant candlelight. My mother and Hallan laughed and drank deeply, their eyes and pearly teeth shining. They were equally beautiful: my mother with her creamy coloring and tumble of curly brown hair, and Hallan with his bronze skin and muscle tone, his black hair cropped short and sleek. When they smiled at each other, it was easy to imagine them married and in love. I was jealous of the picture they painted.

But Razim had been right. In the simplest form, they were courtiers, entertaining the upper classes to gain favor. Less simply, to my mind, they used their bodies to do so, elevating pleasure to an art. It didn't bother me, but I also didn't understand

it, as if my mother were off upstairs speaking a language I couldn't comprehend and didn't care to learn. What I *did* care to learn was more about souls, and my mother had said we would practice our secret talent on our guests tonight.

When everyone retired, the couples split—my mother with the woman, Hallan with the man. My mother got the better end of that deal, I thought. The woman was at least a little pretty, with her tan skin and long, dark hair, but the lines in her face were deeper than in my mother's, and her nose was too sharp. The man, however, was sickly pale and balding. Hallan didn't seem bothered, putting a strong arm around him before they slipped out of the dining room.

Razim made a face of distaste behind their backs. I had been suppressing one a moment before, rinsing my sticky hands in a ceramic bowl floating with water lilies, but his reaction left me nervous. Two years older than me at fourteen, he had a much better idea of what was happening between our parents and the guests, and if he didn't find it appealing . . . how would I ever?

"Gods, I hope I never have to do that," he muttered, and then he became aware of my attention and his face went still. Focused.

"How are you progressing on the lyre?" I asked with false sweetness. I knew he practiced playing so that, when he debuted in court, he would have a different means of entertaining people from his father. He acted determined to follow in Hallan's footsteps, but despite his eagerness those few years ago to brag about what our parents did with their guests, I could tell he wasn't too excited to do the same.

And neither was I. But while Razim seemed unenthusiastic about the *particular* people at hand, I was uninterested in . . . any of it. With *anyone*.

"The lyre's going well enough," Razim said, his voice deepening, trying to sound more adult as servants began to clear the table. "Enough that I don't need to practice this evening. So, Kamai, what should we do?"

I had some time before my mother needed me, so I grinned and said, "We could play Gods and Kings, if you're ready to be beaten again." It was the one card game everyone played, the game of royalty and peasants alike, but it was especially prized by courtiers competing for status and recognition. It took strategy, wit, and storytelling, and I didn't find any other activity as much fun. Even at twelve, I was already a deft player, better than Razim.

"Or we could play a different game." Razim's dark eyes held me like hands around a moth. I couldn't move.

Somewhere in the past year, this had started happening. Before then, I was someone underfoot, someone taking the last honey fritter at dinner, someone who left a puddle of water in Razim's chair, someone who told on him when he pulled my hair in retaliation. Someone, like my mother, who occasionally stole Hallan's attention. I was all the annoyance of a little sister without actually being one. It didn't help that my mother seemed to dislike Razim. She wasn't cruel to him—I didn't think my mother *could* be cruel—just cool, distant, when she was rarely anything but warm with everyone else.

But now it seemed to mean something different to Razim that I lived in the same house and yet wasn't his sister. Something tempting, even forbidden. He looked at me in the waking hours like I tried not to look at the door while asleep. As if something enticing lay underneath my outer layers. Like I held answers to questions he didn't even know yet.

Before I could reply, one of the serving women, Zadhi,

gently put a hand on my shoulder. "The young lady must study tonight and then go to bed early, Madam Nuala said."

That was often how it was, if both my mother and Hallan were occupied and left Razim and me alone without a tutor. Zadhi became our minder, or at least mine, at my mother's direction. And my mother seemed to want me directed away from Razim.

Razim looked at Zadhi darkly. "Madam Nuala isn't here right now."

"Hey," I snapped. It was no secret in the household that our parents weren't married, but everyone usually kept up the pretense. I didn't appreciate his disrespectful tone besides.

Zadhi glared at him, her hands on her hips. "Watch yourself, young man, or else I'll speak with Mr. Lizier. Last I checked, it was still your father's house."

Razim stood abruptly and stalked away from the table. "Not always, it won't be. Someday it will be mine, so maybe you should watch *yourself*."

Zadhi pursed her lips at his back as he left. "That boy has darkness in him. You'd better get to studying, hm?"

I didn't know if Razim had darkness in him. I hadn't walked in his nehym yet, because my mother had expressly forbidden it. I was not to intrude upon the souls of anyone in the house. I wasn't sure if that was out of respect for their privacy, or because she didn't want me discovering something I wasn't supposed to know. There were a lot of secrets under this roof. And the more I tried to discover them, the more secrets I found.

My mother had also made it clear that she didn't want Razim and me sleeping anywhere near each other. Our rooms were at opposite ends of the villa, where we both headed after he shot me one last look in the turquoise-tiled hall outside the dining room. Candlelight glowed on his bronze skin, and his eyes were liquid pools. He still looked hungry, even though we had just eaten. Growing up, I'd thought our living arrangement meant my mother didn't want me to wander into Razim's soul, but now, with the way Razim was acting, I understood there might be other reasons. I was oddly grateful for her precautions—oddly because maybe I should have wanted more than just to walk Razim's soul. I was getting older, after all, when I was supposed to begin wanting other things . . . things that Razim seemed to want at least some of the time from me.

"Good night, Kamai," he murmured.

"Good night." I stared after him, mostly at his shoulders, broader and higher by the day. I frowned, caught between wanting to say something more adult and to childishly stick my tongue out at his back. As always, I dragged my feet in the other direction, upstairs to my room.

This night, my mother had given me strict instructions to wait three hours before sneaking into the guest bedroom and slipping under the bed. This trick only worked with guests who wished her to sleep beside them. If I got caught inside the room, or if Razim or one of the servants spotted me going in, I could use the excuse that I needed my mother.

Like hiding under bedroom windows, this ploy wouldn't work forever. At twelve, it was already a stretch. But I was willing to take the risk, because tonight, she said, she had something important to tell me. So important we needed to meet in the sleeping realm for me to hear it, which I hoped meant it was going to be a critical lesson in soulwalking.

I studied to pass the time, as Zadhi had suggested, lying on my bed behind the gauzy swath of mosquito netting with my chin perched in my palm, reading history and poring over an atlas of Eopia. My room was my haven, the intricately tiled floor covered in an even more intricate rug of teal and black spirals, my dark-posted bed with its embroidered silk sheets and cushions like a cradling hand at the center of it all. Heavy wooden shutters kept out the night, though I could hear insects singing in the dark. On my bedside stand stood a small statue of pale Heshara with her secret smile and cloak-like black hair, watching over me, alongside a bronze censer burning spicy incense to keep the air smelling pleasant. I felt safe here.

I never minded studying. When my hands weren't holding a spread of Gods and Kings cards, they were turning the pages of a book. Myths, histories, maps—it was all a type of magic, transporting me somewhere else, even if it was only to other places in Eopia. Books were doors I was allowed to open with the flick of my wrist . . . unlike the black door. Tracing the jagged contours of our sandy island continent and the rocky volcanoes crisscrossing it always made me feel small with how little I knew of them and breathless with the potential they held. The land was made up of familiar pieces—sandy deserts and dense forests, palm-lined beaches and sunbaked, rocky peaks—but they were used to build something bigger, just like the halls and rooms of a nehym.

I was so engrossed I lost track of time, glancing up to realize the candle had already burned past the mark my mother had made for me. I leapt up.

My slippers were silent over the tile of the upstairs hallways, and I knew every obstacle to avoid tripping over in the darkness. And my mother and Hallan kept every knob and hinge well-oiled, so the door to this particular guest bedroom didn't make a sound as I cracked it open and slid inside.

The orange light of dying candles made my mother's pale skin glow like coals. She lay on her stomach, her back bare above the covers of the bed. The woman, more careful of her nudity, wore a satin robe, her arm draped comfortably across my mother's shoulders as they slept. The sight didn't bother me or inspire me . . . until I tried imagining myself in my mother's place. *That* made me want to run.

Shaking my head, I refocused on the task at hand. I tiptoed inside and quietly laid myself out on my mother's side, under the bed, a thick rug keeping me cushioned from the tile. She'd be the only one to accidentally step on a stray arm of mine then, and she could warn me if her patron awoke.

I used to be unable to fall asleep like this. Just in case, my mother always made sure I had a couple of vials of sleeping tonic, distilled from the herb mohol, to knock me out in a hurry. But it was late enough, and I'd been staring at the atlas for long enough, I didn't need one.

I was standing in the familiar dark glade almost immediately. This was where my spirit usually ended up if I stopped halfway between wakefulness and dreams to soulwalk—where my own nehym should have perhaps been, but wasn't. There wasn't much to explore in the clearing. The edges faded away into blackness, like a line of trees that I couldn't distinctly make out. Whenever I tried to step into it, I couldn't. If this was the only place I could have gone, being a soulwalker would have been dreadfully dull. Fortunately, it wasn't.

If there was someone nearby when I fell asleep, I would often end up directly inside their soul. This time, I had a choice. Two doors stood before me—only the doors, free of walls—one of rich, warm wood that I recognized as my mother's, and a high, narrow, stately one. My mother had told me to meet her

in our guest's, so I turned its knob, slowly out of habit from the waking world, trying not to make a noise.

Where one might have expected to see the clearing on the other side, a hallway as high and narrow as the door greeted me, made of the same dark wood. The place wasn't what I would have called bright or cozy—the air was stuffy, smelling slightly of must, the lighting dim. It could have been unpleasantly oppressive, but the silent hallways felt heavy with potential, filled with mysteries and secrets, leaning claustrophobically in on me as if to murmur them in my ear.

"Kamai." I heard my mother's soft voice. I followed it into a sitting room that was as stuffy as the hallway. Even the chairs seemed stretched thin, with high backs and narrow seats. My mother was seated in one, her beaded silk gown in airy blue contrast to the walls around her, and she patted the cushion of the chair next to her. "Sit, dearest. It's time we spoke on a certain matter."

Despite her seeming casualness, I knew this was important. She'd said so herself. I sat, alert, without leaning back.

My mother laughed. "This isn't a test, I promise." She pursed her lips. "More of an interview, in a sense."

My eyebrows furrowed. "We're not going to explore?"

"Not right now." She sat back in her chair, studying me. "What do I do for a living, Kamai?"

"You're a courtesan," I answered promptly. It was easy enough to say. A pretty word for a confusing thing.

"That's a position at court, yes, but how do I make my living?"

I swallowed. "You sleep with people."

She smiled at my inevitable blush. "Close, but not quite. Hallan and I, we are pleasure artists. Much like actors, we use certain masks: our smiles, our words, and yes, our bodies to please others. But we are different from common pleasure workers, and not just because of the particular mask of our *marriage*. The distinction is silly, but to maintain our reputation—and our patrons' misplaced sense of pride—we receive no money in return for our art. We can accept gifts, of course, and favors, and influence, but . . ."

"But that's not how you make your living," I finished slowly, realizing the puzzle for the first time, one that had been right under my nose for my entire life. I was embarrassed I'd never thought to question it.

But my mother beamed, satisfied I'd figured it out now, at least. "Precisely. And while Hallan and I are considered members of the upper class—some might even call us famous—we are not nobility. We don't have extensive lands or holdings beyond Hallan's villa, or income from investments. Patron gifts would not pay our taxes to the king, or keep us in fine clothes and jewels, able to host lavish dinners such as tonight's. With that alone, we would not be able to maintain an appearance worthy of the court and its nobility—our very important patrons."

Razim had been hinting at some other purpose behind their actions for some time, but I'd never realized that while their supposed marriage was a mask for their art, their art might be *another* mask for something else entirely. "So what do you do?"

She leaned forward, her eyes intense. "We deal in secrets, Kamai. The intimacy we share with others affords us a certain vantage. It exposes vulnerabilities. People let slip things they wouldn't otherwise. And because these people are often powerful, their secrets are worth the most."

My heart was thundering in my chest—not from fear or nervousness, but excitement. "Who do you sell them to?"

Her face grew oddly still. "A secret organization called the Twilight Guild. They're a broker of secrets, in a sense, and they pay their members well. They resell the information to interested parties who will pay even more for it."

Maybe it was her tone, but my mouth suddenly felt dry. "Are they good people or . . . are they bad?"

My mother didn't brush the question aside; instead she considered it for a moment. "They are neither. The information they sell could be used to do good things: to expose lies, to reveal who paid an assassin to murder someone at court, or to uncover a plot to steal money from, say, one of Tain's temples." I shuddered at the thought of the sun god's fiery eyes narrowed in displeasure under the burning pyre of his hair. Who would want to steal from him? "Or it could be used for what we might call evil. The secrets we sell might engender lies, or lead to someone's assassination, or betray how best to steal from a temple. We don't decide what people do with the secrets. We merely sell them to the guild, and they sell them to the highest bidder. It's the same as a crafter of swords. Steel in someone's hand can be used for good or ill; it is not for the blacksmith to decide. He creates the weapon, not what is done with it."

It was strange to think that my mother's actions could lead to someone's death, though it didn't scare me as much as it should have. It made her business even more fascinating, like dark things often were to me. Of course that death wouldn't be her fault, but the Twilight Guild could certainly choose whom they sold information to and try to avoid it. They sounded shadowier in purpose than a mere blacksmith, and not only because

of their name. "The guild would never hurt you or force you to do anything you didn't want to do, right?"

"I joined them of my own free will, and they have never hurt me. But one would be wise to never cross them." She paused, smiling ruefully. "And to remain valuable."

"So they're not dangerous?"

"That depends. They have been around for centuries, with hundreds if not thousands of members. No one except their leader—whose identity is always a secret—knows how many, or how deeply they are seeded in this land, but I know they have members in the lowest levels of society up to the highest. No such organization could have clean hands. Take the clergy, another ancient organization. Are Heshara's priests and priestesses dangerous? To some people, yes, others no. They reveal a soul's deepest secrets for the king, for better or worse. They've brought both fortune and death down on people's heads with that knowledge. They've hunted down unlicensed soulwalkers and allowed them to be burned at the stake in years past, but they've also healed people's souls and long served the moon goddess. I love Heshara and her worship, and yet her servants are a danger to me."

It wasn't only the sun god and his searing gaze that seemed frightening now. As a soulwalker, I'd always prayed to Heshara first, most comforted by the thought not only of the goddess of night and souls but of a mother figure watching over me. And yet, just as there were many faces to the moon, Heshara, with her pale visage half-shadowed by her curtain of starlit black hair, seemed to have other, darker sides as well.

As did my mother.

"So you're saying the Twilight Guild isn't dangerous to you?" I asked.

My mother smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"They need me. I'm one of their best harvesters of secrets. They—even Hallan—think it's because of my skill as a pleasure artist, but as you might have guessed, it's also because I can soulwalk."

I could hardly breathe. To make a living off curiosity, exploration, and *soulwalking*, turning a dangerous liability into a profitable blessing . . . it seemed like a dream.

My dream now. And maybe not mine alone.

"Is Razim planning to join the guild?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"He already has," my mother said with a slight frown. "He's young but determined. And Hallan allowed it." She sounded as if *she* wouldn't have.

"Can . . . can I?" I stammered.

She hesitated. "Someday, perhaps, which is why I wanted to speak to you about this now. It would affect the course of your studies both in the waking *and* sleeping realms. There are tricks in both worlds to sussing out secrets. But . . ."

My forehead furrowed. "But what?"

"You realize, Kamai, that either Hallan's path into the Twilight Guild as a courtier, or mine as a courtesan *and* a soulwalker, would require you to sleep with people."

I opened my mouth and then closed it. And opened it again. "But what about Razim? He doesn't want to sleep with people, either. He's just pretending if he says he does. That's why—"

"He's studying music to perform as a courtier, I know, hoping it will stir up emotions and trust and perhaps secrets on its own. That *is* another path, but only time will tell if he can make it worthwhile to the guild. Perhaps they see something else of value in him," she muttered half to herself, staring off in thought for a moment before blinking back at me. "But for you, as a soulwalker, there really is only one way."

She was right. I'd just been thinking myself that the time for sleeping under windows and beds was drawing to a close. I would have to start sleeping *in* beds.

"But I don't want to force you down this path," my mother said quickly, earnestly. "While you are still young, I want you to think long and hard about it. Especially since I haven't seen you noticing boys, or girls, very much. That might come later, but I want this to be *your* decision. Until then and, needless to say, until you're older, I won't begin any of your training."

I wanted to say yes immediately, but . . . she was right. I hadn't noticed anyone in *that* way. Sure, Razim was handsome and I wanted to explore his soul, but I didn't feel the desire that he had in his eyes when he looked at me. And yet maybe that would come later, as my mother had said.

But I was beginning to doubt.

She sensed my hesitation. "If you don't want to answer now, it's okay. And if you never want to do this at all, I understand completely. Maybe it's even best . . ." She trailed off, glancing to the side, as if keeping a lookout for something.

The black door.

I didn't want to stay away from souls. I didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to do something so exciting as *spying* to learn people's secrets. And I wouldn't let myself admit that I didn't want to stay away from the black door, either.

And if sleeping with people was the path . . .

My mother patted my knee. "I'll leave you to think on it." She stifled a yawn. "I'm going to get some sleep. Feel free to explore, just remember—"

"No touching or moving anything, I know."

She smiled, stood up, and vanished.

There would be no touching souls, probably not until I was

okay with touching bodies, I guessed. My studies in the sleeping realm had likely come to a halt until my mother was sure I could go down this path.

I grimaced and stood, turning angrily away from the room that I couldn't *really* explore. But the walls leaned in close . . .

And I couldn't help that my arm brushed against the black door. It had appeared right next to me this time. Almost as if it wanted me to bump into it.

When I did, something tickled my skin, like an exhalation. A whisper. Without thinking, I put my ear to the smooth surface, since I could have sworn I'd heard something.

It was like putting my cheek to someone's chest. There was the same warmth, the *aliveness*, thrumming through it like a heartbeat. My scalp prickled, my hair stirring with what felt like a breath.

#### "... Kamai."

If the night wind could whisper, this would have been its voice. There was no doubt about what I'd heard. I threw myself back, crashing into the opposite wall and banging my head. I stared at the door, wild-eyed, and it once again seemed to stare back at me. For a moment, my face was reflected in the sheen of the gleaming surface.

It *knew* me. But I didn't know it. For once, the part of me that wanted to was overwhelmed by fear.

I didn't care about the secrets held by this darker soul, or what my mother would think about me leaving so soon. I tore open the other door, to the outside, to my body, to safe familiarity, and hurtled through it.

I was sixteen when I yelled at the door.

I was in my bed, and a girl, Ciari, was propped on her

elbows above me, her long dark hair curtaining our faces. She was kissing me.

And I was . . . trying . . . to kiss her back. I couldn't silence the buzzing in my head. Not a pleasurable buzz, but more like an agitated hive of bees. I couldn't think. There was only the hum of wrongness. It wasn't helping my technique.

Not that I'd been taught much, either by my mother or Razim or anyone else. To be fair, I hadn't asked.

I told myself again that I wanted this, but I couldn't silence the rising scream inside of me. The no. I'd long thought Ciari was beautiful, and I even had the urge to be near her, but as soon as she'd started kissing me, as soon as I started even imagining going beyond kissing with her, I lost interest. More than that: I wanted to run the other way. The solid posts and silk sheets of my bed, glowing softly in the spicy candlelit air, no longer felt like a hand cradling me in safety, but one offering me up, exposing me, and Heshara's statue with its secret smile, gracing my bedside stand, seemed to know something I didn't.

Ciari pulled away, her lips glistening. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, fine," I said, a little breathlessly, following her gaze down along my body to my fists, which were crumpling the satin skirt of my lace-trimmed nightgown.

I want this.

No, I don't. But I want to soulwalk, to join the Twilight Guild, and this is how I do it. Be brave.

Ciari took one of my hands. I managed to unclench it.

"Have you never done this before? With a girl?" she asked, tracing my fingers with a lovely gentleness that made me shiver.

She thought I feared something new. She didn't know I feared something I didn't want, had never wanted, and might never want.

"No. Not with a boy or girl," I admitted, a blush flaring up in my face. "But I like both."

I liked the *look* of both. Both had the potential to make me want to draw nearer. But when I did . . . there was nothing. I had a complete lack of that desire to get even closer—and less clothed—which everyone around me seemed to have. *That* was more embarrassing to me, a much deeper secret, than my lack of experience.

Ciari grinned, and it was an evil, beautiful thing. "I can teach you how."

It was as if she were talking about how to feel what she felt, rather than how to have sex, and I wanted to believe she could. "Okay," I whispered.

She leaned in to kiss me again. This time, her hand reached down and started gliding up my leg, lifting my nightgown, seeking . . .

My hand shot out before I could help it. "Don't," I gasped, panicked, against her lips, and I tore my own lips away and flung my head to the side. Horror at what I had done flooded me, and I glanced back at her with wide eyes. "Sorry, I . . ."

Ciari rolled off me. "It's okay," she said, though she was clearly disappointed. She sat up and smoothed the front of her nightgown over a lovely pair of breasts. Not lovely enough, apparently, for me. Nothing was ever enough. "We are just supposed to be playing cards anyway, and then going to bed, while our mothers and Hallan have their fun."

She sounded very much like she wanted to be having that sort of fun too. We'd been playing cards downstairs earlier, whiling away the time as Razim made eyes at the both of us, but Ciari only had eyes for me. We'd gone upstairs early, giggling, leaving Razim flushed and frustrated, but I had ruined it.

I felt ruined. Broken. And for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why. At least, I knew what made me a disappointment to Ciari and my mother—and myself. My lack of sexual desire was all too obvious. But I didn't know why I was this way.

Afterward, Ciari and I hardly spoke, beyond what was required for another uninspired round of Gods and Kings. It didn't help my mood or hers that I beat her. Afterward, she rolled over on my silken bed cover and snuffed out the candle.

I wanted to soulwalk, but it took me a while to fall asleep lying next to Ciari. Being in bed with another person was supposed to make it easier to use my talent, not harder. Yet another thing I was failing at this night.

I eventually ended up in Ciari's nehym. It was a stone house, small but nice enough, tidy with rich wood accents. I didn't pause to look around, because the black door stood across from me, and it drew all my suddenly furious attention.

"What do you want?" I shouted at it before I really knew what I was saying. Before I realized what I actually wanted to say:

What do I want?

No one was apparently the answer.

I knew what it wanted anyway. My mother had warned me long ago, and I had felt it every time I had seen it since.

It was my evening for thwarting desires. I didn't open it, and, strangely, I felt nearly as regretful in denying the black door as I had Ciari.

I was seventeen when the door gave me a gift.

One late afternoon, my mother called me into the sitting room. She'd been pacing there all day, and laughing less and less for months while the faint lines in her lovely face deepened.

"Kamai," she said, taking my shoulders, which were no longer

lower than hers. I was expecting her to comment, like usual, on the fact that my dress was too dark for the sunny, dry season, making me look morbid instead of appealing, but it was far more serious than that. "I can't explain everything, but you must listen to me. If something happens before I can get you away from here, go to your father, in the capital. His name is Jidras Numa, and he won't like it, but he'll take you in. You may not like it either, but it's the only place that will be safe."

"Wait, what?" I wanted to reel back, but my mother's grip kept me rooted. She'd never told me anything about my father. I hadn't even known that she knew who he was. "Why now?"

For a second I thought it was because I was failing her so badly. There had been no awakening of my desire, which was making it harder and harder for me to get near enough to anyone to soulwalk—harder and harder to follow my mother into the Twilight Guild. If I could have made myself more like her—so beautiful and beguiling and knowing—not only would I discover the world's dark secrets for myself, but maybe I wouldn't feel broken anymore. Maybe I could make her proud.

But desire wasn't something I could study and learn to feel, just like my soul wasn't something I could search for and discover.

All I had was the black door, and I could never open it. I couldn't feel the proper things I should have felt, and the one forbidden thing I shouldn't have wanted was what I craved most.

Maybe she was casting me away because I truly was broken. Reading my face, she said, "Kamai, my sweetness, it's not

you. I've done something I might regret."

"What have you done?"

She smiled faintly. "I fell in love." The smile vanished,

replaced by steel. "Forget everything I've told you about the Twilight Guild. Forgive me—I wasn't entirely honest with you, for reasons I can't explain right now. They are bad. They are dangerous to you and me. Very. And whatever you do, don't trust any of their members. Not even Razim. Stay away from him. If anything terrible happens, they're all responsible."

I could have laughed, if not for how grave and urgent she sounded. At nineteen, Razim was moody and withdrawn, but not *dangerous*. Then again, I didn't know quite what role he had played for the guild in recent years, since I hadn't been able to join them and learn for myself. "What about Hallan?" I asked, breathless.

Her softer smile returned, and suddenly I knew whom she had fallen in love with after all these years. "He won't be the problem, in any case. But *stay away* from Razim. Now go, pack only what you might need!"

"Wait, right this moment? What about you?"

"I have places I can hide, if . . ." She didn't finish, and I got the sick suspicion her sentence would have ended with if I make it.

"Come with me!" I said. "I'm sure my father will hide you as well!"

She shook her head ruefully. "I doubt that very much. In any case, I can't follow you right now, Kamai, because I'll only put you in greater danger."

My mother no longer held me in place—in fact, she was trying to steer me away from her—but I kept my feet planted. "I'm not leaving without you!"

The steel returned to my mother's voice and I flinched away from it. "You will do as I say. Go pack. And don't panic; we have some time before they make their move."

As it happened, she was wrong.

A short while later, a little after sunset, someone pounded on the front doors of our villa. I'd been gathering my things in my bedroom in a haze of disbelief, unsure this was actually happening. When I heard the noise, I leapt up to peer downstairs through the crack of my door.

My mother glanced up in my direction. "Don't let them in!" she shouted at the servants hurrying toward the commotion.

The pounding turned to hammering. The doors shuddered on their hinges.

"Stay hidden, Kamai . . . and run!" Those were the only words my mother had time to spare for me. I didn't run. I couldn't. "You there," she continued to the servants, "bar the doors! Arm yourselves with whatever you can!"

She herself seized an ornate ax from a plaque on the wall. It was nearly too heavy for her, the tip gouging the floor, but she managed to heave it upright. I cast about for some weapon of my own, but my room held only soft things. In the meantime, Zadhi and another servant were dragging a heavy chair to block the entrance.

None of our efforts mattered. A group of men wearing soldiers' uniforms kicked in the doors. Before my mother could do more than clumsily swing her ax, which they deflected easily, they slit the servants' throats in the candlelit entryway, faster than I could follow the line of their daggers. Zadhi, who I'd known most of my life, fell gurgling and choking on her own blood.

And then, there, in the front room, without any ceremony, one of them ran my mother through with a sword.

The blade entered underneath the front of her rib cage and came out, red, from between her shoulders. Her eyes widened, beautiful lips parting, and she made a sound like a strangled cough. But when her attacker lowered his sword, she was silent

as she slid off and fell to the ground, her own weapon slipping from limp fingers.

My knees hit my bedroom floor at the same time. I choked on a scream, my agony silent, just like my mother's. She wouldn't have wanted me to draw attention to myself, but my silence was less for survival's sake and more because I was paralyzed by the sight below me. All I could see was her blood, soaking into a pale blue rug and pooling on the white tile beneath her. Her limbs jerked, and yet her eyes were sightless. A piercing keen rose in my ears, but only in my head—the scream I hadn't released.

One of the soldiers, his blade gleaming red, called out, "Kamai Nuala?"

I dropped all the way to the floor, fist in my mouth to keep even my ragged breathing from reaching him. Why me? was all I could think. Why not Hallan or Razim as well?

The soldier tried to move for the stairs, but another caught his arm, pulling him back, shaking his head. "If the girl was in the house, she's not now. She wouldn't have kept quiet through all that. Let's go."

He gestured at a third soldier, who poured a clear liquid all over the floor, including the base of the stairs, flinging it on the curtains and furniture while he was at it.

They weren't going to leave anything behind.

They knocked over a standing candelabra, and all the guards backed out the front doors and into the evening as everything went up in flames.

# STRANGE COMFORTS

dashed to the top landing to go down to my mother, but the heat was sudden, immense, like running into a wall. I leapt back involuntarily, away from the fire, my skirts snagging as I scrambled back down the upstairs hall on hands and knees. Thick black smoke was already pouring up after me, churning across the ceiling's bright mosaics like river rapids over stones, swallowing them. I didn't make the decision to run from it. I just did.

There was a second staircase the servants used—had used. They were all dead now. When I wrenched on the handle at the base of it, the door didn't budge. It was supposed to open into a back entryway, with a door just beyond it that I'd often used to sneak out. But the soldiers must have blockaded it.

I ran back up the stairs and had to drop into a crouch to breathe. Coughing, I crawled into my room and kicked the door shut.

Other than the haze in the air, it was peaceful, candles casting a soft glow over the teal and black spirals of the rug, the heap of silk pillows on the bed, and the statue of smiling, serene Heshara. Like my entire life wasn't burning down around me. I flung open the window shutters.

The grounds below were quiet in the deepening twilight. The air still hung heavy and hot from the day, but it was only the weakest whisper of the heat behind me. A horse whinnied shrilly somewhere far away. Perhaps the men were gone, but it didn't matter; I'd still break my ankle if I jumped. I couldn't even see my landing. I spun back to the room, looking for anything I could use to climb down, but froze when I saw the smoke flooding in under the crack of my bedroom door, forcing its way in.

There wasn't time. I had nowhere to go. If the black door had suddenly appeared in the waking world, I would have thrown it open and dashed inside to escape.

"Kamai!" came a hoarse shout.

I turned back to the window, squinting and coughing. It was too dark to see clearly, but a shape slipped out of the shadows of our garden.

"Jump, Kamai, and I'll catch you!"

I wasn't sure who it was, but I didn't think twice. I tossed my legs over the sill, only making sure my skirts were clear, and then shoved myself out into the night.

It wasn't like in the stories, where the brave rescuer catches his lady and sets her on her feet in the same smooth motion. I may have been slight, but I hit hard. My cheek smashed into a shoulder, my skin tore against the studs of leather bracers, and my delicate silk dress ripped at the waist. My weight dragged both of us to the ground, knocking the breath from my lungs.

So I couldn't scream when I saw it was Razim who'd caught me.

He sat me upright, his arm firm and steady around my back despite our collision. "Are you hurt? Can you move?"

I opened my mouth, but only to gasp and cough. My mother's words echoed in my mind. Dangerous. Stay away from him.

"Come on," he said, lifting me to my shaky feet, while he stood tall and strong from the years he'd grown and trained since boyhood. "I'm not sure what Marin did to bring this down on our heads, but you'll be safe if we hurry. The Twilighters will still take you in, even if you're not one of us."

The Twilighters. My mother said they were behind this. And Razim was one of them. That was why my mother's killers hadn't called his name, at least, along with mine: he was already with them. And now he was likely trying to finish what they'd started, to lure me closer in order to kill me, or else this rescue attempt was some other sort of trick to betray me to them.

My mother had also told me to run. So even though it shamed me later, I did.

Razim caught my arm before I'd made it five steps and hauled me back. "Where are you going? The wagon is this way!"

"Let me go!" I screeched, trying to wrench my arm out of his grip.

He held me tight, lifting his other hand in the darkness to his lips. "Quiet, idiot! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

All at once, I quit pulling away and turned on him, like I should have from the beginning. "Why do you care? You want me dead anyway. This is all your fault!"

"What? No, those were the king's soldiers—"

"Anyone can hire soldiers or even dress like them, especially

the Twilighters!" I spat. "I'm not an idiot, but I would be one to believe they're not responsible!"

Razim squinted. "Why do you have reason to fear the guild? What did your fool mother do to—?" He cut off when one of my hands caught him on the cheek, and the other clawed for his eyes. "Kamai, stop!"

I didn't stop. I shrieked like a wild animal and threw myself upon him, hitting, scratching, and kicking. Somewhere in there were sobs, and a grief that was eating me alive. I would tear Razim to pieces with my bare hands if it meant I could somehow escape it, reverse what had happened. Bring my mother back to life.

Razim seized my wrists, pinning them together, and tried to drag me with him. I bent and bit his hand as hard as I could.

He shouted a curse and let me go.

I took off in a blind sprint in the opposite direction. I didn't know where I was going, only that I couldn't go with him. He was one of *them*—the men who'd killed my mother and set fire to the villa. I wasn't sure why he wanted me to follow, but the reason couldn't be good for me.

As if to prove me right, Razim slammed into me, bringing me to the ground. His weight crushed my ribs, twisting my wrist underneath me.

His hand gripped the back of my neck, holding me down, and he leaned over and growled in my ear, "Gods, Kamai, you stupid girl! Fighting me now will get you nothing. Come with me, and *be quiet*."

I screamed into the dirt as loudly as I'd wanted to when my mother had been stabbed through the heart.

He clamped a hand over my mouth, pinching my lip hard against my teeth. I tried to twist away and claw at him, but he

swung his leg over me, sitting on my lower back and pinning my arms between us. He kept hold of my mouth with one hand while fumbling with the other. I gasped and tried to bite him again, without success. In seconds, he tossed a handkerchief next to my face and then let me go only long enough to block my shouts with the cloth instead. He cinched it brutally behind my head. I sobbed and gagged, vaguely hoping I wouldn't vomit into the handkerchief.

"Kamai, you're making me do this," he whispered, his voice furious. His weight shifted again, and something whipped the warm air—his belt as he yanked it off. Hot, it was so hot with him on top of me, and I could barely breathe to fight. I felt suffocated by his proximity, but it was too late—his hands found mine in the darkness, and he bound my wrists tightly behind my back with the leather strap.

He rolled off me then and heaved me to my feet, seizing my elbow like a vise. That didn't stop me from struggling, so much he practically had to carry me under his arm.

The blow to the back of my head stopped me, finally, as we made it into a dense stand of palms. I'd been bent forward, kicking and writhing, so I didn't see where it came from. It wasn't Razim, since both of his hands were occupied. I didn't have a chance to look around as the pain blinded me. I only saw the back of a covered wagon.

Razim let go of me, and I fell to my knees, and then on my face since I couldn't catch myself on my hands. I rolled onto my side, blinking away the sweat and dirt, to see Razim seize a man by the shirt . . . only to shove him away.

"Don't touch her," Razim snarled.

I heard the smirk in the other man's voice even if I couldn't see it. "It looked like you needed help. Ranta's tits, what a match!

I would have rescued you from your fierce little assailant earlier, but I didn't want to draw any more attention to our position than she already has."

"Gods." Razim wiped sweat, and maybe blood, from his brow, and looked down at me. "She must be mad with grief."

"Doesn't she know who her friends are? Stupid girl."

"Don't call her that," Razim said. "Whatever her fool mother did to get herself killed, Kamai must have watched her die. It can't have been easy."

"Your father is dead too, and yet you're holding it together."
My breath caught. They'd killed Hallan as well? Horror rose
with the bile in my throat.

Razim raised a hand, his voice tight. "Don't, Nyaren. I  $\dots$  it's too new."

"Have it your way. Just know that every one of us have sacrificed a lot for the guild. We've all lost someone, but that's just the price we have to pay. She'd best learn the same lesson too."

Hallan . . . Hallan might have been only pretending to be married to my mother, but I'd known him all my life and he was the closest thing I had to a father. A sob lodged in my chest, a terrible whine escaping from behind my gag.

In contrast, Razim was just standing there, when the men who'd murdered his father were nearby—maybe even right in front of him, in the form of this Nyaren. It didn't matter if the Twilighters would spare my life in exchange for my compliance, if their offer wasn't just a trick to discover what I knew before they killed me. That wasn't a trade that I, or anyone, should be willing to make.

And yet Razim must have made such a bargain for himself, if he wasn't already their creature through and through. In either case, he wasn't just dangerous. He was inhuman. I thought I'd

known him, but I'd been so very wrong. How could I know anyone? That was a lesson my mother had tried to teach me; I'd just learned it too late.

But perhaps I'd learned a final lesson, even if it was too late for her: Never fall in love. Because this was apparently what happened when you did.

Nyaren turned my way. "Still making noise, is she? Is she even worth all this trouble? Although she is a pretty thing, I'll give you that."

Razim was in his face again. "She's mine. I told you not to touch her. Never touch her."

A pretty thing. *His.* Maybe that was the only reason I wasn't dead. He'd finally managed to claim me.

I'd always viewed my lack of desire like a stone in the path of becoming like my mother. Now it would be a stone that I would use to build a wall between me and people like this, so they could never touch me. I would refit my brokenness to be my armor.

If I ever escaped.

Half rolling, half inching along the ground like a caterpillar, I tried to drag myself away from them both.

"Get control of yourself." Nyaren shoved Razim back. "So she's yours. Understood. Now do you want to get her in the wagon or let her crawl away?"

They both came for me. Razim took my shoulders, his fingers digging into my arms as he climbed into the back of the wagon with me, while Nyaren took my legs. I thrashed, trying to kick Nyaren in the face, without success. At least he let go of me once I was inside. I kicked the side of the wagon instead, over and over, my feet pounding against the wooden slats like a

giant's knock. I bruised my heels through my thin slippers, but I didn't care.

"She is a wild one," Nyaren said. "I didn't think you'd need it for your lady love, but there's some mohol in the satchel there."

Razim drew me to his chest to hold me still, trapping my legs with his and leaning against the front wall of the wagon. His skin was hot, sticky, touching too much of mine. "Shh," he said in my ear—gently, somehow, after all the violence. Comforting. I wanted to vomit more than ever. He leaned, reaching with one arm, and pulled a small bottle from a leather bag.

I couldn't see clearly in the darkness, but I knew well what mohol was. I struggled harder, sobbing, but it was no use. He slipped part of the soggy handkerchief up over my nose, uncapped the bottle with his teeth, and poured some in his palm. Then he pressed his hand over my nose and mouth.

I had time to thrash once more before the dizziness hit me in a wave.

"I've got you, Kamai" was the last thing I heard in the waking world.

For a while, I couldn't open my eyes, not even in the sleeping realm. Unlike the diluted tonics my mother had occasionally given me, straight essence of mohol kept me too far under at first. I didn't know how much time was passing, but I had the vague, drugged sense of it slipping by in my muddled nightmares.

When I next opened my eyes, there was no covered wagon around me, only walls. They were the thick gray stone of an impenetrable keep. Torches burned in sconces every few feet to keep the shadows at bay. I was alone, standing in a surprisingly warm hallway, and wearing a clean black dress, darker than ever,

with no stains or rips. This wasn't the waking world, then. But it wasn't my clearing. The air had a familiar clean, woody scent—Razim's soap.

Razim had held me as I'd passed out, and he must have gone to sleep next to me in the wagon. That would mean this was his soul, his nehym. I wasn't dizzy here, or sweaty and battered and bound. But I was just as afraid, and the weight of my grief was enough to crush me. Despite the rich tapestries lining the hall, the lush burgundy rug under my feet, the warmth in the air, this place felt like a prison. I spun a full circle, hugging myself and quaking like a palm frond in the wind.

I tried to wake up, but I couldn't. The mohol had relaxed its grip on me, but not enough for my spirit to come fully back to my body. The mind was always less affected by sleep than the flesh, which was how soulwalkers could do what we did.

For so long, I'd wondered what Razim's soul looked like. Now I only wanted to close my eyes again. Anything but explore, which would feel like drawing closer to him than I already was. But there was no way I could let myself slip back into dreams; I was too vulnerable, too afraid to just let go and drift. And yet, without my own nehym or the ability to wake up, I had nowhere else to go. I could have found the door out to my clearing, but I didn't think my legs would carry me that far. They were already threatening to buckle.

I wanted to curl up in a corner and hide, but I couldn't stomach letting the walls of Razim's soul touch me. I would have rather stood in one spot and not moved.

It was then that the black door appeared.

I hurtled straight for it, as if running into its embrace. Somehow, for the first time in my life, it was a source of comfort. It was familiar—something I'd seen my entire life, no matter the soul. It was something I'd so long associated with my mother, even if it was only through her prohibition of it.

I wasn't stupid enough to open it. Not yet. But I threw myself against it and slid down its length, pressure building in my throat and behind my eyes.

Hallan . . . Zadhi . . . oh, gods, Mama. Mama, Mama . . . There, with my shoulder pressed against the smooth, warm surface and my knees hugged to my chest, a cry ripped through me. I sobbed until I couldn't anymore.

Eventually, I grew calm enough to see straight. I was every bit in the same place—alone, in danger, and with no one I could trust—but I felt empty, at least, if not at peace. Blinking swollen eyes, I looked down past my arms, to where something rested on the dark stone next to my foot:

A single red rose petal. Just thin enough to have been slipped under the black door.