





EIGHT WILL FALL

SARAH HARIAN

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Beneath Larkin's glowing lantern, luminite shimmered like fish scales in the darkness of Ethera Mine. Her heart jolted as she unearthed a vein as wide as her thumb. It was the most valuable mineral in all of Demura Isle.

Larkin brushed a few dark curls from her brow and shut her eyes, searching for a shift in emotion within the other miners further down the tunnel. But their pickaxes continued to sing against stone. They weren't close enough for her to sense, which meant they weren't close enough to catch a glimpse of what she'd found.

The sensation of Garran's surprise ignited her spine, and she peeled one eye open to see her little brother lowering his axe and wiping the sweat from his face. "Sweet Ilona."

Larkin pressed a finger to her lips, scowling. Garran knew better than to risk any greedy thieves. Hells, she'd almost sent a pickaxe through the face of a miner just last week for trying to pinch her ore. She didn't want to fight today. She only wanted to celebrate.

She handed Garran a chisel and wedged her own into the stone crack, striking it with her hammer. The lode crumbled into chunks of hardened clay and mineral.

Larkin grinned at Garran, excitement pulsing through her. They were never this lucky. Too often she left the mine sore, with nothing to prove for her labor. Their mother had used the last of

the stone-ground flour this morning. Larkin needed marks, or her family wouldn't eat.

She knelt and reached down. The sensation of Garran's surprise evaporated as her fingers grazed the luminite. She cupped the ore in her hand, the iridescent mineral glimmering. It was as beautiful as it was crippling, suppressing her magic, just as it would suppress the magic of every Empath in the capital.

Hatred for the mineral rose inside her, but Larkin forced herself to remember that she and Garran were fortunate. The presence of luminite should have doused her ability to sense entirely, but the two of them were stronger than the other miners. A *resistance*, her mother called it. Larkin and Garran had inherited the gift from her.

The moment Larkin dropped the ore into her bucket, Garran's amazement came fluttering back. She curled her fingers into her palm and reveled in the thrill as she siphoned his emotion.

Garran grasped her wrist. "Don't you dare." He sounded like their father. Hells, the older he became, the more he looked like their father too, caution ingrained into every one of his soft features. Even his threat was as mild as a lullaby.

"The handle on the bucket is broken." Larkin stole her arm back. "Won't take long to fix it."

"I'll carry it."

"It's my birthday." She smiled defiantly.

"No."

Larkin dropped her hand. Garran was right; magic was as forbidden as luminite was coveted, the mineral drawn from the bowels of the isle to be crushed and smelted and gilded onto every surface in the capital. Protection against the likes of Larkin

and her family—Empaths—who could siphon the emotions of others and use them to conjure or destroy.

And yet Garran was also wrong. Larkin knew that no one was watching them, because she was always careful. No miner or guard paced their tunnel.

She could argue this with him a thousand more times and it wouldn't matter, so she chose to change the subject. "Thirty marks?"

Garran dug through the ore. "At least. Canyon rumor has it our benevolent Queen Melay raised the price of luminite today, just for you." He winked at her.

"Just for me?" Larkin clasped her hands.

"She wants you to have a birthday feast."

She gasped dramatically. "Such mercy! What fortune!"

"*Shh*—keep it down." Garran looked over his shoulder. "Next thing I know, you'll be Melay's newest advocate."

Larkin raised an eyebrow. "Never. Cross my heart and spit on Ilona's grave." She pointed at the remainder of the lode. "Shift's about to end. Hurry!"

She and Garran had only gutted half the vein when the bell sounded. Larkin rammed her chisel into the loosened rock and cursed when the falling ore nicked her hand. She examined the wound in the lantern light before wiping her blood-glazed knuckles on her trousers.

Garran tossed the ore into the bucket. "Be careful."

"I'm fine." Larkin grabbed her knapsack and stood. She thought of their sister Vania's glittering joy every time Larkin and Garran brought anything home from the market district. A full bucket was well worth a few cuts and scratches.

Garran covered the bucket with a filthy handkerchief and picked it up, hugging the ore to his chest. Larkin kept an eye on him as they fell in line with the others, worming their way to the mine's main artery. The shallow chambers of Ethera had been picked clean, and miners like Larkin and Garran had been burrowing deeper for years now, the snaking tunnels shored with timber. The line of tired workers stretched endlessly before and behind them. The air stank of salt and sweat. Five years in these mines and the crawl to Ethera's entrance was still as agonizing as the first time. At least Larkin's nightmares of being buried alive had stopped.

To distract herself, Larkin focused on deciphering the swell of emotions surrounding her—the crackling abrasion of Garran's annoyance with the long lines. The miners carrying empty buckets, their disappointment like cold water to glowing steel.

At the conflux of two tunnels, Larkin almost collided with Adina, a girl whose family lived two doors down from them. Dirt and sweat coated Adina's fair skin, clay caked in her feathery hair.

"Any luck?" Adina clutched her own bucket with buoyant delight.

"A bit," said Garran. Larkin sensed his eagerness at seeing Adina and smirked. He jabbed her in the ribs.

"Where are your brothers?" Larkin asked, frowning. Adina was never alone.

Adina's face fell. "They've gone to find Edric."

"Is he well?" Larkin pressed, sensing Adina's worry. Edric was Adina's older brother, who had been reassigned from the mines to

one of the farms. Before he left, Edric was a cheerful companion in Ethera, even on days when he found no ore. His smile was a welcome change from the drudgery of the mine.

“Nolaa Farm was destroyed. The cottages are nothing but splinters, like the worst storm you could ever imagine came through. No one can explain it. Most of the harvesters are missing. Edric, and our aunt . . .”

A chill numbed the tips of Larkin’s fingers, and she squeezed her hands into fists. Sure, there had been rumors for the past year or so of strange disturbances beyond the city gates—structures crumbling to dust, farmers disappearing. Larkin had heard the stories only through echoing conversation within the mines; workers had picked up word from the farms in the vale. Queen Melay had yet to make an official statement.

But this was real, not a rumor. Edric was someone whom Larkin had shared an axe with. He’d offered her a shoulder when a cart had run over her boot last spring, before he was reassigned.

“I’m so sorry,” Larkin whispered. Besides the mines, the farms were the only other place Empaths were sent to toil. Edric could have been someone from her own family. He could have been Garran, or her father.

“My other brothers left this morning to help with the mess and to try to find him,” said Adina. “I don’t even know if they were able to get a permit to leave the city.”

“I’m sure they did.” Garran exchanged glances with Larkin. Larkin knew what he was thinking. As soon as Nolaa Farm was repaired, Melay would assign another batch of Empaths to tend the land, as if they were nothing but bodies. None of Larkin’s

family had been reassigned yet, but the strands of luck she clung to were shredding beneath her fingers.

Garran put his hand on Larkin's shoulder, and she knew he sensed her fury.

Anger changed nothing. Not in this damned gilded city.

The chamber widened. Adina was jostled into another line. Larkin and Garran only had time for a quick farewell before they found their own line to the smelter. She reeled from Adina's story.

Nolaa Farm may have looked like it had been destroyed by a storm, but Larkin knew better. She'd heard about destruction magic of that scale once, several years ago—rumors of a young boy who destroyed an entire village in the foothills. Melay had the boy executed.

If the same thing was happening again, then perhaps an Empath was to blame. But destruction magic wouldn't explain the missing harvesters.

"You think it's magic," Garran said. It wasn't a question.

"I don't *want* to think it's magic," she replied, ignoring the churning in her stomach that told her otherwise.

The cavernous mouth of the mine echoed with the conversations of hundreds of miners. Larkin sensed the usual bubble of anxiety. They were nervous to see how many marks they would be taking home.

She pressed a hand to her belly as it flipped. No, not anxiety. Confusion. Both roiled through her gut, but the confusion made her nauseous.

"Where are the guards?" Garran asked.

The smelters' tables were always accompanied by a handful of city guards, but Larkin didn't spot any today. Normally, she would be grateful for their absence—she hated the way their eyes followed her particularly close—but now it was troubling.

"I'm surprised a riot hasn't broken out," said Garran.

"Don't give anyone ideas," Larkin muttered. When there were riots, Melay's soldiers converged at the capital and Empaths died. The last was a year ago, the memory still fresh and raw, the haunting stench of blood still potent.

Plus, she had no interest in rioting against the smelters. It was the guards who knocked the hilt of their swords against her head when she wasn't walking fast enough, the guards who visited Empath homes to reassign mothers or fathers or children to the farms, tearing families apart with glee. Fantasies ran rampant in her head of what she wanted to do to them—what she *could* do to them—with the magic she possessed.

They approached the smelter's table, and Garran dropped their bucket on the scale. A small man with sizable spectacles glanced inside, raising thick eyebrows. He made some charcoal scratches in his ledger. From his coin purse, he counted out twenty-four marks and placed them in Larkin's cupped hands.

Larkin clenched her soiled fingers around the coins until her fingernails bit into her palms.

"I'm short," she said.

The smelter shrugged and shooed her along with a wave of his hand.

Larkin's pulse beat in her ears. She ached to siphon Garran's

disappointment. She needed to break something. Maybe the smelter's spectacles.

Garran muttered a thanks to the smelter, shoving Larkin away and up the steps to the mine entrance.

Larkin took a few deep breaths of the dusty air. *It's not his fault*, she chanted until the beat of her heart slowed. Smelters had no control over the wages. That was Queen Melay.

"Tomorrow she could drop the price of ore to a quarter-mark an ounce," Larkin said. "The mines would be filled with starved corpses because all of us would have to work until we keeled over—"

"*Stop.*"

Larkin turned to Garran, flustered.

He was smiling. "What's in your hand?"

"Twenty-four marks. Garran. You were standing right there."

"Exactly." He gripped her shoulders. "Flour, meat, salt, oil . . . All of that will be fifteen marks at most. That's nine left over."

"Nine marks left over for what?" His giddiness, as weightless as it was, also annoyed all hells out of her.

He laughed at her. "Don't play daft. For your birthday, or did you forget already?"

She didn't forget. Seventeen felt old. Trees had rings, and she had another layer of soot on her olive skin, now sallow from days spent in darkness. Another hot coil of rage tightening around her heart. Was this what older meant—the same, but filthier and angrier?

She should save any leftover marks. That was the responsible thing to do. But Garran was right. She deserved something nice,

and so did he. Vania, her mother, her father. These marks were for them.

Larkin funneled the coins into the purse on her belt. “I guess this could only mean one thing.”

Garran followed her up the steps to the entrance, satisfied. “Cake.”

TWO

The late sun clung to the sky like an overripe fruit. Soot from nearby smelteries curled up from limestone bricks and disappeared into the bath of light, and as Larkin emerged from the mine, her eyes watered.

It was her favorite time of the year, early summer. The dry city smelled of baked stone and pine. The sun's warmth soaked her face as she lifted her chin. She scrubbed the grime from her neck with her palms. When her eyes adjusted to the still-bright evening, she saw a boy her age watching her from across the cobblestone path.

Larkin stalled. She'd seen him before; the capital was small enough that she recognized most faces, and he had a carefree one that matched the contentment Larkin sensed in him. He was much taller than she was, with bronze skin and eyes like smoked quartz, and he smiled at her like he knew her. Larkin felt herself smile back, her cheeks flushing.

"Ilona's blessings!" he said. "Will I see you at the temple this afternoon?"

She froze in her steps. Turning on her heel, she grabbed Garran's arm. "Walk." They sped away from the boy, who still beckoned them toward the Temple of Light.

"Aren't you going to say hello?" Garran teased.

"Sure, and then I'll tell him to shove his goddess's blessings up his—"

"Really, Larkin. He was only being polite."

“Just like the goddess Ilona wanted to politely smite our kind?”

“He’s an Empath, too,” argued Garran as they melted into the crowd’s current. “Clearly a miner. Did you see his clothes?”

“Then he’s a stupid Empath if he believes in the goddess.” *All of the pretty ones are stupid*, she thought. If Queen Ilona, the first in the dynasty, truly had been immortalized, surely she made the stupid ones extra pretty to spite Larkin.

It didn’t matter anyway. There was no time to be distracted by pretty Empaths. She had the market to visit and supper to help with.

“You were so captivated for a moment.” Garran elbowed her.

She pushed him away, rubbing at her side. “Don’t make me cuff you in luminite.”

Larkin ignored Garran’s smugness as they hiked past mine entrances. Workers poured from them and made their way up the mountain toward the market district.

Demura’s capital was crafted from the heart of the mountain, every shop and building fashioned from granite. Queen Melay’s palace was built into the very peak, sculpted towers frosted with luminite balconies. The apex of the entire capital. The rest of the city coated the mountain like snow: the city gates and the gilded Temple of Light below to the east, the mining district down the north slope, and the canyon—her home—slicing through the mountain’s base to the west. Everything glistened with luminite, as though ready to melt and collect in the central canal that ran down the face of the alp, drainage and dust and sparkling minerals.

Larkin and Garran followed the canal to the crowded market

stalls nestled in a bowl beneath the palace. Most of those who bartered with the street vendors were miners from the canyon, sifting through barrels of threshed wheat and baskets brimming with shriveled fruit. Their determination bordered on desperation; a successful hagggle was the difference between food on the table or another supper of clear broth.

The stalls were surrounded by bronze-doored shops and pillars of granite. Guards normally patrolled the entrances, forcing patrons to display a full coin purse before they could enter. They were absent today, just like in the mines.

They'll be back, she thought, dipping her hand beneath her frayed tunic and grazing her purse. Her father would want her to barter at the stalls instead of entering one of the shops. But that would mean forfeiting . . .

"Cake?" Garran asked encouragingly.

Larkin nodded, knowing he could sense her nerves. "Two of us in the shop will look suspicious. I'll meet you in the canyon."

Garran frowned. "Let me go in."

"You know I'll be fine," Larkin said.

"Then I'll wait for you outside."

"Garran." She stared hard at him. "Go home."

Garran bounced on his toes, uncomfortable, but Larkin would win. She'd die on the steps of this shop before going home first. Most shopkeepers thought Empaths loathsome, and Larkin much preferred to take the brunt of their cruelty rather than subjecting Garran to it.

He gave in, his shoulders sagging. "Don't be too long. I'm starving."

Garran cast one final glance over his shoulder before crossing the canal bridge home.

Larkin approached the nearest bronze door and ducked into the shop. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the low light and saw a candlelit effigy of Ilona in the center of the room. Larkin almost laughed. The goddess's face was deformed with the help of the artist's poor skill.

As in every shop she'd been in before, small luminite trinkets were strung along the edges of the ceiling. The shopkeeper must have paid a small fortune for them. She thought of the Empath boy who regularly peddled fake luminite trinkets in the market, wondering if these were fake too.

Beneath the trinkets, a woman and a young girl in an embroidered dress browsed shelves stuffed with sugar-glazed pastries and imported candies. The woman's eyes kept darting over her shoulder.

She's used to guards, Larkin thought. How wonderful it must be to find comfort in those polished suits of armor.

Larkin was only able to glimpse at the shelves before the shop owner, dressed in a crisp linen tunic and leather apron, strode over to her. She felt the sensation of mud dribbling down her skin. *Disgust*. Her unkemptness disgusted him. Larkin stared back, forcing herself not to swipe at the dust on her cheeks.

"Can I help you?"

"I have twenty-four marks." She proceeded to rattle off everything she wanted, allowing him to do the math for the cuts of meat and pounds of flour. The man busied himself, scurrying about to fulfill her request.

Larkin stood by the counter and waited, the child behind

her chattering with glee as she and her mother made decisions on sweet rolls and toffee. Every so often, the shop owner glanced at Larkin, but his indulgent smile was laced with the kind of suspicion that made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

She met his smile, widening her eyes innocently.

The shop owner returned with her requested items. “Twenty-two marks.”

Larkin emptied her purse into her palm, counting out coins as he wrapped her cut of salted meat. As she held the marks out, he stalled, studying her hand.

Black clay crusted over the fresh scab on her knuckle, black clay beneath her fingernails. Black clay lined her palms like roads on a map. Only Empath miners burrowed deep enough to hit black clay.

His suspicion intensified, and hate sparked on Larkin’s tongue and scorched her throat like molten ore. But the shopkeeper’s calm face didn’t betray his hatred, which told Larkin one thing: He was used to turning down Empaths like her.

“Take your coin to the shop down the road,” he said flatly. “They’ll serve you.”

Larkin wouldn’t beg. She refused to beg. “My marks are as real as any.”

Silently, the shopkeeper plucked the items off the counter and placed them all on a shelf behind him. He turned back to her and crossed his arms, waiting for her to do or say something—anything—cry and scream or shuffle out of the shop.

Larkin wouldn’t give him the pleasure.

Slowly, Larkin reopened her purse and funneled the coins

back in. One fell and hit the ground, ringing. She bent down to pick it up, then paused.

Larkin should have been out the door already, the shopkeeper all the wealthier. Yet here she was, crouched beneath an assortment of fake trinkets. She could still sense the man's revulsion.

It was almost too easy.

She closed her eyes and siphoned his scalding emotion, ushering it, her hand curling into a fist. She focused on the shelf near the woman and the young girl, fanning her fingers as her body exhaled his rage.

With a crack, the shelf snapped in half, glass jars smashing against the floor. The girl screamed as the shards shot across the tile. The shopkeeper swore and raced to assess the damage.

In the chaos, Larkin quickly evaluated what was in reach—rounds of aged cheeses, three rabbits, and two unplucked pheasants hanging by their feet. No cake. *Sorry, Garran.* She stuffed it all into her knapsack.

Above her, the delicate trinkets swayed with the commotion, useless.

Larkin punched open the shop door and scrambled down the steps. She ran through the circle of outdoor carts, dodging vendors and patrons, and across the footbridge toward the shelter of the canyon.

She imagined the shopkeeper's face when he realized what she'd stolen and grinned.

He could have had her money but chose her wrath instead.

THREE

The strap of Larkin's bag cut into her shoulder as she rushed toward the canyon. The sun had just dipped beneath the city's mountain, stall vendors filling wagons with leftover wares to cart home.

She scanned for the patrol and found none. The streets were vacant of guards, just like the mines and the shops. Any concern was quickly overwhelmed by her relief. The absence of guards had granted her a satchel full of food and a purse heavy with marks.

She'd gotten away with magic.

Destruction magic.

But their hatred was always mixed with fear. They knew that were it not for the luminite, she could glean their silent loathing and use it against them.

Her own exhilaration at using magic surprised her, and she quickly sobered. To be caught using magic meant a lifetime in a cell, or worse. Her family couldn't afford to lose her wages.

She couldn't risk it, not again.

Larkin hurried through the canyon, the granite cliffs trapping the stench of garbage. Broken lampposts lined the path, and a luminite cable crisscrossed the high walls like an iridescent web. As Larkin neared the canyon's bottom, she passed a woman sweeping the steps to her home. A dejected man on the next stoop drank from an opaque bottle.

She sensed the same emotion every evening as she walked

up to. The same emotion, but not a constant one. Because love wasn't a fine-tuned note that rang without changing pitch. Love was harmonized by worry and trust, bright with joy, and sometimes heartbreaking. There were few emotions like that, ones that took Larkin's breath away every time she felt them. Even as angry and exhausted as she was now.

The door groaned as she pushed against it. Larkin's father sat at the kitchen hearth, preparing dinner as her mother chatted with Garran and Vania at the worn table.

Garran stood and met Larkin at the door, planting a kiss on Larkin's forehead. She sensed his relief that she'd made it home safe. "How was the shop?"

She set her bag down. "No cake, but we'll eat more than broth tonight." She smiled and forced herself to relax so Garran wouldn't sense anything strange.

"Angry?" He raised an eyebrow.

She was angry. *Still* angry. But if she tried explaining this to Garran, he'd be disappointed in her.

"The shopkeeper tried to overcharge me."

He grimaced. "Some shopkeepers think the luminite's shut off our brains, not just our magic."

Thank Ilona, Larkin thought, more out of habit than faith.

Vania ran toward them, jumping into Larkin's arms. Larkin groaned, steadying herself to keep from toppling over. "You're almost too big for this."

Vania flashed a grin full of missing teeth, batting away dark, unruly curls. "Maybe."

Larkin released Vania and approached her father, who was slicing bread near the hearth. She glanced inside the pot, the

broth no thicker than brackish water. With a flourish, Larkin pulled the pheasants and the rabbits from her bag, and her father paused mid-slice.

“Did you pinch this?” he asked, much too seriously. *Ilona’s breath*, everyone was suspicious of her today.

Larkin erupted in laughter. She’d learned from experience that laughter was a good distraction, the easiest way to hide her emotions.

Larkin didn’t exactly have the cleanest slate when it came to theft. As a child, she used to steal bits of fruit and dried meat from the stall vendors after her shift. When her mother found the hidden stash beneath Larkin’s bed, she made Larkin scrub their entire home with a pig-bristle brush the size of her thumb, hoping that would stanch the bad behavior.

It didn’t work.

“She found a luminite vein in the mines,” said Garran.

“See?” Larkin knocked her shoulder against her father’s. “You have no faith in me.”

“It’s Ethera Mine he has no faith in,” her mother chimed in.

“Perhaps it’s less dry than you think.” Larkin knelt and hung the rabbit on a skinning hook near the fire. “You should come back. Mine with me and Garran again.”

Her father frowned. He’d been working in the Vault, a newly dug shaft. Prone to cave-ins and noxious gas, the mine churned out more casualties than any of the others. But the work paid well.

“We don’t need all of this,” he said, examining the pheasant. “Did you spend everything?”

“Oh, Jallus.” Her mother hobbled over. “A nice meal for once won’t kill us. It’s Larkin’s birthday.”

Her father sighed. “Fair enough.” Larkin hid a smile. He knew better than to try and argue with her mother.

“Garran, help Vania wash up,” said her mother, easing onto a kitchen stool.

Garran swept the young girl off her feet and rushed her to the kitchen basin, Vania giggling as Garran splashed her. Their joy was warm, and Larkin’s muscles relaxed.

“I can heat a blanket for you,” Larkin offered as her mother stretched out her bad leg. Her mother had broken her leg in the mine years ago. When she didn’t heal properly, Larkin took her place, Garran following suit soon after.

“Oh no.” Her mother lifted Larkin’s hand and examined it. “What did you do?”

“It’s just a scratch,” argued Larkin. She felt a flash of disorientation and heaviness, as if she were poisoned. Guilt. “Mum . . .”

“I only wish I could give you a day,” her mother murmured. “Take your place so you could have one day from that awful hole in the ground.”

“The mines keep me out of trouble.” Larkin hugged her. It wasn’t fair that her mother felt any guilt. None of this was her fault, and Larkin could remind her of that over and over again, but it didn’t matter.

I love you, thought Larkin.

Her mother’s arms tightened around her, returning a love warmer and more familiar than any other emotion Larkin knew.

After supper, full and drowsy from rabbit stew, Larkin took Vania by the hand and led her up the narrow stone staircase to the bedroom they shared with Garran.

Larkin lit a candle and helped Vania into bed. She sat behind her, unwinding a matted ribbon from the girl's dark curls and grabbing a brush from the nightstand.

Vania yawned. "Mum is going to start teaching me how to read tomorrow. Then I can be just like you and Garran."

Larkin smiled. "You'll be reading faster than us in no time." Empaths were banned from formal education, so their mother had taught Larkin and Garran how to read from her small set of heirloom folklore tomes.

Even their mother didn't know how old the tomes were, or whom they belonged to first. There were no names inscribed, no owners or ancestors listed. Empaths weren't allowed to have a surname either, and Larkin had little knowledge of her lineage beyond the mysterious books. Books that hinted at a time when Empaths weren't hated and practiced magic freely. The dynasty erased their names and their stories, stories that had kept her up late, wondering if Empaths once had a goddess of their own. But Larkin knew as little as her mother did, and perhaps as little as her mother's mother. Their history was gone.

And once Vania learned how to read, she would have the same questions. Knowledge of the magic within these books had given Larkin an itch she was always desperate to scratch, like poison beneath her fingernails. And there was no antidote.

Part of Larkin wished that Vania could stay ignorant of such knowledge forever.

“And then, maybe soon, I can start working too,” said Vania.
“Just like you.”

Larkin combed her fingers through Vania’s now-silky strands.
“You don’t need to work, sweet girl.”

“But I want to help.” Vania craned her neck to blink at Larkin.

Larkin kissed the top of her sister’s head. “You can help me by staying home with Mum and keeping her company. You can join me and Garran once you’ve grown bigger and stronger. How does that sound?”

Vania sighed reluctantly.

After tucking Vania in, Larkin picked up the threadbare ribbon from the nightstand and brought it to the table in the corner, sitting down. Mending it herself would be simple, and in the privacy of her home, where there was no chance of getting caught, the risk was worth it.

Around the same time Larkin had learned how to read, she’d taught herself how to conjure and destroy. When everyone else was asleep, she worked with odds and ends—nothing that would be sorely missed—crushing clay mugs and iron buckles to create tiny figurines she’d kept beneath the floorboard. She made one for each member of her family, imagining them living on a farm surrounded by miles of forest, in a land without a queen.

The figurines were gone now. She’d destroyed them only a year ago, after the riot, severing herself from such a childish hope. She’d needed to grow up.

Now she tried to be practical and cautious with her magic. But it was her birthday.

Larkin concentrated, sensing her father’s worry bubbling up through the floorboards. She siphoned and projected onto

the fringed ribbon, shredding it into a pile of wispy threads. Destruction was the easy part, but she usually had trouble pulling together enough positive emotion to conjure. Tonight, it would be simple.

Garran laughed from downstairs, and Larkin siphoned his buoyant amusement. Thread rushed back into her palm, a tendril of crimson ribbon spiraling around her fingers.

Tomorrow, Vania would wonder for only a moment why her hair ribbon looked new, and their mother would be too busy to notice.

Larkin looked up as Garran entered the room, the trill of anxiety below growing.

"They're arguing again." Garran joined Larkin at the small table. "Father told me to go to bed."

Their parents' conversation had grown serious upon Garran leaving the kitchen. Larkin could barely hear them.

"The disappearances in the hills are getting worse," said her father. "Heard rumors in the mine this morning. Not only that, but more destruction—homes, crops, wagons—all crumbling to dust."

Larkin met Garran's eyes as they listened intently.

"This has gone on for far too long," said her mother. "What if one of us is reassigned to the farms? What then?"

"Melay has sent her army to investigate. Even the city guards have gone. Something about a scarcity of soldiers."

"A scarcity? Do you know how large the Demuran army is, Jallus? Are they dead?"

"Faie . . ."

“Missing, like the farmers?”

“You know I don’t know, Faie. No one does.”

“Dead?” whispered Garran.

Larkin knew that Garran was thinking about Adina and Edric. These weren’t just rumors; Edric was missing.

Her eyes darted to Vania, but her sister was asleep. Melay’s soldiers couldn’t be dead. The dynasty had always kept a large army even though Demura rarely faced a real threat. Still, she couldn’t help but entertain the thought. Would it be so terrible if the guards never returned?

“Jallus?” her mother asked. “What if it’s destruction magic?”

“It’s just a rumor, Faie. Who could be powerful enough? Unless the magic is coming from below. From the—”

“*Don’t.*” Her mother’s voice was sharp. “Myth does not belong entangled in truth.” She paused. “And keep your voice down. The children are listening.”

Her parents’ voices became indecipherable, but the prickle of their anxiety lingered.

“What was Dad going to say before Mum cut him off?” asked Larkin.

“I think he was going to say the Reach.”

Larkin barked a quiet laugh. “You can’t be serious.”

Garran shrugged, his concern a cold, dull chisel grating against her rib cage.

“You heard Mum. It’s a fable.” Larkin kept her voice light and soothing. The last thing she wanted was Garran’s emotion waking up—

“What’s a fable?” Vania said quietly from her bed.

Larkin groaned. “Now you’ve done it.”

Garran lifted his hands in mock surrender.

“What’s a fable?” Vania repeated, sitting up.

“You’ll learn soon enough when you start reading from Mum’s books,” Larkin said, and waved her hand. “Now to bed.”

“I want to know *now*. What is a reach?”

Larkin simpered at Garran. “The honor’s all yours.” She knew Vania wouldn’t rest until she got her answer. Better they tell her now than risk her asking Mum about it in the morning.

Garran scratched his head. “The Reach is a big cave.”

“How big?” asked Vania.

“The biggest on the whole isle. And a long time ago, the queen threw *very mean people* inside of it as punishment. But it’s just a fable, Vania. People tell it to keep naughty children like you from doing anything bad.”

“Then it’s a mean story.” Vania crossed her arms.

“Indeed it is.” Larkin grinned. “A very mean, very *short* story.”

Garran matched her smile. “I do my best.”

The tale was meant for Empath children: a warning should they ever attempt magic. The bad Empaths in the story were led by the villain Otheil Kyran, who wanted to steal the throne from Queen Leliana Ilona. When Ilona defeated Kyran and his six disciples a thousand years ago, she cast them into the Reach, and magic was forever banned.

The tale’s most thrilling moment was when a captured and bound Kyran told Ilona that, though he had fallen, darkness would rise once more.

And Ilona ever famously responded: *Darkness cannot exist where there is Light.*

Ilona had since been revered as Demura's Goddess of Light, Kyran the God of Darkness. Good pitted against evil.

But Larkin, the story had a much more practical meaning. *Ilona and Kyran were two mortals with too much power. Ilona loathed magic, and Kyran abused it. Nothing more.*

Of course, Melay continued to uphold the legend as truth, graciously allowing Empaths to exist on the isle. Their inherent darkness was ever doused by the dynasty's light, after all.

Fortunately, Larkin didn't have to explain any of this to a satisfied Vania, who had fallen. But Garran's concern remained.

"Do you think it's Kyran?" Garran whispered as they slid into their beds.

"There's no such thing as gods," said Larkin. And she believed it. Demurans chose to believe in stories about goddesses and underworlds. Empaths *chose* to worship Ilona, even if it wasn't in their best interest.

Fables, however untrue, were less terrifying than the unknown.

The Reach was not a place of magic ruled by a dark god. There was an explanation for the destruction magic happening now on the farms and the disappearances—there had to be. Larkin couldn't let the rumors continue. She knew Queen Melay would find a way to use the rumors of dangerous Empaths to her advantage. Larkin had to lay the fable's power to rest.

FOUR

What exactly do you plan on doing?" Garran stuffed a canteen into his bag as they readied for work the next morning. "Roam around to different miners and tap them on the shoulder? *Excuse me, ma'am, have you heard of our dark underlord, Otheil Kyran?*"

Larkin watched Vania to make sure she was still asleep. "I was thinking, *On a scale of one to ten, how likely is it that our fabled dark underlord is not an actual underlord?*"

"Good luck with that one."

"They'll talk to me." Larkin shoved her foot into her boot. Miners they excelled at stories that could be told within a single whisper, quick enough to share at the tunnel junctions. She knew better than to trust a rumor floating through the darkness, but she trusted Adina, and she trusted her parents' worry. There *was* destruction in the hills, and perhaps an Ethernia worker knew where it was stemming from.

A knock sounded at the front door, and Larkin's head snapped up. Their father had already left for work. No one came over unannounced. No one came over at all. Empath congregations were punishable by death.

Larkin sensed a storm, the static before the strike of lightning. She hurried down the stairs, her brother at her heels. Her mother was in shock, her shoulder pressed to the door, a hand over her mouth.

“What is it?” Instinctively, Larkin searched the room for a weapon. She grabbed a fire poker propped against the hearth.

Her mother’s hand fell from her lips. “Guards.”

Larkin tightened her grip on the fire poker until she couldn’t feel her fingers. “No.” The word escaped her mouth, an order to the guards to stay away, but her voice trembled. Blinking back hot tears, she swore.

Melay still had capital guards left in her command. And there were only two reasons why guards knocked on Empath doors: to reassign, and to arrest.

Her mother backed away from the door. “They’re taking some of us to the farms.”

“Larkin?” Garran’s voice sounded from the stairs, and she fought through his confusion to find her thoughts. This had nothing to do with the farms. The taste of last night’s stew rose in Larkin’s throat. She swallowed, running to her mother, still holding the poker. “Mum . . .” How could she explain what she’d done? The shopkeeper had obviously notified the guards of her theft. Perhaps even of her magic.

She’d never see the light of day again.

The handle rattled as someone rammed against the door. Her father had meant to fix the lock . . .

Larkin didn’t have time to explain. Forget explaining; she couldn’t even apologize. Maybe her family would think that she was being taken to the farms and never know better. “Garran and Dad are going to take care of you, Mum, all right?”

Larkin’s mother grabbed her shoulders. “What are you talking about? *What did you do?*”

The lock gave way and the door slammed open, morning light pouring in. Larkin shielded her eyes. The sun reflected off the brightest armor she'd ever seen. Luminite armor.

Luminite was too heavy for battle; only the palace guards wore it. Palace guards didn't march all the way to the canyon to arrest Empaths like her for stealing rabbits, did they?

The tallest, a surly lieutenant, stooped as he stepped into their home. He wasn't wearing a helmet, and somehow that made it worse. More personal. Weathered by age, the man looked as though he'd made these arrests hundreds of times, but Larkin knew this wasn't a normal arrest.

She couldn't sense him—not with his armor—but caught a glimpse of alarm in his eyes as he unclipped the luminite shackles that dangled from his belt. Three other guards swept around the lieutenant and into the house. Startled, Larkin dropped the fire poker, wincing as one yanked her arms behind her back. The lieutenant clamped the luminite shackles around her wrists.

Garran cried her name.

"Stay back!" she shouted, knowing full well what guards did to Empaths who fought arrest. She tasted iron at the memory of sprayed blood, imagining it was Garran's.

No. She couldn't let that happen.

As the luminite metal grazed her skin, her Empath sense extinguished entirely.

"What did you do?" her mother repeated.

Larkin opened her mouth, but the explanation was lodged somewhere deep inside her.

I didn't want us to starve.

I was humiliated.

I wanted to hurt him back.

As she fought to find the right excuse, her mother's confusion sickening her, the lieutenant nodded toward Garran.

A scream tore from Larkin's mouth. "NO!"

Garran flinched out of surprise, holding his hands up as if to surrender.

"He didn't do anything! He wasn't even with me!" A fierceness rose, something untamed that wanted her to protect what she cared about most. She'd spent her whole life doing just that. She couldn't give up, not now.

Larkin thrashed against her restraints. "Don't touch him!"

The guard holding Larkin threw her against the wall near the hearth, slamming her head against stone. Pain blinded her.

As her mother wept, and Larkin homed in on the sound, using it as an anchor to keep from blacking out. Her vision refocused as a guard cast her mother to the kitchen floor. Her mother landed on her bad leg, crying out.

"Mum . . ." Larkin's eyes darted across the room until she saw Garran backed into the corner. Brandishing a knife, the guard grabbed Garran by the collar and shoved him outside.

The lieutenant's fingers closed around a fistful of Larkin's hair, and he yanked her away from the wall. Tears of pain streamed down her face as he pushed her through the open doorway. Larkin stumbled down the steps to the canyon.

Even with her hands behind her back, she whirled to the open doorway and the collapsed form of her broken mother. With all the armor and the shackles, Larkin didn't know how much her mother could sense. She tried anyway. Love was supposed to feel

bright and warm, but her own weighed heavier than chains, the agony deeper than any wound.

I love you.

A guard grasped the door handle and swung it shut.

“Wait!” She wasn’t ready.

Larkin felt a sharp pain as the lieutenant bumped his fist against the back of her skull.

“No talking.”

She stumbled again, the ground spinning beneath her feet, before she was hauled back up. She heard scuffling from somewhere up ahead of them. Her brother. Larkin lifted her head to see Garran attempting to yank away from the guard who held him. “Leave her alone!”

“Garran, don’t.” Larkin focused on the pain to keep herself distracted, failing. If she were religious, she would’ve started praying to Ilona. Asking for mercy. *But I don’t deserve mercy*, she thought. Not after what she had done to her mother. To Garran.

Larkin heard him whimper in pain. She’d never forgive herself for this.

Several Empaths stopped in their tracks to watch before scurrying away. Larkin didn’t need to sense their fear. She saw it in their eyes.

The growl of rock sounded in the distance. Larkin watched two Empaths stumble and cling to each other at the same moment the ground shifted beneath her own feet.

The guard who held Larkin hesitated, tightening his grip on Larkin’s arms. “What was that?”

A deafening crack startled Larkin. She jerked her head toward the city gates just in time to see the Temple of Light

collapse. The structure fell all at once, as though crushed by the grip of an invisible giant. The nightmarish sound of crumbling stone sent vibrations deep into her bones.

Destruction magic. More powerful than she could have ever imagined.

Her breath caught as she watched, stunned. For a moment, Larkin wondered if she had done it. But that was impossible. She couldn't sense anything beneath these shackles.

Plumes of dust erupted from the debris. Beneath the echoing rubble, screams reverberated up the mountain.

"Sweet Ilona," Garran said.

Some of the surrounding guards drew their swords, but the lieutenant held his hand out.

As the dust dissipated, the market square dissolved into chaos.

"Do something!" a vendor screamed at the guards. Some were throwing wares into carts before hauling them off, others abandoning their stalls entirely. Folks stampeded past Larkin like the wild rush of a river current. Before her, a man fell and was nearly trampled, and she watched in horror as the guards—her guards—did nothing.

Her luminite shackles bit into her wrists. She was almost grateful for them—the terror of the vendors would have been maddening. Was the canyon safe? The mines?

"Dad!" Larkin cried. She looked to Garran, who stared down at the ruined temple with wild eyes.

The lieutenant dropped his hand. "Continue escorting the prisoners."

"But, sir—"

“Do it now,” barked the lieutenant, stepping over the fallen man. “Queen Melay’s orders.”

Melay? Larkin must have heard wrong. Why would the queen bother to personally give a damn about her arrest?

Larkin’s guard steered her north, shielding her from the crush of people. “Out of the way!”

“Where are you taking us?” Larkin pleaded.

Her question soon answered itself. They’d been arrested by order of the queen. And now—amid the crumbling capital—they were headed to the palace.

The palace cellblock smelled of old hay and piss.

Larkin was surrounded by three brick walls; in front of her, bars of luminite stretched from the floor to the ceiling. The other cells were full, the prison heavy with misery. She had a bucket to relieve herself and nothing else: no bed or blanket, and no light other than the torches that flickered between the cells. Her pulse sped as if she were trapped in the mines.

But this was worse than being trapped in a cave-in. A cave-in was unavoidable. She'd brought this upon herself. Upon Garran.

Her brother was locked in the cell to her left. With the brick wall between them, Larkin couldn't see him. Her luminite shackles were gone, so she tried sensing him, but it was difficult with her head throbbing like she had every hell's fury trapped inside of it.

Larkin crawled to the corner where the bars met brick. Garran threaded his hand through the bars and reached out into the prison hall, and she did the same, their fingers lacing together beyond their cells.

How could she tell him that she was sorry? It didn't matter. Nothing could fix what she'd done. Larkin had only one option. It wouldn't make things right, but at least he would know the truth of why they were here.

"I stole from the shopkeeper yesterday. I distracted him with magic."

Garran's disappointment chilled her. "I knew you weren't telling the truth."

"If I'd known what was going to happen—"

"That's just it, Larkin. We do know what always happens: the worst possible outcome. Every time. You knew what would happen; you just chose not to think."

She said nothing in response. Larkin knew Garran could sense her shame, and it was her only offering to him. She couldn't reverse their fate, or the pain she'd inflicted on her mother. It was burned into her mind—the broken heap of her mother on the kitchen floor.

"I didn't think you'd dare to risk something so stupid, not after . . ."

He drifted off, but she knew what he was going to say. Last summer's riot, when the price of luminite plummeted. They'd been caught in the crowd outside the mines. The soldiers had descended, slashing through the chaos with blinding luminite swords. She'd been so close—close enough to witness death, and not just once. There was enough blood to distinguish its sharpness from the scent of iron. The horror had roiled inside her, so violent she thought it would tear her in half.

The same horror she would have sensed today if she hadn't been shackled. There was no such thing as a successful rebellion. Not Kyran's uprising. Not the miners' riot. Not Larkin's brazen destruction and theft.

"I'm going to fix this," she said.

"You can't." Garran's defeat weighed heavy on her. He let go of her hand, and pulled it back into his cell, out of reach.

He was wrong. She had no other option *but* to fix this. Propping herself up on her elbows, she glanced around her cell. Thanks to her resistance, the luminite bars weren't close enough to completely inhibit her magic, and the surrounding brick walls looked old with deteriorating mortar. She could destroy a section of the wall, and she and Garran could shimmy between the break in the bars.

And then what? Somehow manage to dodge every guard until they found an exit? Neither of them knew the layout of this place. Not only that, but she didn't know if she could bring herself to kill someone if they were spotted.

Larkin sat back against the brick, catching the eye of the girl in the cell across from hers. She leaned against the luminite bars and grinned at Larkin.

What do you have to be smug about? Larkin wanted to shout. Perhaps the prison had made the girl mad, though she didn't look delusional. She watched Larkin with utter fascination. Her expression was curious, her mouth delicate and cheeks round.

Larkin couldn't take it anymore. "Do you want something?"

The girl shrugged, reaching up to retie her mass of dark, crimped hair. "New visitors are always a refreshing sight, is all."

Larkin stared at her. "*Visitor* implies I'm going to leave soon."

The girl's eyes were so wide that they caught all of the surrounding torchlight. "We're all going to leave this place eventually. We're mortal."

Larkin rolled her eyes. The girl was mad after all. Larkin hoped her lack of a response would shut her up.

In the silence, the girl's words kept churning inside her. They were mortal, and the dynasty's stance on magic was set in stone. She and Garran were going to rot in here.

Larkin knocked the back of her head against the brick wall, the pain a punishing reminder of her stupidity. *You can't cry*, she thought. She didn't deserve to cry.

The girl tapped her fingernails against the bars. "Your crime?"

Larkin thought of Garran, who was surely listening on the other side of the wall. The wound of his disappointment was too fresh. "I'd rather not go into it."

Standing, the girl moved about her cell, kicking moldy hay to the corners until the floor was clear.

"You're an Empath, right?" She laughed as if she'd made another joke. "Obviously. There are only Empaths here. And those shackles they brought you in with! I've never seen anything like them." She flung herself at the bars, beaming at Larkin through them. "You used magic, didn't you?"

"I'd rather not go into it."

The girl frowned. "Not much of a talker, I see."

Larkin lay back on the grimy floor and folded her arms over her belly.

"That's all right. Talking grows old after a while, even when you have as many great stories as I do. But I don't mind if you're quiet; it's nice to not be alone. Your cell's been empty for so long."

Larkin wondered how long the girl had been in here, and what had happened to whoever had been in the cell before her. But further conversation sounded about as fun as pulling her teeth out one by one.

The girl busied herself eventually, pacing across the now vacant floor and scratching her chin, as if assessing something. Then, she began to dance.

From her precise, delicate movements, it was obvious that the girl was skilled. Strange for an Empath—when did she find the time to learn how to dance?

In the silence of the prison, she danced for the span of what must have been an entire damned mine shift, not even pausing when her hair fell loose. She even managed to work the act of retying her hair gracefully into her routine. Dancer's deep copper skin sheened with sweat, but she didn't stop until a guard stomped over from the cellblock's entrance.

"Quit that!" he bellowed, unsheathing his sword.

As if on cue, Dancer twirled to the back of her cell and pressed herself against the wall. She bowed to the guard, so low her face was hidden. "Why of course, Your Excellency."

The guard grunted, flattered. Something told Larkin that he was new to this post. "Excellency," he muttered. "I'm not even a lieutenant. Just quit with the dancing."

"Most certainly, Your Excellency."

The moment he walked away, Dancer picked up again with twirls and sashays. Larkin sensed the hot anger of the guard as he whirled back toward her, but another guard grabbed his arm. "Just leave her alone. She'll mess with your head, that one."

Dancer stopped mid-twirl to wink at Larkin, and Larkin couldn't help but smile at her defiance. Pointless, perhaps, but amusing.

"You're good," Garran called out to Dancer. His kindness even now made Larkin's heart ache.

"I live to entertain." Dancer bowed in his direction, and then continued.

Larkin grew bored with watching her and rolled to her back, staring at the cracked stone ceiling. The cellblock was maddeningly quiet, filled only with an occasional groan, the shuffling of Dancer's feet, and the chill emanating from Garran.

The silence was broken when a man several cells down loudly uttered a prayer to Ilona.

Larkin groaned; her first instinct was to tell the man to shut up.

Another woman beat her to it. "I can see all that praying is working in your favor. Ilona isn't going to save you, old man."

A few prisoners from the surrounding cells applauded and jeered, but their mockery was half-hearted. Larkin looked over to Dancer, who had stopped dancing and was peering at her again through the bars. She chewed her bottom lip and waited, as if expecting Larkin to offer her spiritual philosophies.

Larkin took the bait. "Don't tell me you're a believer."

Dancer studied her pointed foot as she trailed it across the floor. "If she's watching me, I'm sure she's not all too happy. My troupe's been telling tales of Kyran's revenge for years now."

"You're from a traveling troupe?" Larkin sat up, intrigued. That explained the dancing and the bad jokes. She didn't know Empaths were allowed to be in a troupe. She thought they weren't allowed to do anything other than farm or mine.

Dancer nodded eagerly. “How do you think I landed here? Got wrangled into it, if I do say so myself. Mum was transferred to the farm all on her own when she was pregnant with me. Died a few years ago. When you’re on your own like that, you start listening to your friends, you know?”

Friends. Larkin wanted to laugh. Once she and Garran finished up at the mines, they were expected at home. Her family members were her friends. Anyone else, like Adina and her brothers, were nothing more than a wish—a cruel reminder of friends she could have if there were more time in the day.

“Wouldn’t have done it on my own, but all that space and land gets Empaths dreaming up big ideas.” Dancer released a theatrical sigh. “I couldn’t exactly say no. There were five of us who got caught sneaking out of the farm one too many times, and the rest is history.” She dragged her toe across the dirty floor, pensive. “I think about it a lot. All that space. I dance to make this cell seem bigger than it is. If it were any smaller . . . hells, I’d go mad I guess.”

So the girl wasn’t mad yet, just on the brink. In the short span of time, Dancer had already grown on her. Which was good considering how long they might be living across from each other.

“You’ll have to tell me one of your tales sometime,” Larkin said.

Dancer brightened, opening her mouth.

“Please, Ilona, not again,” someone groaned from the cell next to Dancer.

Dancer’s mouth snapped shut. She frowned sullenly.

Garran hissed Larkin’s name, distracting her.

Larkin crawled back to the edge of her cell. "I'm here."

"There's a farmer in the cell on the other side of me. We got to talking. Remember the people disappearing in the hills? The farmer said they're disappearing into holes."

"Disappearing into holes?"

"Holes in the ground. Out in the harvesting fields."

"Sinkholes? That doesn't make any sense, Garran."

"His daughter . . ." Garran's inhale rattled in his throat. "He heard his daughter screaming in the field and ran toward her. She was clutching onto the edge, and he had almost made it to her when she couldn't hold on anymore."

Holes in the earth—could that be where all the missing harvesters had gone? Had they been swallowed? Larkin had wondered if the farms had been destroyed by destruction magic. But magic didn't come from the ground. It came from Empaths like her.

Who could be powerful enough? Unless the magic is coming from below. From the—

No.

She batted the Reach and Otheil Kyran from her mind. They were corpses now. *He* was a corpse.

Garran interrupted her thoughts. "Can you imagine watching someone you love just slip away like that forever?"

"Mum and Dad and Vania are safe in the city," she reminded him.

"They could be transferred to the farms any day. You know that."

Garran's grimy hand slid from between the bars of his cell, and Larkin reached out from her cell and took it. She shut her eyes, picturing her mother and father near the hearth. Garran

helping Vania wash up for supper. The candle on the table in her bedroom that cast shadows on her hands as she conjured the ribbon. The scent of her sister's hair, her giggle.

He squeezed her hand. He could sense her emotions.

Larkin had no hope to give Garran, but she could give him love. Her memories were all she had left. She dwelled within them for what must have been hours, until sleep claimed her.

Larkin jerked awake as a raw jolt ignited her spine. Shock flowed from the opposite end of the prison. She sat up, murmurings spreading like a slowly burning fire. The stone floor vibrated as prisoners surged toward the fronts of their cells.

Larkin pressed herself against the bars and caught Dancer's wide, bleary eyes as the girl woke. "What's going on?"

Dancer crawled toward her. "Something exciting."

Down the corridor, a cell door creaked open.

"Please, my queen," a woman sobbed. "I'm getting married!"

My queen? Surely Melay wouldn't be in the prison. She had guards for her dirty work. Larkin peered through the bars in an attempt to see their newest cellmate, but it was too dark.

Gradually, the sounds of scuffling and the occasional quiet sob grew closer. People were being dragged from their cells.

"Larkin?" Garran called her name quietly.

"It's all right, Garran." She couldn't remember the last time her brother had sounded so small. So terrified. "I'm here." Maybe if she kept talking, he'd feel better, but she couldn't think of what to say. "I'm here," Larkin repeated. "I'm here, I'm here."

"This block is too full." A commanding female voice resonated

from the front of the hall. “There are more than twenty prisoners waiting to be assigned.”

“The other blocks are at capacity, my—”

“When has that stopped you from making room before, Hathius?”

A cell door creaked open. Larkin strained against the bars and glimpsed moving shadows down the hall.

Crushing terror nearly floored Larkin. A wet, viscous noise was followed by a thud, and the cellblock swirled with panic and whimpers. Garran cried her name again, but Larkin couldn’t coax forth a soothing remark.

Another cell door opened. She winced with the expectation of sensing another death, but only heard a struggle.

“Devon,” the woman boomed.

“You’ll burn in Kyran’s hell for this,” growled a male voice.

Larkin made out the noise of restraint. Devon was being taken, not killed.

The remainder of the cellblock visitors neared, and Larkin caught sight of a white gown skirting the soiled floor. Her eyes followed it upward to a jewel-embroidered bodice.

Please, my queen.

It was a face she’d seen only from a distance—sharp and stoic, with flawless citrine skin and eyes of ice.

Larkin gripped the bars, her pulse thrumming in her fingers. Melay.

She felt her bones lock up. She had never thought she’d be so close. The man named Devon had cursed Melay to Kyran’s hell. After what Melay had done to her family, Larkin knew she should want to do the same. Her surprise held her back.

Larkin's mind reeled. She was certain this wasn't a chance for an audience with the queen. Melay wouldn't have come all the way down here just to help move Empaths to different cell-blocks or order killings, especially not when the very capital was crumbling.

Something was terribly wrong.

The lieutenant Hathius walked beside Melay, a fleet of guards close behind. The queen's frown was hard, her eyebrows arched. The moment she halted in front of Larkin's cell, her guards followed suit.

The queen craned her neck to peer at Dancer. "Elfina."

Dancer stumbled backward, all grace and poise gone. Melay's lieutenant unlocked her door. The girl's eyes found Larkin and waited, like she wanted Larkin to say something—a whispered warning or encouragement.

Larkin's lips parted, but she had nothing to offer. She'd known Dancer—Elfina—for a handful of hours at most, the girl's brightness bordering on annoying, but she'd been friendly. Now Larkin didn't know what was going to happen to her.

Elfina hesitated before gliding forward. As soon as she was within reach, the lieutenant grasped her wrists and cuffed them behind her back. He secured a collar with the telltale flash of luminite around her neck before a guard swept her away.

Melay continued onward, not bothering to so much as glance at Larkin. She stopped again, this time in front of Garran's cell.

No.

"Garran." His name rolled off Melay's tongue with familiarity, and hatred awoke inside Larkin.

The queen lifted her hand, her fingers curling inward like

spider legs, beckoning Garran forward. A ring gleamed on her finger, the large gem a vivid, unsettling blue.

Larkin knew that color. Hauyne. Beautiful and brittle as all hells.

Do something, you idiot.

Garran's terror erupted inside her, and, Larkin quickly siphoned his emotion. A loud crack sounded as the hauyne in Melay's ring shattered into a spray of bright flecks, tinkling against the floor.

Larkin's heart thudded as Melay slowly lifted her hand, examining the empty ring setting with a detached curiosity.

Hathius drew his sword and started for Larkin, but Melay stopped him.

"His sister . . .," began the lieutenant.

"I know who she is."

Melay's eyes narrowed, and Larkin wondered if the queen understood that Larkin had actually used magic in a room full of luminite. Her stony face gave no indication.

"Very well." Melay rapped on the bars of Larkin's cell with her now barren ring, and the lieutenant stepped forward, sliding his key into the lock of her cell.

Her plan had worked.

Larkin stepped out of her cell, and the lieutenant cuffed her arms behind her back. She didn't know what the queen had in store for her. It didn't matter. She'd be the one to face the terrifying unknown, not Garran.

Her brother slammed his hands against the bars. "Larkin!"

She wanted to tell him to be brave, but the words remained

lodged in her throat. All that mattered was that he knew how much she loved him.

Her heart swelled until she was certain he could sense her.
More than anything.

Hathius fitted her with a luminite collar, the bone-deep sensation of Garran's grief snuffing out.