

GLITCH
KINGDOM
SHEENA BOEKWEG



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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*This book is dedicated to my husband and my kids,
and to all the video games they played while I wrote it.*

1
RYO

The rules of the game were simple.

The goal was four shovels and a song. I fanned my hand of cards. Three boats and two birds. Blast. I inhaled and fought to keep my breathing shallow; hold my shoulders still, and keep my face free of the thousands of tells I'd learned to hide.

There would be no winning this round.

At least not if I played the cards.

I peered over my hand and studied my opponents around the table instead. A haze of smoke coming from Lady Maramour's pipe blocked her expression, but the tapestries I'd crisscrossed over the arched windows of my rooms sent a sliver of sunlight that cut through the smoke and highlighted the creases at the edge of her eyes. She was sharp as the knife at her waist. She held her cards close to her chest, a hint of a smile hiding inside the folds in her cheek. Lady M had the mind of a general when it came to stealing my coins, and with that smile I'd best fold now, count my losses as education.

Unfortunately, a pretty girl was watching. The chair usually occupied by my best friend, Grigfen, had been filled by Lady M's eldest granddaughter, here from the country. The girl seemed more interested in making eyes at me over the top of her cards than paying any semblance of attention to the game. No clue what her cards held, although what she wanted was clear, and it wasn't a kiss—it was my crown.

I slid a pile of coins to the center of the table.

My guards, Davi and Fio, folded immediately, although Davi

seemed reluctant to let go. I wished he would have stayed in—he could use the money; his girl was in the family way, and the married barracks were barely comfortable for two. But my guards always allowed me the win when we gambled real coin. Probably on my mother’s orders.

Where was Sir Grigfen? He should be here by now. I glanced about my chambers. Three tables full of players in pale silk dresses or sharp suits seemed content enough with their cards. When my gaze settled on Lady M’s granddaughter she flushed pink and then folded her hand, her smile a thrown game I didn’t have to do anything to win.

Lady M matched my pile of coins and picked up a card. I grinned at her, but inwardly I fought a panic. Last time we played she took my coat.

“Guess it’s just you and me now, my lady.”

Someone entered my rooms. I turned, hoping it was Grigfen. He’d been known to get caught in tables less savory than mine.

Close, but no dice. A boulder of a man blocked my doorway. Tall and thick, with corded arms and a bushy blond beard, Sir Tomlinson seemed completely devoid of his son Grigfen’s good humor. As the head of agriculture, the man was more farmer than noble, despite his fine coat, and from the dark angle of his eyebrows, he wasn’t pleased to find my rooms set up as a gambling den on a Thirdday afternoon.

I pulled at my vest. “Sir Tomlinson,” I said. The room’s chatter quieted at the presence of a member of my father’s council. “What brings you to my den of iniquity?”

Sir Tomlinson was not amused. “News. A Savak Wingship landed not twenty minutes ago.”

A chill ran up my neck. This was news for my parents, not idle gossip to throw at my friends. Every man in the room, except me, stood. Several people spoke at once, but I ignored them. If a member of my father’s council believed the news urgent enough to speak freely, then another game had started.

“Military?” I asked from my chair.

“Religious,” Sir Tomlinson answered.

Lady M twisted her fingers. “Not much better. How many?”

“One. A lone cleric in her red robes. She surrendered her wings without a fight.”

Fio lowered his voice and leaned near me. “I didn’t know they had female heathens.”

I hid a smile, but Sir Tomlinson caught it. “Watch your tone, sir. They may believe in a different god, but we don’t want to war with their bloodthirsty queen. It’s best we avoid the notice of the seers, and calling them such a word—”

“And why does this involve me?” I asked, leaning forward.

“She’s requested to meet with the council of six, and your father wishes you to observe.”

My cheeks flooded with warmth. “When?”

Tomlinson didn’t answer. He simply turned his heel and left my rooms.

Now, I gathered.

I followed him out with my guards at each flank.

My father wanted me to observe a council meeting.

Do not skip, Ryo. My father’s council was meeting with a Savak cleric. Now was not the time to skip.

A slight bounce to my step, however, was acceptable.

Tomlinson scowled when I caught up with him. “I do *apologize* for taking you away from such noble pursuits,” he said with a sneer.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll have you know that card game was well within my mother’s code of conduct.”

He clearly had more opinions, but he ducked his head in a bow. “How Your Highness behaves is none of my concern.”

We turned a corner from my hallway. My collar felt hot all of a

sudden. “It isn’t. Especially since Sir Grigfen didn’t show, and Lady Dagney wasn’t invited—”

“That is Lady Tomlinson to you. If you speak to my daughter at all. Which you should not, unless you are in a crowd of witnesses and I am observing with my grip on my sword.”

I chuckled. “Honestly, Sir Tomlinson, you have no reason to fear. It’s very unlikely that Lady Dagney would break my heart. Though I am touched for your concern for me.”

Davi broke in, “You see, Sir Tomlinson. Girls, for the prince, are like coins. Easy to win, easy to lose.”

“Better in piles,” Fio supplied.

I snorted. In truth the only similarity between girls and coins was that I had to make a full accounting of each to my mother. “Unless, of course, you weren’t worried for your own crown prince’s heart?”

Davi gave a false gasp. “The disloyalty to the Crown!”

I placed my hand on my heart and mock fainted.

Sir Tomlinson stopped his quick assault down my halls and raised a finger. “My daughter would rip you to pieces.”

I bowed. “I thank you heartily for your warning. I shall endeavor to leave your daughter far from my attention.”

“Good.”

I grinned and made my way through the polished stone hallways, through arches of sunlight that warmed the floors. Now he was following me. “Though now that I’ve thought on it, Lady Dagney is interesting, in her own way. I believe she bested me in an archery tournament once, and there was something so fascinating about the crease between her eyebrows. Most other noble young women of my acquaintance view me as a path to becoming queen, so they store their patience in large vials. She, however, seems to not understand that I am *constantly joking*. A serious girl, your Dagney.”

“Some things are not jokes, Your Highness,” Sir Tomlinson said.

I’d worked my way under his collar. My cheek lifted, despite my attempt to keep a smile off my face. “Of course that does make her more fun to tease. I wonder if she plays cards.”

Sir Tomlinson turned a shade of pink I’d not yet seen, so I decided to lay off him about his daughter. Truth was I sometimes forgot Grigfen even had a little sister. She was always so content to stay home with her books. Besides, I wouldn’t risk Grig’s friendship over a pretty set of shoulders. There were plenty of other options out there. I loved women—their intelligence, their kindness, their stubborn bravery, not to mention the softness of their skin—but once I met the right girl there would be room in my heart for only one. I wanted a love like my parents had. A love of equals, that could last forever, long past legends.

But I’d yet to meet a girl who could see past my crown.

Sir Tomlinson fumed down two flights of granite stairs and across the wood-paneled entrance hall, each slammed heel a punch line that tickled me no end.

We crossed into my father’s council room and I lost my grin.

Perhaps it was the length of the ancient table, the carved map that covered the length of a wall, or the shadows on the council members’ faces, but the mood seemed sober and ominous. Sucked dry, as it were. A chorus of Historians in raven-feather robes and silver masks surrounded the edge of the room. At the center, my father’s council and the Savak cleric sat around a long table.

Sir Tomlinson took his seat at my father’s left, and my father dismissed my guards.

The lone empty seat was reserved for my uncle, so I stood among the Historians.

“Seen anything naughty lately?” I asked the closest Historian.

They did not respond. Not even a chuckle.

I could never read the Historians, not with their expressions hidden behind their carved masks. They were tasked to record everything of note for posterity, refusing to influence history, only to observe it. Truth was I barely noticed them anymore. They were simply always there—watching me eat breakfast, studying me sword fighting with Grigfen in the armory; one always observed me as I slept, in case I were to die while dreaming and my last gasping sounds were worth recording.

Prince Ryo ne Vinton's last words: gurgle gurgle.

Who would want to lose that?

The cleric wasn't speaking.

Her red hood rested at the crown of her pale hair. Silver wings—the emblem of the Savak—painted across her brow, her dark red robe puddling around her chair, and a silver and glass sphere necklace tucked between her collarbones. Her face was flat, devoid of emotion, but I could not say that of the rest of the council. Sir Tomlinson crossed his arms, the general's jaw pulsed tight, and Lord Reginal's tongue peeked from the side of his false smile. A sign of his greed as well as his suspicion.

My mother watched me, not the cleric. And my father? My father sat like a spring wound tight, pinching the bridge of his nose, his foot tapping against the marble floor, his twisting mouth rebelling at the silence.

“What is your business here?” my father expelled, his voice rough and serious, like he only was to our enemies.

She stayed silent.

My father, the most powerful king in the world, asked her a direct question, and she sat in silence and the king did nothing but huff in impatience.

Mother waved her hand. “Perhaps you'd like something to drink?”

The cleric pressed her lips together. “Not until every chair is filled.”

Well, at least we knew she had the ability to make sounds.

The last chair stayed empty. By rights of the council it belonged to my uncle Edvarg, but as emissary for the Abbey of the Undergod, he wasn't likely to show his face in order to appease the Savak. No matter how many times the king sent a messenger to the Abbey, he would not come to hear a heathen's words.

It would be a council of five.

"Son." The king gestured toward Uncle's seat.

"Me?" I touched my chest. Tomlinson sighed, but the rest of the council seemed to soften with affection, looking at me much the way they did Mother's pet cat, Chompsens. I cleared my throat. "Yes, Father?"

"Take your uncle's seat, please."

I bowed to the council, and I fought back a grin as I touched my forehead in a salute to the Historians. This I wanted them to record. I looked back at the king and in that moment, I saw my father. The man who always welcomed me to sit by him no matter how busy he was, who cheered at my tournaments even when I was bested, the man who told me that there was nothing I could do that would make him not love me.

And then in an instant something behind his eyes went blank, and he shifted from the man who was my father to the man who was my king. But I could handle this opportunity. All that I wanted, more than any win or tournament, was to see my father look at me with pride, the way I remembered.

I slid into the chair at Mother's right.

"You must give me your kingdom," the cleric said.

The council shared looks. Ridiculous. I laughed, and General Franciv gave a snort. Sir Tomlinson's giant hands batted at poor Lord Reginal, but the scrawny little man was giggling so hard he didn't notice. Mother pressed her fingers over her lips, trying to remain polite in case it wasn't a joke.

It had to be, although the Savak were not known for their humor. Their cunning, their betrayal, their strange religion? Yes, of course. Humor? Not famously reported.

The cleric tipped her head to one side as if she did not understand our reaction. Her golden eyes seemed sharp in the light coming from the arched windows.

Father did not smile. "Is there a threat in your words?"

I narrowed my eyes.

"Not in my words." She pressed her lips in a tight grimace and reached into her long sleeves.

My father's guards drew their weapons.

There, hidden behind swaths of red silk, was a bag, brown leather, tucked tight next to her body.

"In the future."

My breath caught.

Out came a clay vase, sealed with wax. It thudded as she placed it on the table in front of her. She withdrew five small clay cups.

The guards did not put away their weapons.

We all eyed the vase . . . or pitcher, most likely. Filled with the only thing the Savak possessed that made this cleric welcome to the court.

The clear water of the Seer Spring. One sip and the future no longer remained a mystery.

I cocked my head to the side as the cleric filled the cups.

It would be considered blasphemy to drink of the spring water, but anyone who did could see the future. Imagine knowing what enemy might attack, or what the clouds would bring—drought or famine, richness or surplus. We could prepare for war or for illness. Blasphemy seemed a small price to pay for such a vision, yet there were rumors the seer water was also a judgment. If their goddess didn't consider the partaker worthy, the water would kill.

I leaned forward.

Oh light. I seemed eager. My reputation would never live that down.

“Generations ago,” the cleric said as she placed a cup in front of my mother, “we were allies. I ask you to remember the time before the Seer Spring was discovered. Back before the first seer drowned in his vision of the future.”

“Before the walls,” Mother said, her voice measured.

Sir Tomlinson’s voice was not. “Before the hibisi.” Sir Tomlinson’s anger was well placed. He’d lost his wife due to the lack of those flowers.

When they discovered the Seer Spring, the Savak built walls around their island, and they stopped sending aid or emissaries to any other kingdom. The Savak closed their gates by the edge of the sword, only allowing certain traders to come, and only if they brought the seeds of the hibisi flower. A century later, they owned every hibisi flower on this side of our world, and they dotted their island like little white specks of light.

The cleric placed the small cups in front of my father, Sir Tomlinson, General Franciv, and Lord Reginal. She did not place one in front of me, which was wise, because I might’ve thrown it in her face. She lowered her gaze. “We, like you, regret the lives lost to the gray illness.”

Lord Reginal clasped his heart. “The Undergod was well fed.”

“By our greed,” the cleric said.

I agreed with the cleric, which felt fundamentally wrong. Six years ago, an illness spread throughout my kingdom. Thousands of lives were lost. Harsh ugly deaths. Nothing we tried could stop it, not until the Savak revealed the cure.

Brewed from the bloom of the hibisi.

They knew the hibisi held healing properties, unlike anything we’d

ever found. They'd seen it in their visions. Centuries before the disease first spread, the Savak knew the lives it would take, and yet they hoarded the truth. The clerics came to our shores with the cure, which they offered for a price, and only if the recipients would praise the Savak goddess for her goodness. The Savak watched, holding the cure, as people—our people—who could not afford to pay, or who were too pious to blaspheme, died gasping in front of them. And the Savak never shed a tear for us.

And now she wanted us to trust her? There was not enough fortune in the world.

Father leaned away and clasped his hands under his chin. "You wish to ally yourself with us?"

The cleric's expression was still as a bluff. "Not as such. We need to be united to save as many lives as we can from what is coming."

I glanced at their seer water, despite myself.

Mother tapped her fingers on the table. With her black hair cascading over her shoulders, and a thin golden band tracing the line of her brow, she was the picture of a queen. "You come alone. Do you have your queen's blessing?"

"Our queen does not know," she whispered. Her shoulders hunched. "She must never know."

"What is coming?" Father asked.

"War," the cleric said. "Our young queen has assembled an army. She will make herself empress. We have seen it. We have seen the loss of life, the destruction she will reap in her rise to power. She will not govern well. She will not take prisoners. But there is a path to survival. You must drink to see it."

"How do we know this isn't poison?" Tomlinson asked. "How do we know she's not sent you here to kill us all?"

"I will drink with you," the cleric answered.

Not enough. Still, curiosity drove me forward. I lifted Lord Reginal's cup to my nose and sniffed. It smelled clean and fresh, almost sweet. I gave it back.

The cleric lifted her eyebrow. "It is an honor to drink seer water. No one outside our island has ever been offered of our spring, and this we freely give to you. There will be no price."

I clenched my jaw. "The Savak always have a price."

She acknowledged my anger with a softened look. "At least not for you. If the queen finds me, my life will be forfeit for smuggling this water and for giving it to you. But I shall give my life gladly. For there is a future you must see. A future we must avoid. And we can, but only with your help."

The Historians stepped closer.

Father had been still. Considering. "What do you say, General?"

General Franciv considered her cup. Her dark hair framed one side of her face, but the other was shaven close to her scalp. Her crisp white uniform was similar to a common Everstrider uniform, except for the rows of jeweled awards on her lapel, and the line of black kohl from her forehead to her neck.

"If her life is forfeit anyway, there is no guarantee of our safety. It could be poison, or a trap. If it's poison, they would take out the spine of our kingdom in one act. We can't let our greed destroy us—"

"It's not greed," Lord Reginal interjected, his voice polished from all the time he spent in the university. He tugged at his fine collar, and his gray mustache twitched beneath his wide nose. "The pursuit of knowledge is never greed. If we can learn our future, we can change it for the better. I vote we drink."

"Well, I will not," I replied. "Father, I would not trust a Savak to post a letter, let alone drink their piss—"

Tomlinson coughed.

No heathen war. Right. I bowed my head and said nothing.

“We must face the future. Together,” the cleric said. “Or we will not survive.”

“If she’s lying, it’s a risk,” Sir Tomlinson said. “But if there is a chance danger is coming, it may be worth it.”

I tapped the table. “Then we let a servant drink. Someone we trust.”

The cleric looked about. “Only a chosen few are worthy of our goddess’s tears. It must be this council.”

“A king never asks a servant to take a risk he would not take.” Father’s gaze was sharp.

I tensed, my tongue slid over my teeth, and I refused to look at anything except the shining wooden surface of the table.

Father was wrong. A king’s life was worth more than a servant’s. My father never listened to me when it came to the greater good. He only summoned the King’s Executioner when the taking of one life would save hundreds. He couldn’t see that if we smashed a threat when it was small, the kingdom would be at peace.

Mother folded her hands. “I’d rather trust and be prepared.”

“Trusting an enemy is a good way to get killed,” I warned.

“If we only take knowledge from those who agree with us, we will be led into a trap of our own making,” Mother said. “We can’t let our biases leave us blind.”

“I’ve reached my decision,” Father announced. “Kings must have longer memories than generals or sons. I know the source of their spring’s magic and I do not fear it. I will drink.”

I dropped my hands. “Father, no.”

Our people would not approve of this. After the hibisi, my people saw the Savak as murderers, as monsters more foul than any Lurcher.

To side with one and share seer water with a cleric? It wasn't just blasphemy. To many of our people, this would be treason.

"As king, I must know what threatens my people." He sighed. "Be brave, my son."

The general reached for her cup. "My king. Wait."

She dipped her kohl-darkened fingertips into the cup and drew them to her pale mouth. She paused as she tasted, then she licked her lips and gave a brief sniff. "I am nothing if not brave. I will drink with you."

They all ignored my warnings. I might as well not have even been there, if they weren't going to take my counsel over a Savak cleric's.

The cleric smiled and lifted her glass. "To a new future," she toasted.

She pressed the cup to her lips, and the rest of the council, including Father, followed her example.

I watched, in horror, as my parents fell victim to the seer water's pull. Their eyes rolled upward, flashing white, their skin paling to a soft gray. The council slumped in their chairs. Lord Reginal nearly fell off his.

And they didn't wake.

I sped to my father's side and struck his back. Once. Twice. Again.

"Father. I beg of you. Wake up!" My pulse raced with a panic so sharp it seemed almost a memory. "Father!"

I knew they shouldn't have drunk. I knew they should have listened to me.

My father's guards rushed to the cleric's side and held her bound. Those at the door lowered their weapons and searched about for something to do. The fools.

"Get a doctor. Quickly!"

The cleric never fell to her vision. Her eyes were clear as a mirror as the guards shoved her into the table. “He will awaken in twelve heartbeats,” she said, her voice strained.

I didn’t trust her words. I couldn’t. She drank it too; why wasn’t she swept up in this vision? “What have you done to him? To all of them?”

“Do not fear, Princeling. All will be well.”

I wasn’t afraid, I was angry. Anger could sometimes make my heart pound, and my jaw quiver, and my throat tighten as if I was about to cry, but I was not scared. A future king was not allowed to be scared.

Mother woke with a great cry. Oh, thank the light. She reached forward and drew me into a hug. Her arms trembled, and she held me too tight, her tears wetting my collar.

I pulled back when Sir Tomlinson screamed himself awake, reaching for his sword and lifting it high above him, as if he were facing a monster. “You’re all right, Tomlinson,” I shouted. “It was just a vision. It wasn’t real.” His arm lowered slowly, and the sword clattered on the table. The sound awoke General Franciv. Her hands twitched to the dagger belted to her waist, before she fell to her knees and clutched her grip together as she prayed. Reginal’s eyes flashed open, and he held his fist over his mouth, fleeing from the table to be sick in a vase.

Father woke, his face filled with grim resolution.

I closed my mouth. I’d seen that look on my father’s face before. Once. When the sickness tore through my people. It was the look of a king at war.

“What can be done?” he asked.

The cleric extracted a large contract from the folds of her cape.

“You must sign your kingdom to the queen of the Savak, and you

must come with me. We will protect your people, and keep the oaths our creator gave us.”

No one laughed now. Father only hesitated for a moment before laying his palm out in request for a quill.

I stood. “Stop! That’s my kingdom you’re giving away.”

“Not yet, my son.”

“Not *ever* if you do this. You can’t just hand over our kingdom to the *Savak*?”

“I feel the sting of this too, my son. But the cost of leaving is nothing if it stops what’s coming.”

Mother stepped toward me. “If we bow to the Savak queen now, she will save our kingdom for last, and we can give assistance to our allies while she thinks us cowed. It is the only way we all will survive. It is our only path to peace.”

“By giving her our armies?” They would not see sense. “We cannot leave.” My voice betrayed my emotion, so I cleared my throat and began again. “What will become of our people if you take our armies to other shores?”

What would become of me?

Father’s eyes softened. “You will keep them safe until I return.”

Me? “Against the Savak queen?” It was too much. “I can’t. I can’t do this. Not on my own.”

“That is not all, my son. The only way to win this war is if you gather the Armor of Irizald before the queen of the Savak tracks it down.”

I stilled at the mention.

The Armor of Irizald was a secret we never spoke of beyond our family walls. The witch-made armor created a power immeasurable when all the pieces were combined. We should have destroyed it—it

was too dangerous to continue to exist—but we could not. Instead, long ago, my grandmother separated the armor and hid each piece in far-flung locations, which only my father and I knew. It set my spine to ice to think of our armor in the Savak queen’s hands.

My father gave me a nod. “Once you find the armor, the true heir will return to the Throne of Honor. Our kingdom will be restored.”

Mother wiped her cheeks and stood. “Your uncle will help you until then. Get him to drink the seer water. He will manage the kingdom as you quest for the armor.”

I crossed to my father’s side. “Father, no. Please. Whatever is coming, we can destroy it on our own. We can gather the armor together. You’d be invincible, no matter what weapon she aims our direction. We’ll face her as a united kingdom, not as servants to these heathens.”

I waited for someone to correct me, but the room was silent.

“It won’t be enough,” General Franciv said. “There is only one solution now. I’ve seen it. We must lead the charge from different shores.”

“What?” The world shifted. If the general agreed, there was no one on my side. “Are you certain?”

“It won’t be enough,” General Franciv repeated. “There is only one solution now. I’ve seen it. We must lead the charge from different shores.”

Why would she repeat herself? The council stood still, as if they were waiting on me to make a choice. But what choice? Why would they be silent now?

Was it possible the cleric was right? My people hated the Savak; they would not understand this. How was I supposed to change their opinion when it matched my own? How could I protect my people and gather the armor at the same time? Could this really be the only way?

I leaned over my father’s shoulder and read the contract.

**WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, DO HUMBLY SWEAR OUR FIDELITY
AND SUBMISSION TO THE HONORABLE MCKENNA SHARPWING
CARRINGTON, QUEEN OF THE SAVAK. WE PLEDGE ALL BORDERS,
RESOURCES, AND LEADERSHIP IN HER ESTIMABLE NAME, IN
EXCHANGE FOR THE SAFE STEWARDSHIP OF OUR PEOPLE.**

**WE DO SO PLEDGE UNTIL THE DAY OF BATTLE ENDS, AND THE
RIGHTFUL HEIR SITS UPON THE THRONE OF HONOR.**

Treason.

Cowardice.

But in truth it was a distraction. The council would undermine the queen from within her circle, and buy me time to collect the armor.

“All right,” I whispered. “I’ll do it.”

A flare of light struck through the glass windows. I stood taller, like something had given me strength.

A servant gave Father a quill and he signed. Father passed the paper to Mother, and she to the rest. My hands trembled and I shook my head.

As they signed away my home, my title, and my future.

As they left me with nothing but a family legend to protect my people from a war that was coming.

And my uncle. He would love a chance to manage the kingdom while I searched for the armor.

The trick would be to remove him once Father returned.

“Can I trust Uncle to help me?”

My parents shared a glance, but the cleric stepped forward. She placed the near-empty pitcher on the table.

“Goddess bless us all if he does not drink.”

2 RYO

My tutors never taught me the proper etiquette of abandoning one's kingdom. Turns out it involves a grand helping of silence, and servants mooring the ship to the royal docks, while the harbor men work and whisper and watch.

Mother pressed back a curl and kissed my hair. "Keep yourself safe."

She cocked her head to look at me, as if memorizing my face. My mother had fought a thousand battles, but never with a sword. She came from a far-off kingdom and she had to fight tooth and bone to gain the respect she'd earned at court. She could protect my father from this. She could protect herself.

"I'll try my best," I whispered. This task had set my voice to hiding.

"Thank you for doing this," my mother said.

The cleric unstrung the necklace from around her neck, lowering her hood over her shoulders to do so.

"For when the time comes, Princeling." She gave me a small blue glass sphere wrapped tight in metal filigree, strung between two threads. "It was drawn from our holy spring after our plans were made. If our plans succeed, you'll see what you must do to find your victory."

"And if they don't?"

Mother broke the silence. "Then this is goodbye."

The sphere full of seer water hung heavy in my palm. A part of me

wanted to drink it now, to know why my parents were doing this, and another part of me wanted to throw this sphere into the moons-lit waves.

My father closed my fingers over the sphere. “Promise me, son,” he said. “Promise you won’t drink until you are sure nothing will stop you from finishing.”

I met his eyes and nodded.

He pulled me tight, his scruff scratching my neck, his hand clasped around the back of my head. When he leaned away, his cheeks were wet.

Then they climbed into the boat, my parents touching their noses in prayer. The general gave me a salute, which Tomlinson copied, and I stood tall, trying to look like one who could accomplish this impossible task, not letting my doubt curl my shoulders or my spine. I slipped the necklace around my neck before I tucked it beneath my collar.

And I turned my back on the people who were turning their backs on me. Alone, I made my way through the courtyard toward the stables. Whispering servants ducked away from me while watchful eyes peered from windows. A Whirligig, a pumpkin-sized mechanical with fluttering wings, rose from the mechanical shop, carrying gossip in its spinning gears. The news had begun to spread, soft and slow like kindling catching. I needed to enlist my uncle to our cause, before the city turned ablaze with words of a king’s treason.

Uncle could help me douse this fire.

Or he could fan the flames.

I raced into the stables, after my mount. Sir Grigfen guffawed from a stall near mine. His foot was caught in the stirrup, and he was spilling coins and laughter as a servant tried to pull his boot from the metal.

The tension in my neck loosened for a second. Grig’s grinning eyes

met mine. “Ryo! Sorry I’m late, pal. I had the Undergod’s own luck at the Fisherman’s Haul. I got twenty coppers before some chap decided I was cheating and tried to . . .” He trailed off as he took in my expression. “Wait. What’s gone wrong?”

I could give him no answer. “Nothing. I need to see my uncle.”

“I’ll go with you. I’ve just got to figure out how to get back on this horse. Were they always this tall?” The servants pushed him back up onto his saddle.

I didn’t answer him. I checked that the cleric’s leather bag tucked at my side still held the seer water and the contract, then I climbed astride my horse and kicked my heels.

“What’s the rush, Ryo?” Grigfen asked as he struggled to keep pace. He’d always hated riding with me; he said I either needed to push my horse to a full gallop, or walk. Still, he smiled—I could not recall if I’d ever seen his face not in the midst of a toothy grin. His shaggy blond curls hung over his eyes, and his vest was unbuttoned, stains on his cravat. “You look like you’ve got a prank on countdown. Should I fetch the feathers?”

“Har, har,” I muttered over the sound of our horses running at full gallop. “You don’t need to follow me.”

He held the reins tight as we rode down the cobbled streets toward the Abbey. He squinted at me, his face shadowed in the torchlight. “The fact you keep saying that makes me think I need to. You look all squirrely so I know you’re either heading toward trouble, or you’re heading toward a lot of trouble. Either way I’m not going to miss it.”

He grinned and I almost smiled back. I’d like the company . . . no, I’d love the company, and I’d love to not be the only one who knew this secret; I also knew that word was going to spread, and once news broke . . . Mine was not the only father who had left.

“You need to be with your family when the news breaks.”

News was already spreading. Peasants stood at the edges of the road, calling out to us, but I did my best to ignore them. They'd find out soon enough.

We reached the Abbey gates, and I dismounted. The Abbey chapel was walled with bones, fused together with iron smelted from swords donated with the bodies of soldiers. A circle of painted glass reflected the moons-light in the grand chapel, but I wouldn't find my uncle in the chapel. I ran past the glowing building and around the back to the catacomb tunnels where the high priests and my uncle kept their offices. Grigfen followed close behind. As a child, we used to play in the hallowed hallways of the catacombs. Now I rushed forward through the catacomb doors, a sealed cup in one hand, and the bound parchment with my father's signature in the other, trying not to vomit on the holy bone walls.

My uncle would help me carry the load of this. Right now, we were the only ones leading this kingdom, and if we wanted to restore the rightful heir to the throne and protect our kingdom from the Savak, then my uncle and I needed to be united.

I turned the candlelit corner to a maze of skull-topped hallways. How could I find my uncle in this catacomb? I usually preferred to wait in the main chambers, or in the chapel, let Uncle come to me when he could. But my uncle's office was back here somewhere.

Grig scratched the scruff on his chin and stopped me. "Oh. It's serious, is it?"

"It is."

"Then I'm not leaving."

I sighed. "Grig."

He folded his arms over his stomach. "You know, your pride is going to get you killed one day, and it's my job as your best mate to protect you from your own self."

“Are you certain?” The task in front of me was dangerous, but it would feel almost achievable if Grigfen was at my side.

He stepped closer. “You’re my friend, and this might be because I’m floating over my winnings at the Fisherman’s Haul, but I’m not ashamed to say you’re my hero, Ryo. Whatever it is, I won’t let you do it alone.”

The weight on my shoulders lightened. “It’s too dangerous. You should—”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re my future king, and I can’t leave you to your adventures without a squire.”

I offered my palm and he shook it. Torchlight brightened against the bones, and I must have squeezed too hard, because he winced.

“Light’s bosom, you are strong.” He shook out his hand and I laughed.

“You won big, then?”

He shook the coin purse at his belt. “Forty coppers in all. You?”

“Lady M took me for twenty-five golds.”

He whistled.

I lifted a shoulder. “She brought her granddaughter.”

Grig chuckled. “Poor fool Ryo. She found your weakness.”

I picked up my pace, and he matched my footing. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“To see my uncle.”

“Grrreeaat.” Grigfen had a way of saying things so I always knew exactly what he was thinking. “And what’s with the cup and the scroll?”

“I wouldn’t touch that.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “It’s Seer Spring water.”

“You’re bringing your uncle . . .” Grigfen let out a rumbling giggle I tried to hush. “Oh, this is a mighty prank. I’m glad to see it.”

I desperately wished it were as simple as a prank.

A Devout stepped forward. Her hair was shaved, her nose was dotted with red paint, and she wore gray and shapeless robes. I tugged at my coat and then chided myself for showing my nerves. The Devout could use a portion of the Undergod's power to see the dead and perform miracles the unbelievers called magic. The truly dedicated, the priests of the Undergod, could command bones to move or control the monstrous beasts that crept from the underworld. "Hush, Grig." I bowed to the Devout and Grigfen followed suit. "Peace and honor to you for your devotion."

The Devout answered our bows with one of her own. "And to you for your reception."

I held the cup behind my back. "I'm looking for my uncle."

"His holiness is in his chambers. May I be permitted to lead you toward him?"

"I thank you for your service."

The Devout turned. Grigfen barely held back a laugh. The shadows of his almost laugh echoed against the walls like a flickering candle.

A bead of sweat traced down my back. Well, I'd found him.

Now what was I going to say?

As the second son, Uncle Edvarg was encouraged to go into the priesthood of the Undergod. He took to it well—too well, some said. It showed too much ambition the way he ascended to the rank of high priest. People whispered about deaths they could not explain, in which Edvarg profited. My parents ignored such rumblings, and so did I.

Uncle Edvarg would help me. He had to.

The catacombs air tasted of silt, torch oil, and candle wax. The bone walls seemed almost made of bricks, each bone slightly different, but united in their anonymity. The office of the Holiest was open, the wrought iron door held ajar by a loose stone. Inside a room of bones,

Uncle pored over a map at his gilded desk. The ceiling was formed of rib cages, with a striping of sunlight cascading on my uncle, unleashing the creator's wisdom on anyone the light fell upon.

Uncle Edvarg's lips pressed lightly before bending into a smile. "Nephew! So good to see you. So tell me, what did the Savak cleric want?"

"What cleric?" Grigfen asked. "I may have missed something when I was down to the tables."

"Ah, Sir Grigfen. I thought I smelled cheap cologne."

Edvarg waved away the Devout. She gave a low bow, touching her forehead to her wrist before exiting.

The door stayed open.

I let out a breath. It was a relief to no longer be alone with this.

"The cleric brought a gift."

"Ah?" Edvarg squinted.

I lifted the cup.

Edvarg gestured it away, but I held it firm. "You have to see the future. Our kingdom depends on it."

He turned back to his papers. "Says the heathen."

"Father drank."

Edvarg stilled.

I pushed the drink forward across his desk. "So did the other four members of the council. And their vision—"

"Wait." Grigfen's face flushed red. "My father drank from the Seer Spring?"

I gripped Grig's shoulder. "What they saw . . . It's terrible, Uncle. The Savak queen will try to destroy us all, but we have a plan to stop her. You need to drink, so you can see the plan and help us survive."

"The council drank seer water?" Edvarg murmured. He pressed his index finger over his lips, considering. He pointed to the scroll. "And what is that?"

I unrolled the parchment and laid it out over the papers on the desk. I knocked over a small idol, but I didn't right it. "After they drank, they all agreed this was necessary to save our people."

Uncle's neck pulsed. "They disavowed our *god* in favor of the heathen spring?"

Father said Uncle would help. He had to. He was the only family I had now. I'd give him one last chance—one last opportunity to be who my parents thought he was. "Trust me, Uncle. They are trying to save us." I moved around the desk. "Please, Uncle Edvarg. You need to drink to see the future and help protect us from what is coming."

Grigfen stepped to the desk, his fingers tracing the scroll as he read the words. "They left us for the Savak? Why would he leave without saying goodbye?" Grig ran both hands through his curls and stepped away. His face crumpled.

"They wouldn't have, if the danger wasn't real," I insisted. "Please, Uncle, you need to believe me. Drink the seer water, and I'll let you rule as adviser until Father comes back."

Uncle Edvarg's cheek creased, and his eyebrows lifted as he read the words. My muscles tightened, but I had to trust that his ambition would be stronger than his piety. I was offering him the throne.

"I could believe you, but never the Savak. My foolish brother has been tricked by them and he's turned a traitor," my uncle announced.

"No. He's trying to save us. If you drink the seer water, you will see why."

"My brother has renounced his god-given duty to our people, and in the Undergod's name, I must assert my claim for the throne he's left behind."

I shuddered. "I'm giving you the throne."

"No. You, my traitorous nephew and your disheveled friend, are the only things standing in my way."

Edvard raised both hands, his thumbs touching in a summoning pose. A green mist spread from my uncle's fingers, lighting the curve of his cheekbones, leaving shadows under his eyes.

I rocked back. The glowing light filled the room.

"Stop," I commanded. I darted a glance to Grig, my body flushing hot. I should have never allowed him to accompany me.

"What're you doing?" Grig's eyes widened.

My uncle pulled his arms down and the bone walls shuddered. A crack and a whiff of bone dust and floating bones flew toward him and congealed together into half-formed, animated skeletons.

I flinched back. The Undergod's own power.

Grig swore and joined my side. His hands lifted into fists.

"Uncle," I whispered. I couldn't stop staring at the half-formed creatures. Bones formed where bones should not be, deer antlers for hips, a skull from a beast I could not name serving as a set of ribs. The Undergod's power to move the dead was a sacred gift bestowed only on the most righteous. Such holiness should only be used for protection from the lich and against our enemies.

Never against me.

"Will you disavow your father," Uncle asked me, "and kneel before me as your king?"

We huddled in shocked silence. "Not bloody likely," Grig said.

I shook my head. No matter what power my uncle wielded, I would never betray my father. Uncle knew that. Uncle leaned forward, his eyes firm on mine, the side of his mouth hooked up like a jagged lure.

He wanted me to stand against him. He didn't want me to cower. He wanted me dead.

My body tensed and I found a store of rage I'd never cracked into before. I bared my teeth, drunk with my anger, off-my-head tipsy with

a need to right this wrong. How dare he threaten me? He didn't just betray me, he betrayed my father. I drew my sword.

Uncle pulled more bones from the wall. The ceiling above us cracked.

My heart thundered in my chest, and my throat tightened. "I won't."

"Shame." Edvard sat at his desk. The side of his mouth twitched like he was hiding a smile. The bone-formed creatures crept toward us at his command. "If you won't stand with me, then you must be removed."

My heart thundered. The whispers had been right. My uncle was more ambitious than my father or I had ever realized. He would kill me to get me out of the way.

But I could not let him ruin my father's plan.

Grig and I shared a look.

The skeletons lunged for my throat. On instinct, I swung my sword, slicing through bone. The skull flew backward, but the creature kept marching forward.

Grig chucked his sack of coins at the skeleton coming for him then raised his fists. I swung my sword again, and again, but bones pressed against my arms and held me back. My arms stopped in midair and nothing I could do would move them. Uncle raised one hand and spread his fingers. The bones threw me backward. I slammed into the wall. Clay and shards rained around me. Grig lunged to help me, but the bones holding the door frame twisted forward and wrapped around his neck, slamming him back against the frame.

I scrambled to my feet and ran to his side, prying at the bones that pressed against his throat. I had to pull them off him. He couldn't breathe.

Grig's face turned red, then purple, his arms thrashing against the bones. Grig.

“Uncle, stop!” I slammed my sword against the bones. They shattered, and tightened closer. Harder. Sharper, shards cutting his skin. The other skeleton grabbed me with strength beyond muscle. It pressed me against the wall. Too rough. I could feel my ribs cracking.

“Uncle!” I gasped.

“Will you join me? Renounce your claim to my throne?”

My head ached. I could never do that. But I couldn’t let him kill Grig.

“I will. I swear it,” I lied. I licked my lips.

“You *lie*, Nephew. I’ve seen you play cards. I know your tells. And why would I allow any uprising to threaten my claim to the Throne of Honor? It should always have been mine.”

The bone at my throat snapped in two.

Then a shard of bone slammed into the base of my throat and speared my body into the wall, like a dart through a board.

“No!” Grig shrieked through too little air.

My hands formed fists. I couldn’t breathe. It was so quick. So cold. I didn’t feel the pain until blood spurted into my lungs. The copper taste coated my tongue, and speckled the pale calcium. Blue sparks crackled in my vision, and a spot of ache between my shoulder blades seemed like a heavy rock collapsing through my back.

The pain came. Harsh. Stinging like a scream that wouldn’t release. Every nerve sharpened; even my hair follicles stung.

The bone spear held me standing as night slipped over my vision.

Blood filled my mouth and I could not find air.



I awoke in the doorway of my uncle’s office, a scream still caught in my throat. I grabbed my neck, but there was no wound; the only proof of

my death was a puddle of my blood, a pile of shattered bones, and one foot to my left, a bloody femur stabbed into the wall.

My mind raced as I fumbled backward. I searched my uncle's blood-splattered office, trying to find answers, but there were none. I was alone. Still breathing. Somehow still breathing. Free from the spear that had stolen my life. I held my head in my hands. I'd died. I knew it.

In the hall behind me, my uncle shouted lies. "Guards! Guards! This assailant killed the prince."

I tilted my head to the side and peered into the hall. The walking bone creatures held Grig's hands above his head, their unnatural backs to me. My uncle marched ahead of them, not one drop of my blood on his robes.

I leaned against the door frame and fought for air. Every inch of my skin hurt. An ache in my skull hummed, as if a spark of lightning had left me scalded. The room stank of blood, bones, and rancid incense.

I clutched my throat.

"It wasn't me," Grigfen said through sobs. There wasn't any weight behind his words. He spoke as though he knew he'd seen me die and now no one would believe his word over the Holiest himself.

But I would. I planted my bloody hands and pushed myself through the doorway.

I was alive and it was a miracle I could not explain. "Stop!"

My uncle shuffled around, his eyes wide, his color pallid.

"Holy . . ." Grigfen flushed. "Ryo. What . . ."

Uncle averted his eyes, his jaw trembling at the sight of me.

"Edvarg ne Mark." I spat out blood that clouded my throat. "You've committed treason in front of a witness."

"How is this possible?" Uncle shook his head rapidly.

The nerve of him. “I didn’t know your heart was this dark, so full of sick ambition.”

“I killed you,” he snarled. “You were erased.”

He froze. His expression lagged as he processed.

I lifted my head. “You are forthwith removed of all title, rank, and by my father’s authority I swear—”

“Your father gave away his authority.” He shook the scroll in his hand. “You are the one who has aligned with the Savak. Some blasphemy saved you.”

“It was our god—”

“You don’t speak for the Undergod. Not in my catacombs.” He spoke through his teeth. “You ask me to commit treason, to deny the Undergod. I will not. You’ve been corrupted by the Savak. I will kill you a thousand times to get the heathen out of you. It is my duty as your uncle.”

I rushed forward. If I knocked him out, he couldn’t control the bones. Edvarg’s spindly hand twisted and a wave of ghostlight tossed me back easily like I was a child still learning how to fight. His nails dug into my freshly healed wrists, stronger than his frail form led me to believe.

I raised my fist.

Grig sputtered behind me as the sharp shards of bones aimed at my best friend, cutting into his neck.

Edvarg massaged his temples as if he’d grown weary of this conversation. “Stop or I will kill him.”

I couldn’t bluff my way out of this. Not with stakes this high.

But I could try. “Let him go.”

“Yeah, seriously, let me go. I’m nothing to you. I won’t say anything, I promise.” It shook my core to hear the fear in Grig’s voice.

“He only lives if you surrender.”

My fist trembled, but I didn't swing. If I moved, my uncle could kill Grigfen as quickly as he had killed me. The bones at his throat drew blood. Grig leaned his head back, his eyes glistening with tears, but his hands rolled and his arm muscles tensed. He was about to fight back. Any movement would spell the end of him.

"Do you promise you will let him live?" I tried to signal Grig not to attack, but his eyes were wild, past listening to reason.

Edvard's jaw pulsed. "Yes."

"That's not enough." I stepped closer. "Swear it to your god."

A muscle twitched on his neck. "Will you trade your life for his?"

Grig's head shook back and forth as though he thought he wasn't worth it, but how could he say that? I couldn't allow him to die. Not when he was willing to die in my place.

I lowered my knife. "I will."

Edvard's anger melted from his eyes. "And you, Sir Grigfen. I can't have you blabbing what you've seen, so the only way I will allow you to live is if you devote yourself to the Undergod himself. Will you accept the Devout class and vow to keep my secrets? It is the only way you will leave this catacomb with your head attached."

Grig glanced at me and then nodded. A green mist swirled around him, before it tunneled into his mouth, brightening the whites of his eyes.

I closed mine. The life of the Devout wasn't death, but it might as well have been. He couldn't marry, he couldn't own his title. I'd stolen my best friend's future.

Edvard turned his sharp smile on me.



Later, in my cell, I berated myself for not fighting back. Later, I thought of a hundred things I could have done differently to save Grigfen, a

hundred things my father would have done against his traitorous brother. What someone worthy would have done.

But I'd raised my hands and dropped the fight.

The moment I needed it, all my bravado had disappeared.

And it had taken my hope with it.

I could not eat the silence in my cell. I could not drink the absence of light. I had nothing to gnaw on except my nightmares.

I woke from one, the memory of a sharp bone paring through my flesh, to the sound of a subtle movement in the dark. I crawled forward, ignoring the dust and filth that littered the ground. The bars of the cell were cold on my cheek. My dry mouth opened, pleading to the noise for light, for water . . . For kindness.

Uncle had stolen everything from me, except the clothes on my back, and the necklace he had not found.

A window somewhere opened slightly, sending a lost saint's whisper of light.

It was a Historian, her legs folded, her carved mask tucked on her brow, like a low-hung hat. I knew this Historian well. She was the one who always came and watched me sleep. It was almost a comfort to have her there, because the expression on her face wasn't predatory.

It was motherly.

Faded black paint spread across her nose and forehead in perfect streaks only marred by the line of tears dripping from eyes I almost recognized.

"Help me," I pleaded. I crawled up onto my hands and knees and held the bar. "Help me," I raged again, my voice shaking with anger and need, like an open wound.

Her tear-streaked eyes recorded my agony, but she didn't move. I pulled at her cloak, trying to bring her closer, to force her to action, but she stayed planted.

Her cloak slipped off.

Underneath the cloak was a structure of rusting gears and green misty ghostlight, a skeleton of pipes, sparks, and machinations. Historians were nothing but walking Whirligigs, with a face of someone I almost remembered.

I dropped the cloak and found a corner on my own.

She recorded my deaths.

Again and again.

I died of thirst, a slow death that rattled my lungs and set a sharp pain in my abdomen.

I reawakened a foot away from where I'd lain, only to die from poisoned food. Each time I awoke, my body was battered, but my heart was still beating. I didn't know how long I could live, clutching on to life with only one heart left to beat. Three times she watched me die. She stood sentinel as I shuddered awake, vomited on the cold stones, and screamed into the darkness to let me go. I didn't want to live, only to stay dead.

She watched, but she never said a word.



Hours, or days, or years later, a door opened, and a lantern's sharp light burned my retinas.

"Still alive?" Edvarg said nonchalantly, like he wasn't surprised, or as if he simply didn't care.

The Historian was gone.

"How many days?" I croaked. My throat was rough as used sandpaper—dry and full of muck.

Edvarg's cape flicked in the breeze. He cocked his head to the side. "Perhaps if we remove your head entirely."

"How. *Many*." I stopped to fill my lungs.

“Eleven.” Edvarg scratched his beard. “Perhaps if there were enough witnesses . . .”

I ignored my uncle’s casual inquiry in how to kill me and clenched my eyes closed. My parents were eleven days gone. I’d lost eleven days of my quest. My palm brushed the bauble around my neck. I died from a lack of drink, yet I had crystal-clear water strung around my neck that I would never consider drinking.

Not until I knew I’d be strong enough to do this.

3

DAGNEY

was in the market when the Executioner gongs rang out. Loud. Mechanical. I clutched the book against my chest and glanced up at the moons above me.

There was time. There was still time.

The bookseller pulled his embroidered books from their stands and packed them in a large trunk. I stepped quickly to his table.

“How much will you give me for this?” I asked. I showed him the bindings, but did not let go. You never let a trader hold your wares. Father taught me that.

“Lady Tomlinson.” He eyed the title on the spine, and then shook his head. “I don’t deal with traitors.”

And I didn’t deal well with people calling me names. I grabbed a handful of his lace cravat and pulled him until our noses were almost touching. “Jecky Varnes, I’ve bought enough books from you to furnish your entire house, so you will deal with me. How much?”

His eyes bulged at my violence. “One silver.”

I let go. “I bought it for five not twelve days ago.”

“Prices go up, prices go down.” He fiddled with his collar and went back to stacking.

I folded my arms. “You are cheating me? I’m your best customer.”

“You were a council member’s daughter,” he muttered. “I could call the guards on you. I’m sure King Edvarg would love payment for your father’s betrayal.”

I lowered my hands. “My father left me too.” My throat tightened,

but I refused to let it weaken me. “He loved me more than anything in this world, and he and my brother left me with nothing. Please. I have a household to feed.”

He met my gaze, a spark of light back in his eyes. “Five silvers.”

“Thank you.” I handed him the book and it slipped into his trunk before I could count my silvers. “I’m looking for information about my brother.”

“Be glad you got the silvers.” He slid his last three books off the shelf and collapsed the thing in one winding twist of a gear. I’d always admired his mechanical bookshelf. “The King’s Executioner’s been summoned. Market’s closing.”

I stared up at the twin moons. It was getting late indeed if I could see their faces.

“I heard the gongs.” I slid my coins into the pockets of my market dress. “I’m sorry about your cravat. It’s been a difficult few days.”

He slammed his trunk closed and locked it. Jecky Varnes used to be friendly, almost a friend. I shared sweet rolls with him, and he always saved me the best books.

But now I was just grateful he didn’t spit on me.

The market emptied. No one here would trade with me, not even for information. I needed to know where my brother was. I had to find him.

But there was no one here, except one woman, huddled in the shadows, counting coins with trembling fingers.

I didn’t know this trader. She sat with her legs folded on a woven rug. Small carved stones lined her table. I crept closer and she looked up. Her eyes were lined with kohl, her pale hair reddened with dye, her face creased with wrinkles. She wore a dress made of scarves and feathers, with tiny shells sewn as embroidery, and nestled in her skirts was a small black-and-white dog.

“You aren’t heading to the execution?” I asked.

“I’ve seen enough death.” Her husky voice barely reached me. Her pale gold eyes found mine. “Why aren’t you running off to join the crowd? You aren’t afraid you will miss it?”

I *wish* I could miss the execution. I glanced toward the castle, and I wrapped my shawl tighter. “I’ve heard tale Sir Grigfen Tomlinson was with the prince the night of the treason. But no one has seen him since. You haven’t heard any rumors—”

“About your brother?” She scratched her dog’s ears. I lowered my eyes. “Aye, I know who you are, miss. I also know you’d do anything for information, so how’s about a trade?”

I knelt before her table. “I have few coins.”

“No, coins aren’t enough. I’m looking for land. Far away from the city.”

I scoffed. “You expect me to trade my family’s land for information?” This was not my first market day.

“No, miss.” She bit her lip. “There’s no information to be had. Not one soul knows where your brother is. I tell you true. I’m offering you more than information.” She glanced over her shoulder before she pulled an unassuming silver bottle from a shell-lined pocket. “I’m offering you answers, and a path to a good future, for you and your family.”

I leaned away from the table. King Edvarg published every word of that contract my father had signed, and the Devout proclaimed to everyone who would stop at the Abbey gates about the council’s decision to drink the Savak seer water. With her words and the twisting in my stomach, I recognized the contents of the bottle without a taste. Seer water. Treason and answers in one gulp. But why reveal it to me now? Seer water was worth a thousand gold pieces at the least.

I stared at the woman. This kingdom was such a melting pot; there were merchants from every kingdom, each one a different height,

weight, nationality, and gender, but somehow, they seemed stamped from the same design.

Except her.

Her dyed silver hair. Her pale eyes. Of course. She was a Savak in hiding, and if she wanted to flee . . . The Savak hated deserters more than any enemy. If she was found here when they came to claim our throne, she'd be among the first to die.

"One year's lease," I offered. But where would she be safest? "The orchard at Avenlo. It's been closed for decades, but there should be wild apples, plenty of squirrels and rabbits. The house isn't much, but it should be warm enough when frost comes. Three days west, follow the river until Forest Hill when you turn south."

"My wife and I thank you heartily." Her eyes shone. "Goddess blessings on you," she whispered.

The moons-light brightened and I felt a swelling of hope in my chest. I would find my brother. I had to. No one else was looking.

I took the seer water and sniffed it. Not well water or wine. I'd never smelled something so crisp before. There was no trick. She'd sold me seer water for a year lease. I'd never won such a bargain before. I closed the stopper and tucked it away before anyone could see me.

"Best hurry, my lady," she said. "Don't want to miss your summons."

I swallowed. "I don't know what you mean."

Her leathered face creased in a grin. "I'll keep your secrets if you keep mine."

I offered my hand and she shook it. "That's a deal if I've ever made one."

The gong sounded again. Third time. I drew a breath. I couldn't delay any longer. I had to be about my father's business.



God below, guide my axe.

My thoughts were more prayer than plan. I stood alone in front of the tall stone doors, as nervous as the first time I attended a ball, but this time my older brother wasn't here to push them open for me. This time I was heading toward death, and it was not my own. My knees shook, and I couldn't move. I wasn't ready to step out of the dark tunnel and into the gallows.

Not yet.

Heavy drums pounded in the distance, each boom echoing in my rib cage. The black robes of the King's Executioner covered my corset and bloomers, and the weight of the gilded axe pressed into my shoulder, heavy as a bag of laundry.

Would the blood stain my robes?

Don't think about it.

I drew a breath, but didn't open the door.

The tunnel smelled like my father—of ink and blood, sweat and polish. It smelled of his tears. He'd warned me taking a life would not be easy. He said it destroyed a piece of his soul to do it.

But he still did it. And with Father gone, I had to take his place.

If only my brother were here to answer the summons. If Grigfen had worn the robes, he wouldn't have stood out. His height was closer to my father's, his shoulders larger.

Perhaps it was good he wasn't here for this. It would kill him to kill another. He'd received the muscles, but I was the one who'd inherited my grandmother's strength.

I tugged the sword belt lower on my hips and widened my stance. I was a large woman, thick as my father. Perhaps they would not think me a woman below the robes.

I could do this.

My fingers twitched inside the witch-made gloves. I lowered the black hood over my mask and tried not to think of the person I would kill on the king's orders. It could be anyone. A dissenter who spoke out against our new king. A traitor, like the servants who helped King Vinton leave.

The new king demanded a show of strength. With war looming on the horizon, our people needed it. And there was no stronger hero than the King's Executioner—he who came from below the streets to kill in the king's name. He mingled with the Undergod. He was holy and secret and sacred.

His title was the mask my family wore, and that was worth protecting.

I pressed the door with the palms of my golden witch-made gloves. The solid wall slid open in front of me, and I stepped through into the night.

At the base of the castle, where some kingdoms would keep a moat, my kingdom held an arena. A half circle of steps made risers to aid the crowd's view.

The awaiting crowd scattered away as the wall behind me closed. Half-melted candles arched around the wall, where names were etched.

The onlookers cheered for my arrival as if I were the star of a theatrical. It'd been too long since I'd heard a kind word, so now this mob celebrating my presence felt like a feast to the starving. Almost comforting. But the lie in their love made the warmth curdle at the base of my throat.

I'd been spat on for my father's actions. They were cheering for a title, and not the girl behind the hood.

I focused on the raised platform, covered in straw at the center of the arena, and the blackened block that awaited me. I walked the way my father would have, shoulders wide, hips straight, keeping silent as the lowborn moved out of my way. No one could see the tears scratching my cheeks. No one could hear my pulse racing.

No one except me.

I could face this. My father had. My grandmother had. My family had carried the secret title and responsibility for four generations, hiding our heavy duty behind our noble name and lands. I'd always been proud of it, of my grandmother's kills, which had stopped the Devani revolt, of my father's high standing with our old king. But I never thought twice about those who died.

And now all I could think about was a name I didn't know.

The drums stopped as I reached the block and lowered the axe to the straw. King Edvarg joined me at the block. Tall as a mountain and thin as a river on a map. He'd been king for a few days, yet he still wore the gray robes of the Holy Order of the Undergod—now edged in royal silver and king's bronze. A tight silver crown traced his brow, pressing down the sacred cowl of the high priesthood. He always seemed sickly to me, with his face lined in shadows. He raised his spindly fingers to the crowd circled about the platform. They silenced.

"It grieves me to meet on this dark night." His soft voice rumbled like a distant thunder. "My brother's treason has led to this, and here this sad business will end. Our god will be appeased, and his justice will rain on those *heathen* Savak who stole the best of us with their vile lies."

The crowd cheered. He spat on the dark cobblestones and I drew backward. To King Edvarg, heathen meant anyone who didn't worship

the Undergod. To anyone else it was only an insult, but from King Edvarg it was a holy judgment of damnation.

“We will not betray our god,” King Edvarg’s voice echoed. “We will not give in to my brother’s blasphemy and cowardice. When the Savak try to claim our lands, we will show them our swords are mightier than any traitorous contract. Our fight against the Savak begins tonight, with one death. A death I mourn already.”

The torches flickered. I caught a whiff of burnt oil.

A crowd of men dressed in long black robes lined with raven feathers moved to the edge of the platform, holding back the crowd with their silent presence and sharp gaze. Historians. I couldn’t look them in the eye. Even behind their carved silver masks, the Historians’ vision was too sharp. My brother had told me it was best to stay away from their notice.

They were watching me now.

I slouched and tried to hide beneath the thick black robes. I was only doing this at the king’s command. It was the king’s kill, not mine. He didn’t even know who the Executioner was. No one did. They should be focused on him.

A bell tolled, and the lanterns sputtered. I heard the footsteps first, the first hint of the life I would take. The crowd roared as the prisoner walked forward, chains linked around his wrists, his eyes and mouth tied with filthy coverings.

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw. My hands would not settle.

Not Prince Ryo.

Any name but his. My brother would never forgive me for this.

The crowd circling the platform spread down the long roads. They only avoided the Executioner’s wall. With the bewitched gloves, I could

press the wall open and reach my father's tunnel. That would be my escape. If it came to that.

But there was no way out for Ryo.

I stared at Prince Ryo like I had the night of my first ball, like he was the only person in a crowded room. Except this time, Ryo marched toward his death in bare feet, dressed in a poor shirt, made dusty red from dirt, sweat, and blood. He'd hate that. He was always so meticulous with his clothing, so concerned with the way his people saw him. The crowd quieted, for this, even in rags, was the prince whose birth sparked a three-week festival, the prince we waved to when he was a small boy, sitting high on his father's shoulders as he grinned from the castle balcony. He'd grown handsome as he aged, with his strong jaw and intelligent eyes. It seemed like god spent more time designing him than others. I knew the details of his face, the scar above his eyebrow, the curve of his lips, the halo of black hair, which seemed a crown. We all did.

He was ours.

And he'd betrayed us.

I should have seen it coming.

No one hated him more than I did. That first ball I'd thought him handsome, and when Grigfen introduced us, he looked me up and down, his lips curved in an appraising dismissal as though he thought me plain. No one danced with me the whole evening. The other girls mocked my ribbons and the boys shoved me to the back of the ballroom. I cried myself to sleep that night, and every other time I'd stepped into his company, Ryo had made another joke at my expense, which would echo and repeat through meaner tongues.

Long before my father signed that contract, I was the lowest girl in court, and I knew exactly who had given me that role.

The king's guards dumped him at my feet, next to the blood-darkened block.

The crowd rumbled, none louder than a row of Everstriders lined among them. Their matching bleached leather coats hung to the top edge of their boots, belted tight at the waist with three buckles and strings of holy bells. They eyed the king's guards and the Devout with distrust. One Everstrider kept his eyes on Ryo, his hand touching the sword handle at his belt as if he would protect him. The rest formed a line at the back of the platform.

I pulled my thin knife from my boot and slipped the blade between the fabric and Ryo's cheek.

King Edvarg protested, "His mouth must be bound." He loomed closer.

But I would not be intimidated. "He has a right to a last word, sire," I answered, my voice deep as my father's.

"His words are lies. Blasphemy."

"And he has a right to it, Your Highness."

The king's glare burned, but he didn't silence me. The crowd was too close, and with the Everstriders watching so sharply, this moment was a scale too precariously balanced. King Edvarg couldn't push me, not if he risked tipping.

Prince Ryo licked his dry lips, but he didn't speak right away. I'd nicked his cheek with my knife, but with the blindfold on, he'd never see it. One of the king's guards shoved him onto his hands and knees, and pressed his throat onto the blackened stone. Ryo's jaw trembled, but he made no plea for forgiveness. No demand of innocence.

"My father has a plan," he said instead. The crowd silenced, hanging on every quiet word, as I was. "The council of five did not betray us. They've saved us."

I leaned in, wanting desperately to believe him.

The vein on King Edvarg's forehead throbbed. He gestured to the crowd and raised his voice. "So we should allow the queen of the Savak to reach into our hard-earned borders? Should we give away who we are because of some contract?"

Prince Ryo broke through the crowd's roar. "I didn't sign it. I'm only suggesting we trust our king—"

"I am the king now."

"Not my king. My father lives, and I do not relinquish my claim to the throne."

The Everstriders stepped closer to the platform.

Edvarg's hand rose, then he gestured at the king's guards. "Hold him down."

They pulled the prince's arms back so high, my own shoulders ached in sympathy. And for what? The rumors were rampant, but he hadn't signed the contract the way our fathers had. For all I knew, Ryo could have done nothing wrong except stay loyal to his own father.

The crowd roared now, some moving to stand behind the Everstriders, their eyes uncomfortable at this scene, some shouting about blasphemy and treason, whipping up to a frenzy, led by the Devout.

But I was the one holding the axe.

Father had struggled to bear the weight of it, but it was too much responsibility for me to carry. I should be reading my books, or drawing my bow at a Whirligig target, not killing someone.

But I gripped the axe with both hands and inched forward. I could do this. I had to. Only it wasn't just killing my brother's best friend. As the King's Executioner I was choosing which king to follow.

King Vinton left. My father had abandoned me at his royal command. As foul as he was, at least King Edvarg had stayed.

There was no choice here. I had to do it. Our people needed to be united under our new king if we were going to survive the onslaught of

the Savak. And I'd tested the new king by allowing Ryo to speak. If I did not do this, I'd make a powerful enemy. If I didn't do this, there was no way I could stay here and find my brother.

The weight of the axe would do the work for me. All I'd have to do was lift the axe and let the blade fall. It wouldn't be murder. I was following orders. That was all.

But it was Prince Ryo. He deserved a slap across the mouth, not death.

My guilt and his ghost would haunt me forever.

The crowd roared out for blood, but I couldn't hear them over the sound of my pulse drumming in my ears. The prince muttered feverishly, "This is wrong. This is wrong. Please don't let me die."

Father wouldn't want me to do this. So many nights Father would stay awake speaking with Grigfen about the influence he could have on Ryo. The prince had the potential to be a great king and a great man, if we guided him. But Father had left me with nothing. Not a word of goodbye, not a coin for food. What he wanted me to do didn't matter when he'd left us to starve.

I lifted the axe high. The prince gasped for air, his frenzied pleas clear as starlight as the mob silenced. Strange the stars still shone, even on such a night as this.

King Edvard was the only one not grieving. His slimy tongue slipped over his lips, curved in celebration so sharp it could only be lust. For all his pious words, he was glad to see his rival killed, even though it was his own nephew.

The idea of Edvard as my king made my stomach roll. My heart-beat stilled. There was only one opinion I could trust now.

My own.

The weight of the axe made my arms quake, but I could do this. I arched my wrists and swung the axe.

Deep into King Edvarg's stomach. His blood splattered out around the axe blade, dripping down the handle and staining his fine robes.

"You are not my king," I roared into the shocked silence. "And I'll have no hand in this execution."

Then the night caught fire.