

The Search Within

*The world is a shadowy place,
and those who live here,
must learn how to endure.*

One king, one war.

*A king's soul bygone
and a curse was bequeathed.*

*In a time of legend,
Before the dawn of a fairy tale,
a woman's words rang true.*

A prophecy for believers.

*Yet dismissed she was,
until she passed into myth,
myth into fable.*

*Abruptly all that could be remembered,
was an aged woman's words,
in dusty books
in the citadel.*

CHAPTER 1

I was born in darkness.

I was born cold-hearted.

I am told I am to be feared.

I am told that my name is only whispered in dark rooms in hushed conversations.

I am told the goddess of death is even afraid of me.

I am not afraid.

I am a Volur: a child raised in the dark arts, a councillor to lords and ladies, a mighty woman married to her craft.

I am the carrier of spirits.

I am one of the six.

I stare across the room as my hair is being brushed up. I have known this view since I was seven years old. The tall towers, the raging winds, the soaring mountains with the unknown beyond them. I have never left the fortress, and yet today I leave. My hair is gathered, the waves flowing down my back—a single braid falling behind my ear. I am dressed in black; metal weighs upon me, tightening around my waist and neck. I look at my bare arm; in only a few hours, I will become one with the goddess, the insignia burned into my flesh. These girls have all been raised together as one. We will take the place of those before us. Too frail to carry the spirits, they will pass to their new life, guardians of the gates to hell.

Today is the awakening.

I take a deep breath as we link arms to descend the marble staircase; the court is waiting for us. This is our role; this is our gift. We shall sacrifice to the gods and then be rewarded for our dedication. The other six stand together, forming a circle, their hands are linked together in shackles, and their heads look upwards to the goddess. Each girl is dressed in ivory robes and black iron crowns sit atop their foreheads. The six of us take our own seats, each throne carved with blessings in our honour. The elder stands. He speaks, but I do not hear the words. While I know these women are honouring us and achieving the pinnacle of life, I pity them. Other elders walk around the girls singing chants, praising the gods for life. When we go over, taking our place and joining hands facing the willing victims of the sacrifice. The mother takes the embers and brings them into individual symbols; she is an Elementalist. The insignias are then burned into our forearms. Where once one might have felt pain, I endure none. When this is finished, we tear the garments from the girl's bodies before us leaving them unclad for the gods. Then we hold the cup to their lips.

They drink the poison.

We step back.

They are set on fire.

CHAPTER 2

I have always considered libraries living, full of opinions and some of the most dangerous weapons imaginable. Books speak to me; I hear them call, and the void of darkness that I am shrouded in fades away. Unlike me, these characters govern their own story and solve the problems set before them. But I am a puppet, a young man trapped in revolving the door of women as they are forced upon me, that I might finally marry and come to the throne. But it is my throne; I was to inherit, and yet, I do not desire to be the one in authority. In this life, I would not rule; I would be subject to the constant overruling of the Steward. He is the advisor who oversees all that happens at court until I am of age. I am a prisoner in my own castle, and for that reason, I have time chained to my wrist; in these chains, I find solitude and comfort from reality. I return to the vast halls of books, where men and women teach me about the world and where diaries of those before make me feel less alone, less lost. I have always contemplated why the words of the past never concerned the clansmen. Their stories are raw and forceful and are the only reason I am brave. I was sheltered.

I walk out of the cold hall through the golden arched doors leading out through the colonnade. The Leonard Messel is blooming, casting pink shadows on the riverway below. The evening sun reflecting and creating a dancing masterpiece for the nixes to play in. Lilies drift along the river, and I watch as the nixes leap in and out of the water playfully. As I sit on the edge of the stone walkway, my eyes drifting in and out.

CHAPTER 3

I cross the walkway into the courtyard, it is filled with Lords and Ladies, and we are all being shuffled into the great hall. The Viceroy stands at the other end of the gallery at the great oak table; a map sprawls over it while important members at court gaze at it. Beyond them, the royal chair sits. Carved from marble, the mighty bear stands guardian; two massive wolves lie at its base. It is the king's chair. No one has sat there for fifteen years, and the immortal flame still burns. I sit at one of the tables with Maura and Braeden. Maura scoffs as she winks at me. She pushes up close and whispers in my ear.

"I wager thee!"

"What stake do they lay?" I respond sneakily. Maura glances over her shoulders; looking back at me, she smiles;

"I say five words will come out of your mouth today; what do you say, Braeden?"

"It is not my place to speculate against his highness," responds my tutor in his sly way. He winks at Maura and then stands up to get mead. As he does, Maura leans back over to me.

"They say the legend is true; the women have been rereleased upon Xanchior. One of the girls is spoken to as a naturalist."

I look at her quizzically. "We have not had a naturalist in" ...,

"nineteen years," responds Maura before I can get all my words out. I look into her dark hazel eyes, studying the seriousness of what she says, and trace the worry to her brow and back down to her shaking hands.

"The Lords will decide what is right for the kingdom; I have no power over our kinsfolk. They do as they wish." I'm tired of sitting through hours of battle plans. Maura was raised as a warrior; she knows her ways around a sword and the politics of the clans. I have no care for blood or revenge. I wish only for the life that I was not born into. I would like to be a simple man with my book and the forest. Maura shoots me a look of disdain and turns to face the crowds, her back leaning against me. The warmth of her skin on my arm.

"I do wish they would listen to the legends," she cries, and courtiers turn to hush her, "yet so many do not care for the books that teach of the old ways. They are foolish in their wisdom." Maura has long relinquished her freedom to speak at court but always attends, dreaming of the day a woman's voice is heard in and amongst the blood-thirsty men. Our places should have been different, she was born to lead, and yet her gender robs her of all opportunities. Yet circumstances lead to her silence with an overbearing man. Where mine to rule an empire which I do not belong to.

"I want to slam my dagger right into that table and demand to be heard!" hollers Maura as she turns around back to the pork laid before her. Her knife slices cleanly through the meat, but the steam off her brow could cook it through again.

"You are.. are..." The words get lost within my lips.

"Beautiful, astute, immensely talented," she rattles on as she brushes her nut blond hair over her shoulder.

“Dangerous,” I spit out. I look at her, the quizzical look on her brow.

“That’s a new one,” she says in a slight undertone. I sense the mood shifting, and I look back at her and see a tear, very delicately balancing on her eyelashes. She leans into me, nestling her head into my hair. I hold her close. My arms wrapping around her frame, wishing to ease the pain that she suffers from. Soaking up the feel of her melting into my body. As much as Maura is loved by me like family, she is also not blood. We’ve been through everything together. Her struggle is also mine. I feel the rise and lowering of her chest as she calms herself. Her mother has always told her, to be strong is to be a woman. It’s a lie, of course, yet I’m still the only one Maura opens her heart to.

“Ah-hem!” The Viceroy lifts his glass and stands on the stairs beneath the thrones. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he announces. “On this day, we gather. Let us bring forth the heir!” I look at Maura, who is just regaining her composure. Then I look at those around me, their eyes burning into me. I am a peacock on a stage. “Son! Come forth!” I walk up the aisles, past the Lords of all four realms. Tonight, is a time of peace, but that is not the emotion overwhelming me now. I walk up next to the Viceroy. “Time to speak...” I cut him off in a hushed tone.

“Willmar, this is not my place.” Willmar turns to look at me. He was my mother's lover, her appointed Viceroy, and now, in the wake of all her years of being gone, he has never once loved me. His cold-hearted glare stares deep into my soul.

“Speak, ungrateful child.” His tone is harsh, yet as I turn to face the crowd, raising my chin, the sun shines through, breaking into the darkroom and illuminating me.

“Welcome! Let the negotiations begin!” I lower my head and look at the stairs. Each one leads somewhere, and yet, in my twenty years of living trapped within the walls of Raveryn, I have never decided if they lead me to the throne or away from it. As Willmar walks down the steps back to the table, I see Maura, her eyes glistening off to my left. She holds out her hand ever so slightly. She knows I have finished here. I walk down and take her hand. She leads me through all the people, the questions about the fleet and if I will be joining on the next raid. Tonight, I only seek the comfort of the fire, of a book within my hands and the solitude that comforts me in knowing I will never enter that hall again.

...

In the morning, I rise to find Maura at the foot of my bed, lying with Astra; she is asleep. Her soft blonde hair is tangled, and her breathing is quiet. She worries for me. I stretch out next to her. The hearth is warm from the morning fire, and I interweave my fingers into her hair. Unlacing the tangles one after another until my hand slides gracefully through. She is beautiful; I have never noticed till now in the light of the morning sun and flicker of the flame. Astra snorts, looking like she's restless. I sit up against the stone wall, shifting Maura gently onto my lap. Astra stands and leaves the room.

Maura stirs and turns to look up at me. “Why did you not wake me?” she ponders, looking up.

“You were so peaceful,” I respond in soft tones.

“You had that look again last night, Priidik. I know that look. I've seen it before.”

“You know me too well. But it's for the best.” I say, looking into her eyes. A tear rolls down mine. “From birth, I never belonged. You belong here. Not I.”

Maura sits up and looks me directly and unapologetically in the eyes. “You’re the future king, Priidrik. You have a duty. Besides, you missed half the news about last night. It was not just about the raid on Gazelle.”

“What is it they discussed then?” I say quizzically.

“They talked about who you are intended to marry.” Her eyes soften a little, then grow hard and dark.

“Marry!” I say, looking at her. “I don’t wish to be married. Marriage is arduous. I don’t even wish to rule. People have emotions, and emotions cause problems. Who can handle so many, and with a wife, they are even more heightened. Even you do not wish to be tied to a man who would keep you chained. Marry, I think not. There is no woman I would wish to share my life with—that is too high a task for me.”

“You are bestowed to me!” Her voice thunders as she walks out of the chamber.

CHAPTER 4

It is morning when I wake to find the new linens lying at the end of my bed. All black minus the silver crown that will be placed on my head amidst the dark ringlets that lace their way down my back. I am cold when my feet hit the stone floor and scuffle over to the hearth. The winter's snowstorm seems only to be beating against our tower today. I look around the room at my sisters. Their bodies are still sore from the escapades of last night. All the illusions of what it means to be a woman of the dark are now gone. Men fear us; they do not invite themselves before us. We are the creatures of the night, but our bodies belong to the gods. The night of the dead is over, it is the dawn, and our work, the ushering of souls, is beginning.

After years of training in my craft, I am the only one to be a naturalist. Most of the other girls are an alchemist or necromancer. I take a deep breath, the brisk morning air burning my throat. I slide on a lace robe and tiptoe over to the solitary window. The sun is rising; its luminescence casts shadows on the floor, but it does not give warmth to my bare skin. My shoulders shudder. I look at my wrist, where the insignia is burned. My flesh is still raw from last night. I take a deep breath. I cross the room and begin doing up the dress laid out. Ribbon laces up the front from my navel to my collar bones. I hear a stirring behind me and turn to see Irmina and Kyrilla looking at me. Their dark black eyes staring into mine. They are twins that were both gifted with necromancy. Their cloud grey hair illuminating their skin, Irmina stands up; with no clothes covering her porcelain white skin, her body glows in the light. Staring at the loose lacing pattern I have chosen for my dress. Irmina says:

"A man might not be able to have you, but they should desire you nevertheless." She turns to face her sister and then grabs my shoulders. Pulling them back, she spins me to meet her. Unravelling each ribbon until the dress once again hangs from my shoulders. Slowly and meticulously, she weaves the ribbons in and out much tighter than before. Squeezing whatever is in me tighter than ever before. She stops, exposing cleavage and cuts the ribbons with her teeth. I feel exposed. Throughout the training, we have covered all skin. But the girls of the Volur did dress this way. Their bodies worship the goddess, and for this, they must please the gods. Kyrilla and Irmina help one another dress in the same fashion. Their black robes leave little to the imagination and heighten their already accentuated looks. As children, many of us were poked and prodded. Stripped of the natural and accentuated. Customs ruled that girls must please the gods so that the goddess is happy. My body is not my own, and it is comforting. At every ceremony, one woman is chosen not to pass on. She becomes the mother of the next set of girls and will bear a child, a gift from the gods themselves. I have not yet found out which girl possesses the ear of the gods. The stories of a god consuming her, and her rebirth are too hard to repeat, and yet, each of us seeks to be the mistress.

When all the girls have dressed, we wander downstairs into the halls. Men still lie on benches, their drunken bodies scattered in heaps of flesh. The site disgusts me, and yet, it is where we left them last night. Tonight, is Der Dunkle Ritter. Those of us who are selected will be given a particular role. To produce the following children for the goddess. Some will not be chosen. But this is the way.

CHAPTER 5

“Sir! It is time for your lesson— is this a good time?” Braeden sticks his head awakening me from my thoughts.

“Yes,” I reply in a drowsy manner. I brush off my troubles and begin to focus on what is at hand. Braeden talks, and I write on the scroll and keep track of all the names. Many are complicated, and soon my brain has left behind my morning vices. By noon it was all but a memory. I head down to the kitchen to grab some of the food before catching any guest's eyes, Cook has prepared a deer, and I snatch a leg before she can see and charge out the back door.

I reach the glen and settle into the oak tree branches. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Maura come traipsing through the forest. Astra wanders over and nestles her head into Maura, who shrugs her off. She glances my way but gives no greeting and carries on. She is still frustrated clearly. Maura has been mad at me before, but never like this, never hours upon hours of no communication and utter silence. I am dumbstruck at what I have done, I only communicated how I felt, and we have always been open. I do not understand what offends her. I feel sorrow and like a sense of loss.

My best friend.

But what she said this morning was utterly disturbing. How long have the courtiers been planning this engagement? What role is Maura to be if not only a mother? Would this indeed be her heart's desire? For years I have known she desires to be in leadership. To fight at the front and to make decisions with the clansmen. Yet today, her usually loud voice is muffled across the woodland. She will come around.

I leap from the tree onto Astra's back, and together we set off deeper into the forest. I do not yet know what I am searching for, but my heart calls me more profound. The air grows misty, and the fog settles in amongst the hills. The air smells of pine; I breathe in deeply and then stop short. I hear voices, and they are close. I slide off Astra and motion for her to stay. I slip in and out of the trees, following the voices until I catch sight of someone. From here, I can barely make out that it is Willmar. I can tell there is another person, but their hood's cloak shades their face from my view. They are talking in hushed tones and yet are agitated.

“The old books are coming to true, Willmar, there is a prophecy that a naturalist child would be born, and the rumours say this child is of age.”

“It is impossible. The legend spoke of a child, and that child was killed. Sent away and destroyed.” Willmar's harsh tones cut through the air. The wind suddenly blew cold past me, and I shiver, snapping a branch. Willmar suddenly turns my way, and I duck into the three components. “

Someones' there!” Willmar says.

“Hush,” says the other voice. “Remember, whatever is true about this child, dead or alive, it cannot be known by the boy. It will ruin our plans.”

“I understand,” repeats Willmar, and the voices fade away.

CHAPTER 6

It is midnight when my feet touch the icy stone surface of the courtyard and begin to lead me beyond the walls I had always known. The moon hangs low in the sky, the stars dancing on the canvas of the black silk sky. It is peaceful up there, but in my heart, a storm is brewing. I have believed I was abandoned for years, found the sisters and given a purpose in life, a more excellent and worthier destiny. My childhood has been a lie, and a great misfortune has been laid upon my shoulders to bear.

I am a bastard's child,

the product of sinful mankind and the greatest of all passions:

love.

It is in my blood to be a child destined for a fight, an inner battle of worth and greed. The gods will not favour me. They never have. It was night when the great Lord called me to his chamber. I had been looking out the window when my maid fetched me. Wrapping myself in a shawl, my bare feet shuffle over the stone surfaces to his chamber. I was ushered into silence. Doom and gloom filled the very air we breathed. He had told me a story, the story of a magical child feared by a kingdom and his destiny to die, and yet, he saw a great power and took me to the sisters. My gift was fed with lies, not to be told the truth until the truth was the only thing holding me back.

That time had come, he had told me. I had fled his chamber in horror. The story of my childhood, the life I had been born for and the destiny that had been ripped from me.

Now I run across a frozen wasteland to the one place where I believe I will grasp clarity—the Goddesses temple. The ecstasy will consume me, and only the goddess herself can choose to release you to enter means to submit. If she sees you as worthy.

CHAPTER 7

I lie under the branches of a cherry blossom tree. Dusty pink petals float in the breeze. Kline Fubes' dance in the wind, softly in and out of the trees. These tricksters play with my clothes. They are mischievous, but I have grown used to their tricks. Their skin sparkles like topaz in the evening light; like stars, they dance and sing. It is uncommon to see so many youngsters in these parts. The wind picks up with the music that drifts around in my ears. I am comforted by the voices the wind brings, the calmness and the solitude. I lay down after a while and begin reading. A bit later, I sense I am not alone; the young around me have stopped dancing in the rays of the sun, sitting inches from my book, a petite man stands, staring into my face with an expression that could freeze a lake. His auburn hair glistens, his cape fluttering in the wind. I rest my book down and look up at him as Vidarr comes to rest on my shoulder. Vidarr pops a razzleberry in his mouth, he smirks at me. The Lord before me then begins to speak.

"Son, you are a bright star of evening light. We sense the presence of darkness here. There is a great power at work and one to be feared." His face says it all... there is something wrong. The Kline fube has sensed it.

I sit up against the stump of the tree, "Your presence is most welcome here, sir. May I ask why you speak to me?" The man before me shifts his stance and then, holding out his right hand, reveals a shiny object, no bigger than my thumb. I take it and examine the coin he has presented me with. It is worn, years have faded the marks, but yet, around its edge, I can see an inscription. It reads:

"For the one true heir, that all may unite under a unified banner."

I look back at the man; his eyes are soft, gentle, and knowing. Vidarr looks at me, then begins to explain.

"Young Priidik, this here is our most beloved treasurer; he has studied all the legends that trace the centuries of your ancestry. He has sensed darkness upon this castle, but what he also senses are an awakening in your spirit. He believes you are being called." I look at the man before me, wizened with age and yet still youthful. His cloaks are laced with silver and yet plain, and he bears the mark of a high treasurer. I lower my head. This man deserves immense respect.

"Forgive me, sir, I did not recognize you in my weariness. Pray master, what is your name?"

"I have many names, young lad, and many will be forgotten. Many have heard of me, and yet very few acknowledge me. I am ever listening, and yet few speak to me. Young Priidik, you may call me many things in your time you will grow to know me; let us begin with Gavriel." His words are soft, and yet I sense a stirring in my chest. This man has known me, while I have not known him.

"Pray my Lord, this coin you have given to me, what purpose does it serve? I am lost to why it is presented to me." Vidarr lands on the ground beside the Lord. I see excitement bubbling up from within him.

"The coin is to protect you, Priidik, for one day, you may need to summon those who still hold fast to the legends.

CHAPTER 8

I look at the marks on my wrists, lines where blood has since dried from previous nights here at the feet of the goddess. I take the knife; its wooden handle has been carved for centuries of sacrifices. Its blade freshly sharpened for the slaughtering of lambs tomorrow in honour of the great harvest feast. The edge is angular, single-pointed, and one-sided. The hilt is stained red now. Once more, I trace those lines on my forearm, my blood dripping off and running to the grey cobblestone on which I kneel.

In the morning, I wake to my blood dried and body aching and shivering in the cold. I stumble out of the courtyard and head back along the cobblestone path to where I belong. My life has been granted to me, and yet the cost for such a gift is steep. My virtue as a woman, as a child is charged, like a beggar asking for riches, they are undeserving of.

The early morning air is nipping at my bare skin, my feet are frozen, and my own breath dances in the morning light before me. Birds call sweetly from the trees that surround the grove; their sweet soft melodies are comforting as the iron castle approaches before me. My home is not a sanctuary to my free-spirited soul. The voices that call to me speak of nameless adventures and harrowing journeys. Their minds are filled with so many stories and so much pain I turn away. Merchants pass and stare at me, their heavy-laden carts filled with exotic riches or spices and fabrics from beyond our own city walls. Here in the streets, the hustle and bustle of regular life is filled with sunken men, and surly women and the calls of hungry children. Yet to my eyes, each of these people has a more remarkable story. Here all around, boys dart in and out of the market stalls calling to women with baskets to try to sell what their master is offering. Banners are being raised between roof peaks, reds, and yellows, oranges, and greens of all shades to celebrate the harvest festival. I have never been in attendance and yet it is unmistakable the bright colours that light the sky, the foot-stomping music, and the wild cheers of dancing people late into the night. Too many of these people, harvest season, is the richest blessing a time to gather with family and rejoice in what the year has held.

I hear calls from inside a shop, a woman getting fussy with the baker's bread. Here, on the edge of nowhere, lies this town, a place to lose yourself or be found again—a place for outcasts. I belong here, and yet, my chains await me in the castle. I quicken my pace as the wind grows more robust and howls around me. At the doors to the court, I glance back once more; beyond this city lies freedom. All my time here, and not once have I ventured beyond the city walls. A nameless fear holds me back. It ensnares me, and for the present, it controls me.

CHAPTER 9

She was my daughter.

A part of her always will be.

Always so talented with words.

She could craft so much imagination in.

I remember how the light would dance in her eyes. I remember believing that she could see beauty in our broken world, that she took reality in but could also see endless possibility. She had mastered words quickly, but by eight, she was willfully wielding them with great strength. Maybe that is where her inequitable behaviour came from. Where the dreamer in her died to reality in a world that she could no longer see fulfillment. I remember hearing courtiers describe her at such a young age as quiet, shy, and with little presence. The society she was being raised in killed her spirit. They hung what was different about her. The uniqueness that ran through her veins. I was lucky to retain my memories, even the painful ones. We are the lucky ones to have memories. Many no longer do.

My daughter was gifted with an original gift, and many believed the traditions in witchcraft to be shameful. She could read minds. She knew people's thoughts, and her soul-piercing stare agitated those around her. She was innocent. I remember her running down the hall to my bedroom crying, falling asleep listening to my breathing. I remember her squeals of joy when we spent days by the ocean side. All the clans saw was her coldness, her drive for perfectionism, and her craft which they feared. Her desire to improve everything within her vicinity; to learn, grow and, challenge the normal. Those people took pieces of her, her smile, her laugh, her confidence.

Until one day,

all that was left was a shell,

and it destroyed our family.

CHAPTER 10

In a society where women are nothing unless feared, men are the pinnacle of what a clan has to offer. For years I watched as women were tossed aside for the strength and brutality of a man, and that grew me. I learned my place at a young age when my very life was threatened by those who held power. To be a man is to keep hands with life itself. In our society, a man can easily control who speaks and who does not. Their voice has much more power, and they are the ones who make all the decisions in our land. Unfortunately, that has resulted in much warfare. Men are more likely to fight without the logic of the situation, anger controls them, and for that, many fear what the future holds. Yet here, on the edge of the known world, women have a powerful key. We possess the power of the goddess. For that, the original Volur were granted the ability to read and manipulate the minds of men. But it is not just a gift, this curse also prevents us from ruling, and somehow, we need to get a new queen on the throne who is worthy before the new age of destruction takes grip of this world. From a very young age, I trained myself to listen to their mind more deeply, not stare but to focus. It has never been more needed until today.

As I open the castle doors, pushing aside piles of snow, my eyes glance upwards to the terraces. There stands a master, a trainer for my many years, his eyes focused on me, and I feel vulnerable and wanting. My body is frozen, and I think the frost glinting off the smoothness of my skin, and I shudder. I walk through grander white oak doors and see my handmade waiting. I follow her through the courtyard and towards the stairs that will lead to the lord's room. As I climb, a younger girl follows behind, momentarily pausing me as I step into a gown. She keeps pace, knotting the ribbons at my shoulders, buckling wolf's fur around my collar, and slipping on sandals on my feet. The dress draped around my skin is purple velvet, its touch against my skin soft and gentle. Few things still touch me this way, and I take comfort in this.

It is the blood that I can smell first as I enter the room, the drapes over the windows are pulled fast, and the only light emitting from the room is the glow of the fireplace, and yet, in this room, I am chilled to the bone. On every surface in the room, candles are lit, gleaming in the darkness. Across the room, the sun just peaks on the horizon through the cracked doors that lead to the terrace. There, through the door, I can just make out a figure. I stumble through the poorly lit room, past the shelves of books that whisper knowledge in the room. I pull open the door to the terrace, and the lord turns on his heels. Clasp my hands with a firm grip, he looks me up and down. Then ever so gently brushing my hair over my right shoulder and running his fingers down my arm. His eyes never meet mine. They are too focused. He spins me around and then walks me into his room. I sit on his bed, and he kisses my neck softly. I can read his mind, and his thoughts are dark. As my mind searches deeper within him, I find what I have been looking for. I slide off the bed gracefully and walk towards the fireplace where the chair has its back to me. There, drenched in blood, as if it were her clothing, is another of the girl. Her heart has long since stopped. The blood spilling from her vein's puddles at the base of the couch. She is a younger girl than me, her gifts developed, but she has not yet taken the oath.

"The seeker had her use; another shall replace her." the Lord says in a calm, matter-of-fact voice. It is true that though powerful, many die in the process of granting those they serve.

"I only hope you got what you sought." I respond, my voice level, and yet angry at the worthless loss of life.

"Come, child, he calls, his voice more severe, "let us not worry about what she saw, but rather what the dawn will bring. Do not deceive me, young daughter, for you know the mind and have seen what she has said, now tell me. Will the court rise?"

It only takes a second to understand his meaning—the connections to the history and what the seeker really did see.

“I saw that the prophecy has been opened, the tree of wisdom is speaking knowledge, and the kingdoms will fight again. The seer saw the prophecy.” My voice rattles ever so slightly, and the implications, the truths of what I am speaking are revealed to me.

“My lord, if this is true, why are you not more rattled? The dawn will rise red, the known world will know.”

“Hush, my child,” the lord says, taking my left arm and holding fast. “The prophecy may have been retold, but the court has also been preparing. You know the stories of old, how your gift is one of the originals, but we have been crafting more. Dawn may rise red, but the women of the court will rise with the dawn. Their blood oath will protect us. Prophecy or not, a new age will not come.” The lord kisses my arm, kneels, and prays to the goddess for life with these words. Once the prayer has passed, he looks me once more in the eyes before ushering me out of the room.

“You may have an original gift Aloisia, but you are a Volur; your blood pact will bind you.”

And with that, I leave the room in silence.

CHAPTER 11

I walk back to the castle with the words of the lord still resonating in my ears. Can it indeed be real? Many have been saying that the prophecies of old are coming true, but this feels like an unprecedented moment.

I enter the court; it is filled today with many of our clan's folk. Men waiting to hear of battle plans, women to see and gather information, merchants, and soldiers and all the like. As I walk to the doors to my castle, a woman stops before me; her hair is red, her dress black as ash and on her hip, she rests a young child. I move to walk around her, but she stops me, her eyes flaming with passion.

"My lord, will you not speak with us?" She is a woman of the dark; her hair is not done up like other court ladies, and the child on her hip bears a resemblance to her. She will be seeking money. I have no time for trivial games.

"My lord, she repeats, my husband has died at the front. Please grant me a court position so I might serve and not starve." I am inclined to believe she is lying until I see the ring on her finger and the pain in her eyes. She is so young, sixteen maybe.

"Come, I say, let me take you to someone who can help." and I direct her down a long passageway towards Maura's suit. As we walk, I can only pray Maura is in there, pouring over some fairy tales, and I desperately hope she will help this woman. Maura is the Viceroy's, wife, a lady in waiting, and she oversees most female staff. I only hope a position is open for this poor lady.

When we enter the room, it is empty. I ask the woman to take a seat and wander over to the balcony doors, which are cast ajar. There, sitting on the ledge, is Maura, her back leaning against a pillar gazing out across the courtyard beyond the castle walls and the ocean. Her blond hair blows in the wind, and her sapphire dress catches the wind and blows gently. Her head turns to me, her cheeks are flushed, and her baby blue eyes look at me with such ferocity and in trepidation. Her complexion conveys how she feels.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," my voice rattles, "I have a young woman here in great need of your attention."

Maura slides off the banister, walks towards me and places a hand gently over my breast pocket. Her eyes look up at me; though shorter, she stands with presence. My hand instinctively goes to her hair, brushing soft curls behind her left ear. Lifting her chin to mine. I kiss her cheek.

"I'm sorry for earlier. I was irrational. You were only telling me the truth." I apologize, and she seems to accept it. She then walks past me into her room.

"Maura, this young lady, lost her husband at the front. I. Well, we were hoping you might have a place at court for her." Before us, the young woman sets her child on the chaise lounge and comes to kneel at Maura's feet.

With tears in her eyes, she looks up to us, and cries "My lady, please let me serve! I beg of you to spare my life." Maura kneels beside this woman, I have seen her kindness a thousand times, and yet again, I am in awe.

"I shall give you the place as my maid. You shall be my assistant. I just lost my last one. She married a farmer." The young lady begins to cry softly, and Maura ushers her out of the room to her new room. I wait behind, knowing Maura will soon return. I have spent a few days in Maura's space. Often, it's too crowded with too many ladies, and they frighten me. I walk over to the mirror, staring in, and I look at my reflection. My hair is slightly matted, and I look sunken and tired. Not the dashing prince one might expect, I suppose. When Maura returns, she smiles at me. I see in her face that she is happy, and I hold my arms open. She rushes over and buries her head into my chest. We stay there for what must be forever, then she drags me back out onto the balcony. Together we sit, watching as the sun goes down over Alandra Bay. From here, I watch the merchant ships come in, lowering their masts. I dream of a day I can ride a boat for freedom, not to war.

"Have you been down to the docks recently?" Maura asks inquisitively.

"You mean to hear the sailor's stories?" I respond, wondering if she too dreams of sailing away from here one day.

"No, she replies, because they are bringing back the slaves." I wondered if you might want to see the horrors of what your viceroy has been up to." Her words do not shock me, the Viceroy has much power, and his wife is a greedy thing. Always dressed in jewels. Maura cannot stand her, but her mother constantly reminds her to hold her tongue and climb up the ranks.

"No, but I will talk to the men in a few days." I slide off the banister and turn Maura from the twilight. "Maura, I have loved you constantly like a sister. Must we change now to husband and wife? She looks deeply into my eyes, sorrow filling her eyes.

"Oh Priidik, the lords will change all rules, but let us not worry now. I sense that you seek adventure. And this coin is your ticket." she says as she pulls the coin from my pocket and places it back in my hands. "I just hope one day; you will return."