Chapter 1

A Bride Under an Ill Omen

“Take her home.”

One of the pale lines cut into the threshold of the Black Gate went dark beneath my heel. The man who’d spoken stood just inside the demons’ courtyard, staring at my boot. I’d practised kneeling in this dress. What was I supposed to do if he sent me back?

Behind me, the Black Gate stood open between the cliffs. The temple chronicles called it the Threshold of Mercy, and in the paintings seven golden gods waited above it to welcome their chosen brides. I looked up, but there was only bare rock. The wind went straight through the white silk of the dress they'd made me wear.

The man was tall and dark-haired, in a plain black coat with a sword at his side. There were no horns or claws, nothing like the creatures in the temple paintings. I might have put him at thirty if it hadn't been for his eyes—silver, with a narrow amber ring around each pupil. I ought to have been watching the sword. Instead, I noticed his high cheekbones and full mouth, one corner slightly higher than the other.

I’d prepared myself for a monster. Nobody had ever mentioned how unnaturally handsome he was.

He was still looking at the dark line by my boots when a guard under the arch noticed it too and put out an arm to bar the way.

“Moraeth,” the priest said sharply, holding up the royal decree of the Hallowed Choosing with its seal turned towards him. “By the will of the Seven and the authority of King Theodren, we bring you the bride chosen for you, that peace may endure between our realms.”

Moraeth didn’t look up. “She’s nine years early.”

The priest tightened his grip on the decree, and I did the same with my travelling bag. Father and I had asked why they were sending me before my time, but the priest had insisted the gods had changed their minds. So why hadn't anyone told the Demon King?

Moraeth looked at me for the first time, then turned back to the priest.

“The Seven have changed the order,” the priest said. “His Majesty received their command and carried it out without delay.”

The priest had used that same voice to read my name aloud at home, with soldiers waiting outside. Theodren had given us an hour to pack instead of the usual three days. The soldiers had brought the white dress with them, and Mother had spent most of that hour trying to make it fit me.

The royal seal caught the lantern light, and I remembered the date beneath it. I'd seen it at home while Father begged for more time. The decree had been signed two days before the gods were supposed to have given the order, and when I asked the priest how that was possible, he'd covered the date with his hand and told me not to question the will of the Seven.

Moraeth looked again at the darkened mark. “The order hasn't changed.” Then he turned back to the priest. “Take her home.”

At the carriage, Mother had held my hand until the coachman was ready to leave, and I'd been the one to pull away. Now the road home was right behind me, but I couldn't make myself take a step towards it.

Father had even offered to sell the south field if it would buy us more time. The priest's answer had been that a family could earn honour by doing its duty, or lose the Crown's protection by refusing. Mother had gone very quiet when he said that.

The priest stepped towards me as though that settled which of us would be getting back into the carriage. “There has been no mistake.”

“Please stop saying that,” I said, though my voice came out quieter than I'd intended. “If he refuses me and you take me back, what will happen to my family?”

The priest drew himself up. “His Majesty will consider what prevented the divine will from being carried out. It is not for me to anticipate his decision.”

Moraeth looked up at the flickering lines above the Gate. Even the guard who'd barred our way seemed uneasy. “Step away from the threshold,” Moraeth said, pointing towards a covered gallery. I was glad to move.

Under the arcade I kept the horned guard between me and the priest. Beyond his shoulder I could see the soldiers waiting by the carriage.

Moraeth had stopped a few paces away. I wanted him to look at me, but he was watching the Gate. “I don’t know why the Gate reacted to you. If you stay close to the old enchantments, things may get worse.”

“For me?”

“For everyone. You may feel it first.”

“If I go back now, the soldiers could come to our house for me.” Moraeth looked at the priest, and I was afraid they'd start arguing about me again. “May I stay here until you find out why they sent me?”

The priest gave an indignant snort.

Moraeth ignored him. “You’ll stay as a guest.”

I looked down at the white dress Mother had barely had time to alter. “Not as your wife?”

“No,” he said, without even pausing to consider it. “You’ll have rooms of your own. Nobody will dare lay a hand on you because some priest has decided you belong to me.”

I sat on the stone bench before my knees could give way. At home a guest had to thank a host at the door, in front of whoever had brought her. I'd practised that answer too. Moraeth let me sit there without saying it.

“And if I decide to leave later?”

“I won’t keep you here. If I have to, I’ll take you to the human side myself.” He pressed his lips together. “But I can’t answer for Theodren.”

Beyond the Gate I could still see the road home. My family would be waiting for news, and the priest would reach Theodren before any letter of mine.

“I’ll stay, if you’ll let me,” I said. “For now.”

The priest had barely opened his mouth when the paving stones trembled under my feet.

One of the grey-robed men near the threshold shouted as the light above the passage shivered. Moraeth spun round. “All humans out. Now.”

The priest tucked the decree inside his robe. “His Majesty requires confirmation that the Vowed has been received.”

The Vowed. That was what the temples called us, as though giving a woman the name meant she'd agreed to any of it.

Moraeth kept his eyes on the Gate. “He shall have it.”

The priests retreated through the Gate. The officer climbed into the carriage without a glance at me. He’d been ordered to deliver me, and he had. I wondered whether he’d so much as stop at our house to tell Father I was alive.

Moraeth laid a hand on the Gate and spoke. His voice was low, the sounds unlike any prayer I knew. I couldn’t have repeated a single word, yet for an instant I understood what he was telling the Gate to do.

Close.

Then the meaning was gone.

The stone doors began to move.

I watched the way home narrow to a strip of grey sky. First the carriage vanished. Then the soldiers. Then the road itself.

The Gate closed.

When the hoofbeats and the soldiers' voices died away, I could hear a chain striking the cliff somewhere above us. The priest would be on his way to Theodren now. I wondered whether he'd tell the king that Moraeth had refused the marriage, or find a way to make it sound like my doing.

I kept my eyes on the doors. For a moment I could almost hear Mother's voice, telling me to take a shawl because the evenings would be cold. She'd said it as though I might come home to complain about the weather.

The captain returned from the guardroom with a register and opened it on the stone bench. After writing the date, he began to write the word the priest had been calling me all morning.

Bride.

Moraeth saw it. “Enter her as a guest.”

The captain crossed the word out.

Moraeth looked at me. “What’s your name?”

Since arriving at the Gate, nobody had called me by my name. I'd been the bride, the Vowed, or simply her. Apparently my name hadn't been particularly important to the ceremony.

“Elythea.” I spelt it for him when he glanced towards the register.

“Elythea,” he repeated slowly. When the priest had spoken my name, it sounded as though he were reading out a sentence. Moraeth said it as though he wanted to remember.

I nodded as the captain finished writing my name and closed the book.

Behind him the pale line on the threshold was still dark.

Chapter 2

The Court Beyond the Veil

The captain introduced himself as Davor as he led me away from the Gate. I looked back twice before the road turned the corner, although the doors were shut tight and there was nothing more to see.

At the first bend, a guard started towards a narrow passage, but Davor shook his head.

“Not this way?” the guard asked.

“Not until someone’s checked the threshold.”

The guard glanced back towards the Gate. I wanted to know what had happened to the line beneath my feet, but Davor was already leading me towards a carriage waiting beside a low stone building.

I was relieved when Davor climbed in after me. I’d only just learnt his name, but I wasn’t ready to be handed over to another stranger. He settled opposite while I tried to get the white skirt out from under my boots. I’d have worn the wool dress if anyone had asked.

“Ossovar,” Davor said when the first roofs came into sight. On our maps the entire place was labelled Residence of the Demon King. I’d pictured a single castle. Ahead of us a sweep had climbed out of a chimney and was shouting to somebody below for his ladder.

The wheels began to hiss over a stretch of black grit. “Cinder Mile,” Davor said. On both sides people were brushing the stuff off their doorsteps in long narrow fans. I asked what had burned here. “The fires were out before my grandmother was born.” He

leaned across me to pull the window shut. A little grit had already settled in the folds of my white skirt.

As we passed a row of houses, I heard a woman calling a boy home. She sounded just like Mother when I'd stayed out too late, and for a few moments I forgot where I was. Then the white silk shifted against my legs as the carriage turned, bringing me back to the present.

Above the rooftops the sky was the colour of a fading bruise, though Davor assured me it was still day.

By the time we'd been travelling nearly an hour, the houses had grown farther apart. The castle stood above us on the hill, enormous against the strange sky. Its dark walls looked almost blue where the light touched them, and narrow bridges joined some of the towers. I tried to follow one of them across and lost it among the roofs.

I'd expected something grim. Instead, windows shone at all sorts of heights, as though the people inside had each decided where they wanted one. I liked it, though I hoped nobody had put my room right at the top.

"Nar-Ossovar," Davor said, following my gaze. "The old house on the hill."

I looked up at the towers again. It was an oddly ordinary name for a place like that.

Above the highest tower hung a pale moon, impossibly large. I leaned closer to the carriage window.

"Is it always that big?"

Davor followed my gaze. "Yes."

I went on looking. For a little while, I forgot to be cold.

The carriage passed beneath the castle's outer arch and stopped in a courtyard. Davor helped me down, and by the time we reached the doors my legs were stiff from sitting so long. Inside, the castle was warm, and somewhere nearby someone was cooking onions. After everything I'd imagined about the Demon King's castle, I hadn't expected it to smell so much like an ordinary kitchen.

A woman with short dark curls came to meet us in the entrance hall.

“This way, please. I’m Vessa. They’ve just told me you’ll be staying with us.”

She took me upstairs to a sitting room where someone was struggling to light the fire. Beyond it was a bedroom overlooking the courtyard.

Davor laid a key on the table. Before taking it, I checked the door and found that it locked from the inside.

“Who else has a key?”

Vessa lifted the ring at her belt. “I do. For cleaning, or if you need a hand.”

“And Moraeth?”

“The king knocks.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that I almost asked whether she was joking.

I looked from the lock to Vessa. “Does everyone here know I'm not to be his wife?”

Vessa's expression tightened, though she didn't seem surprised by the question.

“Everyone in the palace has been told you were received as a guest. Davor made sure of it before bringing you up here.”

“And if someone decides the priest’s word counts for more?”

“They’ll answer to Davor. Then to the king.” She paused. “Though if anyone tries anything of the sort in these rooms, I expect they’ll have me to deal with first.”

I smiled despite myself. “And if I want to be left alone?”

“Say so. I’ve plenty else to do.”

I noticed two old screw holes above the lock.

“There used to be a bolt here,” Vessa said, following my gaze. “We can put it back.”

“Please.”

Davor glanced sideways at the chair by the door.

“Just don’t wedge it under the handle while you’re waiting for the bolt. If there’s a fire, we need to be able to get to you.”

My cheeks warmed slightly. I'd already been wondering whether the chair would fit.

Davor was kind enough to pretend he hadn’t noticed.

When they left me to change, I took the wool dress Mother had packed out of my bag. The white silk caught on my heel as I moved, and I looked down at the uneven hem.

Mother had spent most of the hour we'd been given to say goodbye trying to make the dress fit, while the soldiers waited downstairs. It had been too long and too wide in the shoulders, and she'd let out the seam at the hips before turning up the hem.

Mother's hands were shaking so badly she couldn't thread the needle, and for once she didn't tell me to do it for her. I held out my hand, and after a moment she passed it to me.

“I’ve packed your warm stockings,” she said, watching me thread the needle. “And the brown shawl. The blue one catches on everything.”

“Did you pack my comb?”

“Side pocket.”

“And the little scissors?”

She stopped sewing.

“Elythea, you can open the bag and look.”

“I don’t want to open it. Just tell me.”

I was still holding the wool dress when Vessa returned with hot water. She stopped in the doorway when she saw I hadn't managed to get out of the silk.

“Would you like a hand?”

“Yes.”

She waited for me to turn my back before she touched the hooks.

I could still hear Mother telling me where she'd put the soap and teasing me for leaving the lavender one in her drawer.

The white silk made my skin look grey and my blue eyes far too bright. Mother had insisted it was only the dress.

Once Vessa had undone the last hook, I stepped out of the white dress and left it where it fell. Neither of us moved.

“Mother only turned up that hem this morning,” I said, almost apologising for the crooked stitches.

Vessa looked at the hem. “She was probably in a hurry.”

“She only had an hour.”

Vessa didn't answer, only bent to fold the dress.

That morning, when I'd tried to thank Mother, she'd left the needle sticking out of the hem and put her arms around me.

“I’m frightened,” I whispered.

“I know.”

When I pulled on my boots, she hadn't even glanced at the soft white shoes they'd sent with the dress. She'd plaited my hair the way she always did for a journey, resting her cheek against my head for a moment before she finished.

Vessa put the folded white dress in the chest at the foot of the bed. “Would you like me to put it somewhere else?”

“No.” I pulled the wool dress over my head. “Leave it there.”

The carpenter came before the fire died down. Vessa waited for my nod before she let him in. When he’d finished, I slid the bolt home myself. Only when I heard it click did I feel like eating.

I hadn't realised how hungry I was until my spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl. Then I remembered the bread Mother had packed and ate it as well, right down to the last crust.

When Vessa took the tray away, I checked the window latch and left my boots beside the bed where I could find them in the dark.

Before bed, I wrote to my parents that I'd arrived safely and had a room of my own. I nearly told them Moraeth had tried to send me back, but stopped.

The priest would reach Theodren before my letter reached home, and I didn't know whose hands it might pass through on the way.

I sat for a while, trying to think what else I could safely tell them. In the end, I wrote that I'd eaten the bread.

I folded the letter and left it beside my notebook.

Before drawing the curtains, I looked down into the courtyard.

A woman with horns crossed the yard, balancing a basket against her hip and a sleepy child against her shoulder. Nearby, two men were rolling a barrel towards the kitchen door, arguing over whose idea it had been to take it such a bumpy way.

Someone laughed at a window upstairs.

One man lost his grip on the barrel, and the other caught it with his knee, swearing so loudly that the woman passing with her child told them both to keep the noise down.

I rested my forehead against the cold glass. Mother would have liked that woman. I could almost hear her telling those men to stop arguing and get on with it.

I left the curtain a little way open and went to bed, though I lay awake for a long time listening to the unfamiliar house creak and settle. When I was finally beginning to drift off, I heard something beneath the floor.

It was so faint I might have imagined it, but for a moment I understood what it was saying.

Come.

I sat up in bed.

The room was quiet.

I looked at the door and then at the new bolt. Whatever I'd heard, I wasn't going to open the door to find out.

Chapter 3

Traces of a Forgotten Life

Vessa knocked the next morning. I was still half asleep when I remembered the bolt I'd insisted on having fitted the night before.

“Just a moment.”

I climbed out of bed, slid it back and opened the door.

“Good morning,” Vessa said, carrying a breakfast tray.

The light beyond the curtains was silver. I'd woken twice expecting the familiar gold of sunrise, but apparently this was dawn in Ossovar.

After breakfast, I went looking for my notebook and found a small wooden horse tucked inside one of my stockings.

One ear was longer than the other. Father had carved it when I was seven. Or eight. Mother always said I confused that winter with the next.

The morning before I left, she'd put it in my hand.

“Remember when the river froze?”

“I remember Papa cutting his thumb.”

“That was the following winter. He was making a chair.”

I hadn't argued. I could still see the blood on the snow, though, and the little horse sitting unfinished on Father's workbench.

I turned it over now, rubbing my thumb along the crooked ear.

While Mother struggled with the dress, Father had searched his desk for my birth record. He'd stood holding it in front of the priest, as though my age might persuade the man to leave us alone.

The priest hadn't even looked.

Under the record were the papers from an examination I'd had as a child. I remembered the clerk telling Father there must have been a copying mistake. One note called for another examination if the reaction persisted, but nobody had ever sent for me again.

I'd slipped the paper into my notebook before we left.

Father had been worrying about the spring planting, too. I remembered pointing out where he'd put the seed money.

“I know where it is,” he'd said.

“I only meant—”

“I know.” He'd tried to smile. “You don't have to put everything in order before you go.”

I opened my notebook to the last page I'd written on at home. There, I'd copied a name from the temple notice hanging above Father's desk.

Neris Ovanrel.

Twenty-one. Sent through the Gate eleven months before me.

The temple called it a remembrance of the lost, but Neris’s name hadn’t been read out. I wanted to take that as a sign she was alive. It might just as easily mean nobody had bothered to find out.

I wrote beneath her name: Ask what happened to Neris.

Mother and Father would be waiting for news. I’d send my letter first.

Then I sat for a while with the horse in my lap.

On the journey here, I'd asked the priest what would happen if Moraeth refused me.

“The Seven chose you,” he'd said. “Concern yourself with your part in the rite.”

Well, Moraeth had refused. And the priest had left me here anyway.

I wrapped the horse in the stocking again and put it away.

Whatever else I learnt about this place, I wasn't going to learn it from the temple.

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I had my letter in my hand when I found the petition hall. Davor had mentioned it the night before, and I'd followed the voices downstairs. With any luck, someone would take it before I thought of another reason to put off sending it.

Moraeth sat at the end of a long table. A woman with flour on her cuffs stood opposite him, arguing with an official over a shipment of grain.

“It's sitting at the southern crossing,” the official said.

“In the rain,” she replied.

“Under a tarpaulin.”

“That leaks.”

“Then take the upper road.”

“The permits don't allow it,” the woman said.

I knew that sort of trouble. Father had nearly lost a shipment once because a merchant used a road he wasn't authorised to take.

“Wouldn't they need a different permit for that?” I asked from the doorway.

All three turned towards me.

I hadn't meant to interrupt quite so loudly.

“At least, that's how it works where I come from,” I added. “My father once had a merchant fined for taking the wrong road.”

Moraeth drew the map back towards him before the official could put it away.

“Get her enough grain to keep the mill running,” he said. “Then find out who made the upper road unusable for deliveries.”

“The permits—”

“Are what you're going to look into. Send an escort in the meantime.”

The woman thanked him and left. The official followed, carrying the map with considerably less enthusiasm.

Moraeth came round the table.

“Next time you want to discuss a map, come close enough to see it.”

“I heard your official perfectly well from the door.”

“So did I.”

His mouth moved at one corner.

I caught myself looking and glanced away.

He noticed, of course.

“Did you need something?”

I held up the letter I'd written to my parents. “Vessa said there was a clerk who could send this.”

“By the entrance. Though anything going south passes through the royal chanceries. You should assume someone will read it.”

“I thought they might.”

I looked at the folded paper. I'd spent half the night deciding what I dared tell Mother and Father. Apparently even that might be too much.

“Will it actually reach them?”

“I'll see that it's sent,” he said. “What happens after it crosses the border is another matter.”

I thanked him and took the letter to the clerk.

At least my parents might know I'd arrived.

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I meant to ask about Neris next, but I kept imagining someone telling me she was dead. I'd find the garden first. Davor's directions had sounded simple enough.

Instead, I ended up on a gallery overlooking a service yard. Three kitchen boys were carrying onions under an awning, and a woman with a tail tucked beneath her apron was arguing with a cooper over a barrel.

Nobody was doing anything particularly demonic.

A girl came across the yard with folded linen stacked almost to her chin. She looked up at me, missed the post in front of her by inches and stopped.

"Sorry!"

"You're the one carrying all that. I should probably apologise."

She smiled. "You're the guest."

"I seem to be."

Her gaze went to my wool dress and the ribbon at the end of my braid.

"They said you came in white."

"They seem to say a lot of things."

Her smile faltered, and I regretted my tone.

"What do they say about us?" she asked.

I thought of the temple paintings. Horns, black teeth, flames. Women kneeling before a monster.

"Mostly that I shouldn't be standing here talking to you."

"Then perhaps I ought to look more terrifying."

“You could drop those sheets on me.”

She laughed, and one of the boys below looked up.

“What do you say about humans?” I asked.

“That you put bells on everything.”

“Everything?”

“Doors. Carts. Cows. Your merchants bring bells for doors even when there's somebody standing right beside them.”

“We like to know when something's happening.”

“You have eyes.”

“That hasn't stopped us yet.”

She shifted the linen against her hip.

“My aunt says you take curtains very seriously.”

“She's right about that.”

A woman called from below. “Mira! Those beds won't make themselves.”

Mira rolled her eyes. I knew that expression well enough.

“I'd better go.”

“I was looking for the garden, actually.”

“Through that arch, down the stairs and left at the painted door. Not the stone stairs.”

“What's wrong with the stone stairs?”

“They're closed.”

“Right. Thank you.”

I followed her directions, or thought I did.

Near the painted door, two men were talking around the corner.

“The human girl's letter goes with tomorrow morning's courier.”

“Does she know they're read?”

“The king told her.”

I stopped. It was one thing to know strangers might open my letter. Quite another to hear them discussing it as though I were a parcel waiting to be dispatched.

A man carrying a leather bag appeared around the corner. He had short horns and ink on two fingers.

“Mistress.”

“That's my letter you're talking about.”

He looked uncomfortable. “It's sealed for the southern chancery.”

I almost asked whether I could have it back. But what would I tell Mother and Father if I didn't write at all?

“Could you tell me when it goes? And if there's an answer?”

“Both will be in the dispatch journal.”

“Could I see it?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

He made a note of the request, and I went through the painted door. The stairs beyond it were steeper than I'd expected.

For a while I thought I'd taken another wrong turn. Then a door opened below, and I caught the smell of damp earth.

The garden, at last.

Two gardeners were tying bare branches against a wall. A little girl sat on an overturned bucket, sorting bulbs into piles that made sense to her, if nobody else.

One of the gardeners sent me through an arch, then called me back when she realised she'd directed me to the laundry.

“The other way, love.”

I tried again.

Beyond the garden wall, Ossovar spread across the hillside. Chimneys smoked above the rooftops, and somewhere in the city a bell rang.

The little girl was still sorting her bulbs when I looked back. I hoped nobody was waiting to plant them. She seemed quite happy with her piles, and I was in no hurry to leave either.

By the time I moved away from the wall, the cold had crept through my wool dress.

On the way back, I found a staircase I didn't remember passing before.

It descended into darkness. At the bottom stood a barred door with a strip of metal fixed across it. Something had been carved into the metal, though I was too far away to read it.

Then a pressure began behind my eyes.

I caught the railing.

It wasn't exactly pain. More like the feeling of trying to remember a word that wouldn't come.

The marks on the metal seemed to shift. I knew they weren't moving, but I couldn't make them stay still.

And then, just as at the Gate, I understood.

Open.

I took a step back.

A guard rose from an alcove beside the stairs.

“This passage is closed.”

“I can see that.”

My voice sounded thin.

He came up two steps. “Davor ordered the lower passages closed yesterday. I'll show you the way back.”

“Because of what happened at the Gate?”

He looked towards the barred door instead of answering.

The pressure behind my eyes had become a dull throb. I followed him upstairs without asking again.

Outside, the gardeners were loading cut branches into a cart. I stood in the cold until my head began to clear.

The word stayed with me.

Open.

Moraeth had told the Gate to close, and I'd understood him. Now something behind a locked door seemed to be asking the opposite.

I didn't like either possibility.

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When I returned to my rooms, Vessa was waiting with a sealed letter.

“The escort brought this with your things yesterday,” she said. “It was marked for delivery after your arrival.”

I recognised Theodren's seal.

For a moment I wondered whether there might be news of my family. I broke it open before Vessa had quite finished speaking.

The king praised my obedience and the honour I'd brought to my family. Then came his instructions: I was to report whether Moraeth had accepted the offering.

Not a word about Mother or Father.

Of course, the letter had been written before I'd even crossed the Gate. Theodren couldn't have known Moraeth would refuse me.

But he'd known I was being sent nine years early. He'd signed the order before the gods supposedly gave it.

I read the letter again. There was nothing about that either.

Vessa was still by the door.

“Bad news?” she asked.

“Not exactly.”

I folded the letter, then opened it again. As though I might find something different the third time.

“The king wants to know if Moraeth accepted me.”

Vessa glanced at the white dress folded in the chest.

“He didn't,” she said.

“No.”

She waited, but I couldn't think what else to tell her.

After she'd gone, I took out my notebook and turned to Neris Ovanrel's name.

Eleven months ago, another woman had come through the Gate. I hadn’t seen her name on the memorial list, but nobody at home had spoken as though she might still be alive.

Someone here must remember her.

When Vessa returned to ask what I wanted for supper, I put the question to her.

“Do you know anyone who was here when the last bride arrived?”

“Maera might. She's worked in the west wing longer than I have.”

“Could I speak to her?”

“She starts early in the old kitchen.”

“Then I'll come early too.”

Chapter 4

The Bride Who Knew No Rest

The next morning I went looking for the old kitchen before Vessa brought breakfast. She'd told me which corridor to take, and for once I found it without getting lost.

In the courtyard, the wind stirred the nearly black leaves of a dusk ash. Their undersides flashed silver. I'd mistaken it for frost the day before.

The smell of toast led me through an open door.

An elderly woman sat at a table, scraping the burnt side of a slice of bread with a knife. Her grey hair was coming loose from its pins, and she had a little flour on one sleeve.

I knocked.

She looked up. My eyes went to her forehead before I could stop them.

“No horns,” she said. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“I wasn't looking for—”

“Of course not. Come in. There's bread.”

I stepped inside.

“I'm looking for Maera. Vessa said she'd be here.”

“You've found her.” She pushed out a chair with her foot. “And you're Elythea.”

“Has everyone heard about me?”

“Everyone who was awake yesterday. Sit down.”

She pushed a plate of bread towards me.

“Vessa said you might know Neris Ovanrel. She came through the Gate eleven months ago.”

“Of course I know Neris. She's at the infirmary this morning.”

“Oh. I thought—” I stopped. “How long have you been here?”

“Fifty years, give or take.”

I stared at her.

“You came through the Gate too?”

“When I was nineteen.”

“But your name's on the memorial list. I've seen it.”

“I know, dear.”

She took another piece of bread, as though we were discussing something perfectly ordinary.

Fifty years. She'd been nineteen when they sent her here, and now she was sitting in front of me with grey hair and flour on her sleeve. Alive.

“But Neris isn't on the latest list.”

“Not yet, perhaps.”

“Does your family know?”

Maera's expression changed.

“They knew I crossed the Gate. What they were told afterwards, I couldn't say.”

She reached for a wooden sewing box beside her cup and opened it. Inside were needles, tangled thread and a faded blue ribbon.

“My mother gave me this before I left. She was convinced the dress would tear and I'd have nobody to mend it.”

I touched the cuff of my wool dress. Mother had spent almost our entire last hour trying to make the white one fit.

“Did she ever find out you were alive?”

“I don't know.”

Maera shut the box.

“Neris should be back from the infirmary soon. But tell me, why did they send you nine years early?”

I told her about the soldiers arriving with the dress, the royal order and the priest insisting the Seven had changed their minds.

“They gave us an hour,” I said.

Maera put her toast down.

“And Moraeth?”

“He wanted to send me home.”

“Did he?”

“I asked to stay. The priest wouldn't tell me what would happen to my family if I went back.”

Maera looked at me for a long moment.

“He should have told you about us,” she said at last.

“I didn't know there was an us.”

“No. I suppose you wouldn't.”

“Are there many of you?”

“More than you'd think.”

“And nobody at home knows?”

“Some might. Not everyone believes the temples.”

I looked at the sewing box. Maera's mother had packed it fifty years ago. I wondered whether she'd lived long enough to learn that her daughter was still alive.

“Did you ever write to her?”

“I tried.”

She pushed the plate towards me. “Eat something before we go.”

I broke off a corner of bread, but couldn't swallow it. I left the rest on the plate and followed her outside.

***

The rooms around the next courtyard had washing hanging along the upper gallery. A woman in a leather apron was trying to button a little boy's jacket while he reached for something on the step.

“Tavia,” Maera called.

“Give me a moment. He's got something he shouldn't.”

The boy protested as Tavia retrieved a small chisel from his pocket.

“Again? Where did you find that?”

He pointed towards the workshop.

“Of course you did.”

A man with short horns came through the arch pushing a wheelbarrow. The boy immediately ran towards him.

“Check his other pocket,” Tavia told the man.

He did, producing a handful of wood shavings and a nail.

Tavia held out her hand for the nail. The boy sighed as though she'd ruined his entire morning.

“This is Elythea,” Maera said. “Tavia crossed thirty years ago.”

Tavia glanced at me. “The new girl? I heard.”

The boy caught his father's hand, and the two of them went towards the workshop.

“Is he yours?” I asked.

“Unless somebody's been leaving children on my doorstep again.”

I laughed, watching the boy tug his father towards the workshop. I couldn't imagine marrying someone here, having children. I'd left my boots beside the bed in case I needed to run.

“Did you choose to marry him?”

Tavia looked at me.

“Well, I didn't marry him by accident.”

“No, I meant—”

“I know what you meant.” She smiled. “Yes. Though he took some convincing.”

“You made him ask four times,” Maera said.

From the workshop, her husband called, “I can hear you!”

“Good,” Tavia called back.

I smiled despite myself.

She tucked the chisel into her belt. “Come and see the workshop sometime. I need someone to tell him his chairs are too high.”

She went after her family before I could answer.

Maera was still smiling when a young woman came through the arch with a basket of empty bottles.

“Neris,” she called. “There's someone to meet you.”

She was close to my age, with dark hair falling across her forehead and a small cut on one knuckle. There was a stain on her sleeve. Nothing about her looked like the tragic figure I'd imagined from the temple notice.

“I'm Elythea,” I said. “My father kept the notice from when you crossed.”

Neris looked from me to Maera. “I heard someone came early.”

“Nine years.”

“Gods.”

I opened my notebook to her name.

“At home, they read the names of the lost at the temple. Yours wasn't on the latest list. I didn't know whether that meant—”

“That I was alive?”

“Yes.”

“I am.”

She said it simply, but her eyes stayed on the page.

“My mother still goes to the remembrance service,” she said. “Every year.”

“Doesn't she know you're alive?”

“I've written.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

She looked away.

“Eleven months. Not one word back.”

I thought of my own letter, somewhere on its way south. Or perhaps still sitting in the chancery.

“Maybe she hasn't received them.”

“That's what I keep telling myself.”

I looked down at her name in my notebook. I'd been so relieved to get my letter sent.

***

A woman standing in a doorway behind Neris had been listening. She wore a dark dress, her hair pulled back tightly enough to show a pale scar near her temple.

“Tell her the rest, Maera.”

Maera's smile disappeared.

“Irdovan—”

“No. She deserves to know.”

Irdovan stepped into the courtyard.

“You're wondering why we don't go home.”

I hadn't said it aloud, but she was right.

“Moraeth told me he'd take me back if I wanted. He said he couldn't answer for what Theodren would do afterwards.”

“And he was telling you the truth.”

“Did you try?”

“Yes.”

Irdovan folded her arms, then unfolded them.

“I asked to return. The answer came back that anyone claiming to be me was an impostor. A creature wearing my face. My family was ordered to report me if I appeared at their door.”

I looked at Maera, but she didn't contradict her.

“They threatened my family too,” I said. “Before I crossed.”

“Then you know why getting as far as the border isn't the same as going home.”

Neris sat on the low wall beside her basket.

“What happened to your family?” I asked Irdovan.

“My father died while I was still asking permission to see him. I heard about it months later, from a merchant.”

She said it evenly, but she was pulling at the edge of her sleeve.

“I've got a life here now. People I care about.”

Irdovan looked down at her hands. “But my father…”

She stopped.

“I didn't even get to say goodbye.”

Maera looked down. “I wasn't trying to make it sound that way.”

“You do sometimes.”

Tavia's little boy called out from the step outside the workshop. Somewhere above us a window opened and someone complained about the noise.

For a moment none of us spoke.

“I like it here,” Neris said. “Most days. But if Mother called me home tomorrow, I'd go.”

Irdovan looked at her.

“Wouldn't you?” Neris asked.

“I don't know anymore.”

She looked away before Neris could answer.

“I used to think I'd go home the moment they let me.”

“And now?” Neris asked.

“Now?” Irdovan gave a small shrug. “I don't know. It's been years.”

I’d asked Moraeth to let me stay until he found out why I’d been sent. It hadn’t occurred to me he might measure the wait in years.

A bell rang somewhere inside the wing. I turned towards the sound.

“Work bell,” Maera said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“What work?”

Neris glanced at Maera.

“The seals,” Maera said. “We keep an eye on them. The Gate's part of it.”

“Like the lines that went dark when I arrived?”

Maera stopped.

“What happened at the Gate?”

“One of the marks went dark under my foot. Moraeth noticed. Then he spoke to the Gate, and it closed.”

“What did he say?”

“I couldn't repeat them. But for a moment I knew what they meant. He was telling it to close.”

Maera and Irdovan exchanged a look.

Before either could answer, a dull crack sounded beneath the courtyard.

Neris stood up so quickly her basket tipped sideways.

Under the arch, a pale line set into the stone went dark.

“Get the boy inside,” Tavia called from the workshop.

Her husband scooped their son off the step and carried him to her. The child began to protest, but stopped when he saw his mother's face.

The line faded another few inches.

Something pressed behind my eyes, the same awful sensation I'd felt at the barred door yesterday.

And beneath the scrape of stone, I understood one word.

Below.

I caught Maera's arm. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

The pressure vanished. A moment later the line began to glow again, faintly at first.

Irdovan crouched by the arch.

“This was checked this morning.”

“I know,” Maera said.

Neris moved the basket away from the steps. Tavia disappeared into the workshop with her son, shutting the door behind them.

“What's happening?” I asked.

Maera was watching the light return.

“Something that shouldn't.”

She called a guard to watch the arch while Irdovan examined the stone. I waited for Maera to tell me it was all right now. She kept watching the light.

“I want to speak to Moraeth,” I said. “He never told me about any of this.”

“We need to tell him about the seal, too,” Irdovan said.

Maera nodded towards the guard. “He can watch the arch until we're back.”

In the courtyard I opened my notebook to Neris’s name. Underneath I wrote Still here, added today’s date and closed the book.

“Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” Maera said.

Irdovan went to fetch her shawl.

Neris picked up her basket. “I'll stay. Someone has to tell Tavia when it's safe to let the boy out again.”

Maera returned from the kitchen with a piece of bread wrapped in cloth and pressed it into my hand.

“You haven't eaten.”

“I was going to.”

“Eat while we walk.”

I took a bite as we crossed the courtyard. It was the same bread she'd offered me earlier, still slightly burnt along one edge.

At the council chamber, the guard recognised Maera and Irdovan and let us through.

Moraeth was standing beside the long table when we entered.

“You could have told me about the other women,” I said. “I thought they were dead.”

“You arrived nine years early, and a seal failed under your feet. I had other concerns.”

I'd had a few concerns myself. Staying alive, mostly.

“Maera says they work on the seals. Is that why we're sent here?”

Chapter 5

Keepers of the Unspoken

"The women are chosen to renew them," Moraeth said. "Why the temples sent you early is another matter."

I'd rather hoped we might begin with that.

But Maera was telling him about the courtyard, and I wanted someone to look at the arch before Tavia's little boy found his way back to it. I could wait.

Moraeth sent a guard to fetch Davor and keep everyone away from the passage. Then he took us into the smaller room beyond the council chamber. I sat beside Maera. Irdovan stayed near the table, her shawl gathered around her.

The seals answered to certain human families, he explained. Something of the first binding had passed down through them. The temples tested the children and chose a woman every ten years.

"I was tested when I was little," I said. "They wanted another examination, but nobody ever sent for me."

I'd have been quite happy for them to go on forgetting me.

"I've still got the paper, if it would help."

"Let Holun see it," Maera said. "Our archivist. He keeps some of the old examination records." She turned to Moraeth. "She understood you at the Gate."

"You told it to close," I said. "I couldn't repeat the words."

"I'll speak to Holun myself," Moraeth said.

"And the wedding?" I asked Moraeth.

"Was never part of it."

Mother would have had a few things to say about that dress. She'd spent most of our last hour taking it in for me.

I wished I were home to hear them.

Maera called the work the Keeping. She described a few hours at a seal, then going home hungry and tired. The strength came back after you'd rested.

She spoke so comfortably about it that I found myself imagining coming back with her. Knowing where to go, what to do with my hands. Being tired because I'd done something useful. Perhaps helping with supper, if she trusted me in her kitchen.

Then I remembered the light going out under the arch.

"What about a damaged one?"

"That can hurt you. Badly, if it breaks while you're working on it. Two Keepers died when the three cities fell. They'd gone from the first failing seal to the next, trying to hold them."

Irdovan had known that when she crouched beside the stone. I'd been standing behind her, waiting for her to do something.

I looked at her, but she was watching Maera.

"We teach their names to every new Keeper," Maera said. "That's part of the Night of Three Fires here."

The Sundering of the Three Cities. We lit lamps for the dead every year. I'd stood beside my parents and listened to the story often enough to know whole passages of it.

"A human king tried to draw power from one of the seals," Moraeth said. "His attempt broke them."

"They told us the demons did it."

"It was easier to blame what came through."

I wasn't ready to take his word for that. I would ask Maera later, when I could ask all the questions I wanted without wondering whether one of them would offend him.

"Afterwards, I agreed to keep the purpose of the crossings secret," he continued. "The human court would continue to send a Keeper every ten years."

"And our families?"

"The women who reached me were protected. I could enforce that here."

I thought of Irdovan trying to get home to her father. I was still working out how to ask what protection had done for her when she spoke.

"He supported my petitions. His seal's on them. It made no difference."

I hadn't known that. I was glad she'd spoken before I asked him why he'd done nothing.

"I've kept every refusal."

There was an empty chair beside me. I drew it back a little for her. She rested a hand on it but stayed standing, and I left it there.

Moraeth could hold a damaged connection long enough for a Keeper to work, he told me. He couldn't renew it himself. For that, they still needed women like Maera and Irdovan.

Did they have to do it for the rest of their lives? Maera had been here fifty years. Perhaps I already had my answer.

Irdovan began explaining the other ways they'd been trying. I lost some of it among the newer workings and the old bindings, but I understood her frustration. The

newer workings still depended on the old seals. Every time something failed, they had to put the research aside to repair it.

"Then work with Holun," Moraeth told her. "I'll have your checks covered."

She sat down at last.

"The mark at the Gate was restored that night," he said to me. "Now another seal has failed near you. Until I know why, you won't be going through it again."

"You said you'd take me back if I wanted."

"Through a working Gate. I won't take you near it until I know why they keep failing around you."

I hadn't decided to go home. There were still all the reasons I'd asked to stay, and I didn't know what would happen to my parents if I turned up on their doorstep.

But I'd liked knowing I could change my mind.

I wanted to argue. Unfortunately, I'd been in the courtyard too.

"And you expect me to work on them?"

"I expect you to leave them alone until we know what happened."

"Of course."

I'd rather thought I had been.

I hadn't gone looking for a seal to interfere with. I'd gone looking for Neris.

"Do I need to keep away from them altogether?" I asked. "Because I don't always know where they are."

"For now. Maera will show you."

"I will," she said.

I was grateful she made it sound like something we could manage.

As we left, I recognised the clerk who'd taken my letter.

“Excuse me—has it gone?”

“With the morning courier.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

I moved out of his way with half a dozen questions still on my tongue. How were the roads? How long would the journey take? Did he think I’d get an answer?

He’d sent the letter. It was hardly fair to expect him to make my parents write back as well.

Still, I watched him go, wishing I’d asked about the roads.

***

Maera took me to Holun in the archives behind the library, pointing out the seals we passed. I wanted him to recognise something in the examination paper. A mistake he’d seen before, perhaps, or a word that meant nothing to me but would explain everything to him.

He read it twice.

“What did they tell your father afterwards?”

“That there’d been a mistake. Something copied wrong.”

“Hm.”

I waited while he fetched another examination record and laid it beside mine.

In that one, the examiner had written how the stone responded. In mine, the entries skipped straight past it.

“Your result isn’t here,” Holun said. “There’s a number missing too.”

I read both pages again. The blank looked quite ordinary. I’d looked at it yesterday and seen nothing to worry about.

“Someone left it out?”

"Something was left out. I'd like to see the original before I tell you why."

I had rather hoped he'd be willing to make a few reckless guesses. I'd been making them myself since we left Moraeth, and they weren't getting any more reassuring.

"Keep it," I said. "Whatever you need to compare it with."

While Holun went in search of an older register, I was left staring at the two examinations. I couldn't make the missing words appear by looking harder. I'd tried.

The book near my elbow was a copy of the human register of crossings. I turned to the last entries, looking for my own name.

It wasn't there.

Neris Ovanrel was.

Died.

I read the date. She hadn't even been named at the remembrance service yet. At home, I'd taken that as a reason to hope.

For a moment I saw Father unfolding another notice. My name instead of hers.

I reached for a pencil.

"Leave their wording legible," Holun said from behind me.

I crossed it out once. I wanted to go over it until nothing showed through, but he was right. Beside it I wrote: Alive. Spoke to her this morning.

"They've put me in already?"

I hadn't heard Neris come in. She was standing beside Maera, a book under one arm and her basket of bottles in the other hand.

"It's a copy of theirs," I said.

"I know."

She left the book she'd brought back on Holun's table and pulled up a chair beside me. Her eyes stayed on the line I'd drawn.

"You've written about me in yours too, haven't you?"

I opened my notebook to the page I'd shown her that morning. Still here, I'd written beneath her name in the courtyard.

"Would you add that you've met me?" she asked. "That you know I'm here."

I wrote that we'd spoken that morning and were sitting together now in Holun's archives.

"I could copy it for your mother."

Neris was quiet for so long that I began to regret offering.

"Keep it here for now," she said. "If she answered, and they found the letter…"

I nearly said her mother would be careful. Then I remembered how quiet mine had gone when the priest threatened to withdraw the Crown's protection. Mother had been careful all her life. It hadn't kept the soldiers out of our house.

"I won't send it," I said.

"I do want her to know."

"I know."

Neris put a hand on the open page, as though she might take it after all.

"I just don't know what she'd do."

We sat there for a little while. Then she looked at the basket by her feet.

"I ought to get these back. They'll think I've broken them."

"Have you?"

"Not these."

I laughed, and she smiled back before going to speak to Holun.

Maera glanced at the register.

“The woman above Neris married the baker by the south wall,” she said. “You’ve probably eaten his bread.”

I found the name. I remembered copying it at home, when there hadn’t seemed to be anything else to know.

“Does she work on the seals too?”

“Yes. She’ll tell you about it, if you ask her.”

Maera knew several of the other women on the page. I put their names in my notebook and added what she could tell me about them. Holun supplied a few details, but there were things I’d have to ask the women themselves.

Irdovan had joined us by then and was going through her father’s petitions at the other end of the table. I could hear her disagreeing with Holun over the order of two letters.

My examination paper still lay between the books. Every time I caught sight of it, I wanted to ask whether he’d found anything yet.

***

The register he brought me next was nearly three hundred years old.

“One of your family’s names turns up here.”

I bent over it before he’d quite finished making room. There was something familiar at last. Faded ink, but I could read it.

The pages after it had been cut out close to the binding.

I eased the book wider. A strip of paper still clung to the stitching.

“Is there another copy?”

“I haven’t found one this old.”

I nearly asked him to look again, though I knew he had only just found this one.

On a surviving page he showed me a reference to the Central Binding. Someone had written Deep Hold beside it in a different hand.

“Are those the same thing?”

“I don’t know. The second note’s older than most of the writing around it.”

Below.

I remembered the pressure behind my eyes in the courtyard. I hadn’t heard the word the way I could hear Holun speaking now, and I still couldn’t explain how I’d understood it.

I looked at the floor.

“Could this have something to do with my examination?”

“We need the result first,” Maera said. “Then we can see.”

I copied the two names into my notebook.

“Have you got anything I could read about the seals?” I asked Holun. “Something basic.”

If I was going to stay, I wanted to know what I ought to be afraid of.

Maera and Irdovan left for the lower courtyard while Holun went to find a book. I stayed with the old register, trying to make out the writing on the narrow strip of cut paper.

“Has he found anything?”

Moraeth stood at the end of the shelves.

“The result’s missing from my examination. And someone’s cut pages out of this.”

He came to look.

"The ones after my family's entry," I said. "Holun hasn't found another copy."

Moraeth bent over the book. I watched his face instead of the page.

"Did you know they'd tested me?"

"Not before you told us. Did the priest mention it when he came for you?"

"No. He had plenty to say about the gods."

"Nothing about why you were chosen?"

"I had an hour to pack."

He waited.

"That's all they gave us. Father was still arguing when the soldiers came upstairs."

I hadn't meant to tell him that part. I could hear Father again, insisting that somebody must have copied the date wrong. He'd kept saying it after it was clear the priest wasn't going to listen.

"You keep looking at me as though I might have something dangerous in my bag."

"I don't know what you brought through the Gate. Or what they did to you before you came."

"What they did to me?"

"That examination had a result. Someone decided you needed another. I want to know what they found."

"So do I."

He looked at the old book again. "Tell Holun to send for me when he has the original."

"I'd like to see it myself."

“You will.”

I’d been ready to argue. Instead, I wanted to ask whether he thought there was something wrong with me. I tried to find a way of saying it that didn’t sound quite so frightened.

Then Holun came back with a thin book. For a moment I wished he’d taken longer.

“Take this to your rooms,” he said, laying it beside my hand. “It explains the simpler workings.”

“Thank you.”

Moraeth had reached the door. When he looked back, I was still watching him.

I nearly said his name. I didn’t want to be left with that question.

Or perhaps I just wanted him to stay.

He waited a moment, then left.

Holun was saying something about the book.

“Sorry,” I said. “What was that?”

Chapter 6

Blood Under a Silver Moon

There were still people in the library when I left. Beyond the main stairs I could hear voices and the scrape of furniture being moved, but the passage between was empty.

A man in the brown livery of the royal court came round the corner and stopped when he saw me.

The coachman who had brought me to the Gate.

I remembered him gathering the reins while I watched from the other side. For a moment, home seemed close enough that I might ask whether Mother had remembered to bring in the washing.

“You came back with the courier?”

“This afternoon. I was told I could find you here.”

He approached with one hand tucked inside his jacket. I shifted Holun’s book from under my arm, expecting him to give me something.

“Your father asked me to deliver a message. Said you’d want to hear it before anyone else.”

“He gave you a letter?”

I stopped by the window. The library door was still open behind me.

He didn’t answer. There was sweat on his forehead, though the passage was cold.

“Let’s go a little further. They might overhear here.”

I wanted that message so badly that I almost went with him.

Then he caught my wrist and pulled me towards the stairs.

I struck his arm with the spine of the book. His grip loosened enough for me to wrench free and turn back towards the library.

“Holun!”

I barely managed two steps. The coachman seized my sleeve and dragged me into the window recess. A seam tore at my shoulder. His other hand came out of his jacket.

For a second I could only stare at him.

He’d driven me all the way from home.

He looked down at the knife beside my ribs and waited until I looked too. Then the blade caught my forearm.

Pain burned through the wool. I pulled against his grip, tearing my sleeve, and tried to reach the library again. He put his leg in my way.

I hit the floor on my hip. The book fell open beside me.

He was over me before I could get up. I pushed against the stone, trying to crawl backwards. Someone shouted from the library.

The knife moved.

I couldn’t get out of the way.

And then I was standing by the stairs, with my palm pressed to the wall.

Dust drifted through the passage.

The coachman lay beneath the window. His legs were bent at an angle I didn’t want to look at. There was blood on the pale stone above him.

I couldn’t remember standing up.

My book lay where I’d fallen, several paces away. I looked from it to the man under the window, trying to find something between the two that I could remember.

Two people came out of the library. Holun was speaking, but I couldn't make sense of the words. I took a step towards the book and he put out a hand.

"Stay there. I'll get it."

I tried to point. Blood ran down my wrist into my palm, and my fingers were shaking so badly that I couldn't straighten them.

A guard came up the stairs and gave me a folded cloth. Someone went for a healer. I pressed the cloth to my arm, then lifted it because I wasn't sure I had it in the right place.

By the time Davor arrived, the blood had soaked through one corner.

Moraeth was behind him. Holun began explaining, but Moraeth came straight to me and took my wrists, turning my hands towards the light.

"Before he struck the wall—did you hear a voice?"

His hands were warm and steady. I was glad of them until his thumb pressed below the cut.

"That hurts."

I pulled back. The cloth slipped from my other hand, and I couldn't catch it.

He let go at once.

"Sorry."

Then he looked at my face.

A man carrying a small leather case pushed through the gathering crowd. Moraeth stepped aside for him.

"I'm Ruvan. May I look?"

I nodded. He supported my arm while his assistant knelt beside the coachman. I watched her hold a hand near his mouth as Ruvan eased the torn wool away from the cut.

The knife lay on the floor between us.

“Is he dead?”

“Alive,” she said. “Ruvan, I’ll need you here as soon as you can.”

She told the guard to move the onlookers back. Davor picked up the knife, and I could look at Ruvan again.

While he cleaned and bandaged my arm, I told Davor about the message. About hitting the coachman with the book and falling.

“Then I was over there.” I looked towards the stairs. “I don’t remember getting up.”

Holun had heard the impact. By the time he reached the door, the man was already beneath the window. He hadn’t seen what had thrown him.

I’d hoped he had.

Ruvan finished the dressing, made sure I could stand without feeling faint, and went to his assistant. Moraeth waited until Davor had finished questioning me.

“The voice I asked about—something that didn’t belong to anyone in the passage. Did you hear anything like that during the attack?”

“No. Someone shouted from the library. I was trying to get up.”

I’d heard strange things in this palace. Not then.

“Why would I have heard a voice?”

“It can happen during an unusual surge of power.”