

A VIPER AMONG KINGS

by Sydney Olivia

Discover the exhilarating epic fantasy debut where the cut-throat competition and deceit of *The Raven Scholar* meet the chaotic sentient magic of *A Darker Shade of Magic*.

In the twisted city of Amaris, magic spawns from chaos. Prone to driving humans mad, it can only be wielded safely by the Wraiths—seven immortal beings magically bound to obey the king.

Esme is the most notorious Wraith. She has spent the last century forced to kill on behalf of the nation that stole her from her homeworld, while building a secret life for herself and her wife away from violence.

That is, until the current king turns up murdered, and an enchanted will demands his successor be chosen through three trials. Esme cannot break the magical shackles that bind her, but she will suffer no more tyrants. She rigs the king's succession trials in favour of her chosen candidate: the righteous General Balthazar, who she can't help but fall for.

As Esme weaves together the threads of the court on Balthazar's behalf amid a strange tide of sentient magic in the city and a growing war on the horizon, she will come face to face with Balthazar's bloody past, troubled present, and countless betrayals.

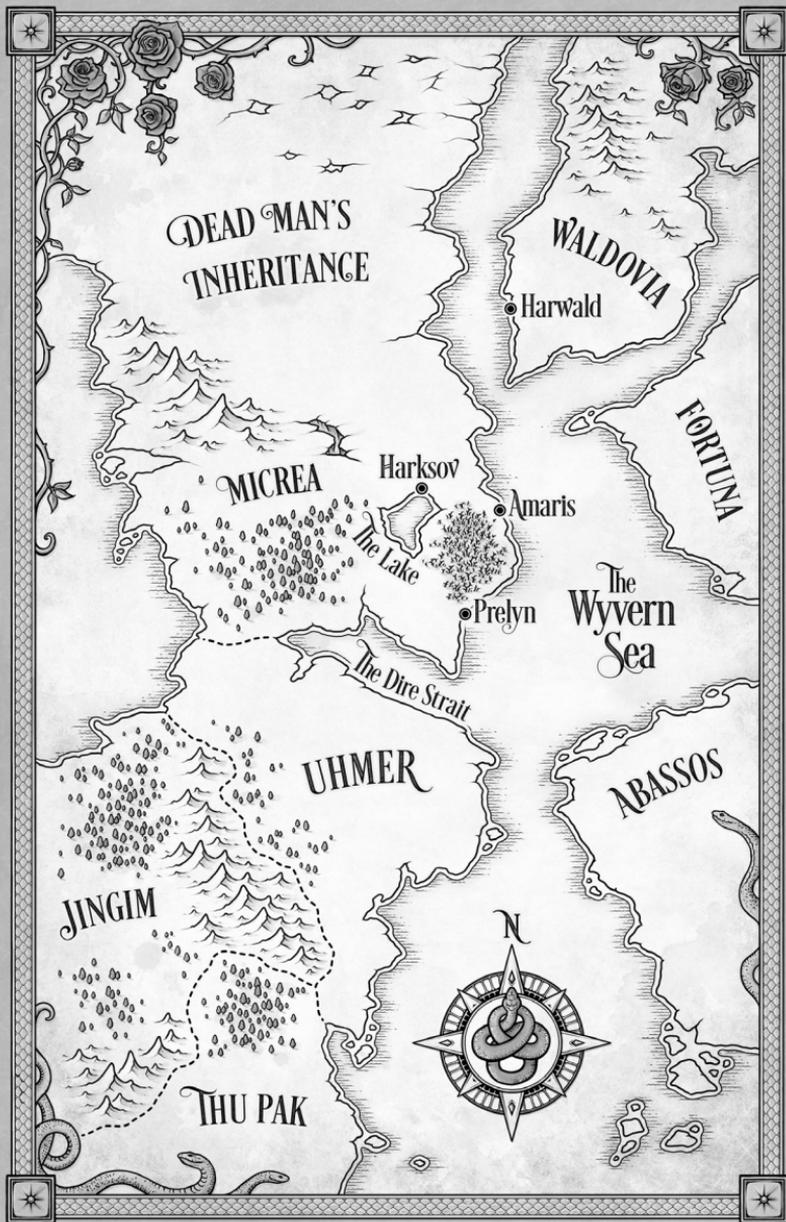
He isn't the man Esme thought he was—but she was born to make and break kings.

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To all the plants I killed while hyper-focusing on this
story for a decade.



DEAD MAN'S
INHERITANCE

WALDOVIA

Harwald

FORTUNA

MICREA

Harksov

Amaris

The Lake

Prelyn

The
Wyvern
Sea

The Dire Strait

UHMER

ABASSOS

JINGIM

THU PAK



part one

MAGIC

*We have lied, just a bit, as we are wont to do,
For you have come for a tale of a woman of silver and blood
and moonlight.*

*But to understand her yarn, we must unravel another first.
One lost even to her.*

So rejoice, small thing.

*For just the next 20 pages, you shall know more than even
Esmerelda d'Omnielle.*

PROLOGUE

A MAN WITH NO NAME

There were several valid reasons to despise the Micrean royal city of Amaris. The man who was looking for his wife had three:

First, it was too big.

Second, reading the language took too long.

Third, there were too many dead people. All over. Stuffed into corners and left under collapsed horses, just dead.

The man was trying to ignore them like the rest of the city did, but was cursed with a sensitive nose and the body lounging outside of a rowdy tavern was starting to melt to goo. Someone had tried to make the corpse look like it was sleeping by throwing a blanket over it, but in Amaris there was no stillness that was not death. Even now, with the full, pale moon standing watch, the city's denizens poured from their slanted houses into Amaris's labyrinthine streets. Beautiful women in

ugly brothels writhed to music floating on the air. Knights banged on tables in crowded pubs for their tenth round. Holy women drowning in their robes snorted pink powders deep into their “sacred vessels.” Amaris was a ballroom for debauchery and its dancefloor was packed, reveler against reveler, shaking and shimmying to the beat of the city’s screaming music.

How fitting it was, then, that the man was looking for his partner.

Well, his partner and a mirror. His hair, currently plaited behind him, was long enough to have developed a mind of its own nowadays. He wanted to look at least halfway presentable when he found his wife again.

And he *would* find her again.

The tenth shop the man visited felt promising, its windows unshattered and with no suspicious smells wafting out from the red-and-gold curtains hanging in front of the entrance. The man ducked under the too-low doorframe and found walls cramped with tarnished bits and bobs: brushes, knives, letter openers, handkerchiefs, and—

And two people having a lovely night on top of a display table. And on that display table, groaning under their combined weight, was the shop’s only mirror.

Well. He didn’t need it that badly. He slipped away without being noticed.

The world outside of this rat-run city was bleak, but Amaris was steeped so deep in chaos that Magic candied the air. Just to move through this place felt like wading through caramel—if the caramel was full of sex fiends and drugs and corpses. But if his wife was anywhere in this world, it was here. The man had already exhausted his leads on other continents. A woman who could manipulate metal in a country far south turned out to be just a gifted smith. Another queen who spoke to lizards was simply an excellent animal trainer.

So far, he'd found only legends. Even in this country, he'd collected stories of Wraiths, slithering immortal creatures born of divine rage. Apparently one was the product of a snake orgy, which, against all his better senses, the man desperately wanted to witness. Unfortunately, though, he'd learned already that humans in this world had a penchant for stories. There was no use hunting down those "Wraiths," who were probably just humans different enough from *these* humans that someone felt the need to spin a tale to explain their existence.

"Aye, come and see a marvel of Valos!" a showman standing on the world's ricketiest wooden box called out over the din. Passersby clogged the gurgling streets to give him a few seconds of their attention. The man told himself he needed to keep looking, even spotted a shop up ahead, but unfortunately, he'd been cursed with curiosity. He veered to the side of the pocked and slanted road, standing at the back of the showman's crowd with his arms crossed over his chest.

"You sees the card, yes?" the showman said, pulling a playing card from the pocket of his colorfully patched jacket that depicted a monarch with the head of a raven. The crowd leaned in to check the weathered edges and thinning paper. "What's it, say you?" he asked a boy standing at the front.

"A King o' Ravens!" the boy shouted.

"Aye!" The showman waved his free hand, nails grown out almost to claws, over the card three times. "But if ye look again with Valos eyes, perhaps ye may see... a viper!"

A cloth serpent sprung out of the showman's sleeve and the crowd screamed, leaping back. The kid up front was so terrified he ran off down the road.

"Or maybe even a maiden."

The showman drew his crowd's attention back to his hand, only for the card to have changed its face. Now, it was decorated with a beautiful

blonde person plucking the string of a bow as if it were a harp. The showman raised his brows at a lovely woman standing at the front of his crowd and reached the card out to her. Before her fingers could touch the paper, he gave another flick of his wrist and the card became a rose.

The crowd whooped for the showman's tricks and the man nodded in appreciation. At least there was something nice in this sex dungeon of a town. Just as the man unlocked his arms to give the showman a clap, he felt something in his pocket.

Of course...

The man pretended not to notice the hand patting around his empty pocket, but it went on just long enough for him to be annoyed. He got it—he was broke. No need to drag this out. After the fifth second of the tiny palm grasping around all that empty space, he looked down at his thief. The little boy who'd shouted out at the beginning of the trick. Expected.

"Lost something?" the man asked. The little boy furrowed his brow. He was about five, maybe, and already a veteran of his trade.

"You need to get a job!" the kid cried, then kicked the man's shin and sped off into Amaris's curling streets.

"Shit!" the man cursed, hopping on one foot. *Mangy little bastard.*

"The little ones sure are funny, aren't they?" A voice like a finger curling under his chin turned the man's attention. Behind him, the pretty woman with the rose stood a few inches from his chest. Her hair was as red as the rose she spun in her fingers, with pink powder dusted over her cheeks.

"You could call them that, sure," the man scoffed.

"Are the children where you're from any kinder?" the woman asked, leaning closer, and the business of the streets pushed them chest to chest. She batted her lashes up at him.

“I wouldn’t—”

Before he could finish, the woman threw herself on him. Her mouth tasted like liquor and smoke, and hidden under all of that was the itchy-sweet sting of Magic. The man pushed her off, but not before she slipped a pressed tablet of something under his tongue. He bent over and spat the little red pill out, sending it splattering on her shoes.

“Hey! That was fifty talons worth of quality product! You owe me!” the woman shouted as the man spat out pink glops. At her voice, the showman from before pushed through the crowd, and the man noticed a few other people closing in on him too. The showman twisted his wrist, and a dagger materialized in his tricky fingers.

Ab, shit.

The man took off the street. Amaris’s roads curved ever inward, and the man was sprinting to Iksha knew where. But now the showman, four burly enforcers, and the woman were cutting through the crowds behind him. The man launched himself deeper into the churn of people, inching farther from his enemies while sinking deeper into the quicksand of bodies. It didn’t help that every breath stung his chest with frigid Magic. One more gulp and he feared it’d freeze his lungs.

Up ahead, the man spotted a dark alley. Never before had one of those seemed so lucky. The man threw himself down the shadowed passage, spotting light from the next street over. Iksha bless. He’d lose them there. Just as the man let hope warm his chest, two figures stepped into the mouth of the alley up ahead of him—the showman and a massive henchman. The man turned back, only to be met with the woman who’d tried to drug him and two more oversized enforcers.

They were all armed.

On both sides, his attackers were closing in. The man knew the easy way out of this, but a fireball in an alley this thin would kill not only them but also the unlucky recipients of half-price handies in the

brothels on either side of them.

“I don’t have fifty talons!” the man said as his attackers boxed him in, each group little more than an arm’s length away now.

“No, but a big, handsome catch like you will fetch ten times that down in Kalipos,” the showman said, licking his cracking lips and spinning his knife in his fingers.

Slavery? Perfect.

“*Oh, Favoriiiiite...*”

The man shivered at the shrill voice whistling above his head. Of all the times...

“Please don’t make this worse,” he gritted out between his teeth, hands out in an uneasy pause with the traffickers eyeing up his muscles.

“*Make it worse?*” The man could hear the pout in that voice, but he knew not to trust it. “*You are so cruel to us. We only wish to assist, see!*”

Before the man could say anything, an invisible hand grabbed the showman’s throat and crushed it.

Bones, muscles, and all. His lip quivered as he tried to suck oxygen down a windpipe dented with the black imprint of Magic’s fingers.

The showman gave a shiver, a shimmy, and then Amaris lost another dancer.

Magic poured into the alley, filling it so high the man could barely breathe against it. He couldn’t see it with his eyes, but he felt the saccharine demon slosh around him, a tide of poison. It wriggled through his guts like a bad breakfast. The rest of the traffickers tripped back from the body, covering their mouths from the onslaught of sickness. They shared a look, and then they turned tail and sprinted for the light of the streets beyond. Not a breath from safety, Magic yanked the woman to the ground by her hair. It cranked her jaw open and bulged her throat as it crawled inside. Her screams choked to gurgles

around the creature. Magic writhed under her skin like a trapped animal before finally snapping all her muscles and bones straight. It stood her up like a wooden doll.

“*See?*” it said out of her mouth with its voice. Howling winds, widows’ screams, orphans’ wails. It spoke with the song of chaos. “*We helped.*”

“You just killed this woman too,” the man said, breathing hard. “That wasn’t necessary.”

“*But the vessel is so fresh.*” Magic admired the woman’s hands, glowing pale in the scraps of moonlight from above. “*We have never even known these people,*” it purred, dragging its stolen palms down the woman’s torso.

“I can tell.” The man passed a look out at the city beyond the alley. He should have guessed it before—the frenzy, the destruction. This city was a buffet, but it didn’t even know it was being feasted on. Magic was chaos given a will. It moved through all creation, through every world, with the sole purpose of indulging in as much debauchery as possible. It’d probably been lured in by the whiff of insanity, but now it was ruining this place all on its own. Most worlds were old enough to have already suffered some Magic-drunk fool trashing it once. Eventually, that world would rise again. Sometimes, remnants of Magic worked its way into bloodlines from the age before, and those blessed with abilities could wield that diluted, tamer *magic* to rebuild their worlds. There would be an age of growth, then peace, and then there would be a city like this one, that would draw Magic close. And then the cycle would start again, and end again, and start again. It was the rule of all worlds: chaos, and Magic, would *always* win.

And by the looks of it, Magic had secured its first foothold in this new world.

They didn't have long, then. Which meant the man needed to find his wife and escape this bloating body before it burst.

"You don't do things for free." The man crossed his arms, punching his cheek with his tongue. "I didn't ask you to save me. I don't owe you shit."

Magic wheezed out a laugh. "*Don't you understand that we like you, Favorite? We wished to assist you, so we did. We ask nothing in return.*" Magic brandished the woman's chest at him like a weapon. "*However, we do have a proposition for you.*"

There it was.

"I'm not killing anyone for you," the man said.

Magic pouted and, in a second, it was on him, nose to nose. "*But it will be easy, and we wish to make a lucrative deal.*"

The man didn't want a deal. He wanted a mirror.

"*We can also give you that.*"

The man knew better. He shook his head and refocused. He was here to find his wife, not to make back alley deals with a body-stealing fiend. He turned on his heel. "I don't need anything that bad," he said, stepping over the showman's body.

"*Not even her?*" Magic might as well have grabbed him by the throat. "*Your time is running out. Soon, she'll be gone forever. We can bring her to you. Or more, even, for the right price.*"

Magic smoothed a hand up the man's spine, the brutal chill reminding him of the woman he'd been chasing across world after world. It slipped into his vest and snatched the chain out before he could stop it.

"*Less than one more link. Months, perhaps.*" Magic prowled around him, dangling the mostly decrepit chain before its nose. Ninety-nine of its hundred links were crusted in grime, the only bits saved from ruin being the clasp cast in the image of his wife's hands, nails shining silver.

The tip of the very last link glimmered still, representing the few months he had left to find his wife before she'd be lost to him forever. He'd searched for her for the last ninety-nine years, scoured worlds and come up with nothing.

Magic was right. He didn't have time to be wrong anymore.

"Bring her here?" The man thinned his eyes like he might squint through Magic's deceptions. "Or is she here already?"

"We could answer that. But it would cost you, Favorite." Magic dropped the chain, and the man caught it just before it hit the ground. He squeezed that last link, the last thread to his love. Would this be worth it? He'd already burned himself once playing games with tricky Magic. That was how he'd lost his wife in the first place.

But he only had about two months left, by his count. He'd been looking for her for longer than he'd had her in the first place, yet not a single second of that search had dulled the love raging in his chest. There was no deal he wouldn't suffer for the chance to have her back.

"I only need to be close enough to get to know her." The man licked his lips, remembering the wording of the original agreement a century ago: *Only once the owner of your heart has named and loved you once again may she remember your name and love.*

The man blew out a shaky breath. Where he was from, names were given, never owed—interchangeable and earned, for better or for worse. The man had taken four names in his time but wore the name his wife had given him like a glistening thumbprint on the crown of his head. An anointment.

"You must have a name," she'd said, hands on her hips and kohlined lip pushed out in a pout. When he replied that he did not, she said, "Then I will call you Mose."

For as long as he was hers, he was Mose. Mose was a man in love with a priestess with silver in her fingers and stars for eyes. A man who

had a simple life, a simple job, but who'd climb the side of her palace wall and haul himself to her balcony nightly. He enjoyed dancing, and he lived with his friend in a small apartment, and he wore his hair short and curly. He'd snuck off with his wife at dawn to be married and bound himself to her with her goddess as their only witness. He'd sworn to love her until the fire in his chest coughed smoke and frosted over.

The man who'd lost his wife was not Mose. Mose would not have made the mistake the man had when dealing with Magic.

So until he found her again, until she loved him anew, he would be nameless.

Acid pumped through the man's gut. If she did not rename him and fall in love with him again, she'd never remember their first love. Asking Magic to turn the tides of her heart would cost him more than he had to bargain with. Then again, he was lucky she'd fallen for him once. A second time was the tallest of orders. But he'd rather she choose him again than be forced to love him.

"You will not change her in any way, nor I. You will not influence her thoughts. You will not remove the memory from her mind after the encounter." The whole time he laid out his terms, his common sense rattled the cage he trapped it in.

"*We will leave you unscathed,*" Magic said. "*All you have to do is deliver us a heart. A heart for a wife and a mirror. Lucrative proposition.*" It tapped the girl's lip.

"Whose? And how?" The man raised a brow. A heart? Not the worst of asks, especially not from Magic. But heart-taking could be athletic business, and the man was getting damn old.

"*A man's. An inconsequential one. It is important to us.*" Magic danced around his most important question, twisting the girl's hair on a finger.

"And why can't you do it yourself?"

“*We wish not to.*” Magic pouted, wilting suddenly. The man moved on instinct, grabbing the girl’s body in his arms before it could drop to ground. Then the buzzing of the body it wore reminded him what, exactly, he held. “*So, Favorite, do we have a deal?*”

The man closed his eyes. This was a terrible idea. But he was prone to those in his extended age.

“Fine. We have a deal.” Just as the man made to drop the cretin in his arms, Magic screwed the woman’s face into a grin. It began almost human, her cheeks bunched and red. Then they went black, and then her lips split and bled, and the evil in her smile swallowed her eyes. Blackness crawled over the whites, the pupils, until they were swirling whirlpools in her face. Magic spilled free from those pitch eyes. It had no form, but the man felt it swamp the alley. He was too awestruck even to drop the body, not until Magic ripped the last of itself from the vessel and the corpse sagged in the man’s arms, nothing but a pile of leathery skin.

The man set the body down beside Magic’s initial victim, the showman. Then he noticed the daggers they wore, and realized he’d come with only one blade.

Well, they *did* try to drug and kidnap him...

He relieved the bodies of their weapons and slid them into his belt, then stared down the frigid, black air that Magic soured in front of him. “All right. Take me to your inconsequential man.”

Magic buzzed with glee, making the man flinch. It darted from the alley, a whistling wind high on the air he could just about follow through the winding streets and up the steepest hill he’d ever climbed. All to come to a mist-shrouded, rickety-looking inn at the opposite edge of Amaris. Every wooden board on the outside looked slapped on, organized by air instead of nailed together.

He knew immediately what the mist meant. It was scentless, light

in the air despite looking so heavy. There was no mist in the louder parts of Amaris. The inn he was standing in front of was not an inn. It was some other building that Magic didn't want him seeing, so it was throwing a glamour over his eyes.

"An inconsequential man, and yet you're lying to me," the man said. Glamours were masks for Magic and those with its power embedded in their bodies. One could slather a glamour on as thickly or thinly as one pleased, but the thicker the blanket, the more noticeable it was. Eventually, the truth would seep through. The man himself wore one now to fit in with the humans of this town, but it was a spritz of perfume compared to the pillow Magic was smothering his senses with.

"*Highest and farthest room,*" Magic whispered, lingering on his shoulders. There was no arguing with it.

The man sighed and scratched his hair, thankful for the pulled back style. He didn't need to get blood in it, and he knew how messy it was to take out a heart. The gore... Iksha, it got everywhere. His shirt was fucked.

"*We can give you another,*" the Magic said.

"What do you want in return?" the man asked, twisting his mouth as he snaked to the back of the inn and stretched. Just when he thought his pillaging days were through, here he was, assassin-ing for a mirror at four in the morning.

"*We just ask that you slice the heart in two when you remove it,*" it said. Once again, the man wanted to ask questions. Magic usually liked its trophies in one piece. Bisected hearts were *so much less fun*, it'd told him once.

"As long as the shirt is green, you have a deal." It was his favorite color, and it brought out the red in his eyes.

The man cracked his neck, crouched low to the ground, and then leapt up to an opened window on the highest floor. He just barely

made it, hanging by his arms. The wind whipped at his braid, and he knew by that alone that he had not just jumped four measly floors. Still, the man threw himself through the window, a little louder than he would have liked.

The glamoured hallway in front of him was doused so thickly in Magic's glamour, it was sickening. Just a wide, empty space. He tracked along the hall until he found a place where that emptiness felt full, as if he were wading into a lake he couldn't see. He squinted, and the glamour finally rippled away to show him a red oak door. The entryway was as thick as two of him and as tall as one and a half (which was rather tall, not that the man was boasting). He ran his fingers over it. *Real*. It was too warm not to be. Magic was frigid, like grabbing ice.

"*Always so smart,*" Magic cooed. It wasn't upset to be seen through. Although it took special pleasure in baffling people, it also liked to be impressed. "*Brilliant little boy.*"

"I told you to stop calling me that."

The door was locked, but the man had never let that stop him before. He broke the lock quietly and eased inside to see a man in his sixties lying on his back in bed next to what looked like a long, red animal pelt. His eyes were closed, but he was not happily dreaming. He tossed and turned, splashing in his own sweat. Every few seconds, he strangled the air, and then his hands slapped back down onto his belly.

The metal knob under the assassin's fingers melted into the crack of the door and sealed it closed. He and his unfortunate new friend would need some privacy.

Given the rich yellow brocade of the waistcoat thrown on the edge of the bed, his victim was wealthy. Discarded boots had atrociously yellow lacing. Even the sweat-soaked gloves the man had gone to bed in had offensively yellow ruffling.

"*Are you curious?*" Magic asked, voice low as if to accommodate

the sleeping man it wanted him to murder.

“No,” the man lied. Inconsequential, his ass. This wasn’t an inn and that red animal pelt, now that the man got a good look at it, wasn’t a pelt. Its paws had red nails and there were gray streaks in its fur. Its eyelashes were curled. Magic was hiding the person his victim was sleeping next to because they were some clue as to who he was.

“You smell curious.”

“I told you not to smell me anymore.” The man picked up a hefty signet ring off a desk. “I’m taking this.”

“You don’t even know what it is.”

“I don’t need to. It’s solid gold and I’m broke.” The man slid it into his pocket and Magic laughed at him. His horse needed a new saddle, and this poor bastard wasn’t going to need a signet ring.

The man snuck closer to the bed and sighed down at said poor bastard. His face was all wrong, features drifting around to keep the man from recognizing him.

Iksha bless, he was curious. How could he not be? But he cared about a mirror and the chance to see his wife more than this stranger’s identity.

So, with little fanfare, he stabbed the bastard in the chest.

Right as the knife sank in, the victim’s eyes opened. He and the man locked gazes for a single second before a gush of hot blood spurted out of the wound. It splattered across the assassin’s face, and he had to blink just to keep it out of his eyes. He unceremoniously spat it out of his mouth and it slicked his arms and chest. The man grumbled at the gore but stopped when he found his victim’s face again. It was clear now, with all the parts where they should be. They stared at each other, and although the man didn’t know who this not-inconsequential victim was, *he* seemed to know *him*. In fact, there was extra warmth in his face. In his last moments, he gave an eye-crinkling smile, like they

were old friends who hadn't seen each other in years.

That smile stayed, even when his eyes dulled.

The assassin had to lever the knife out of his victim's chest, each yank resulting in another little spurt of blood. When he finally wrenched it free, he took a big breath, dreading digging out that heart.

Not because of the desecrating of a corpse. Mostly because his eyes weren't what they used to be.

In response, Magic brought a candle to the gash in the victim's body to light the man's work. Against his better judgment, he mumbled, "Thank you."

"Welcome!"

There were clumps of something in his hair when he finally cut through the ribs. He was going to need three baths just to wash the blood out of his crevices. Did this heart know how hard it was to find baths in this world?

"You are funny in your head."

"Stop reading my thoughts," the man said, peeling back just enough flesh to get his blade through the last big bits of tissue. He put the dagger in his teeth and dug out a smaller one to work in the crevices. "We went through this. No reading my thoughts. No sniffing me. No calling me your *brilliant little boy*." Just as he laid down those rules, he finally freed the heart of its flesh prison.

The man lifted the organ out of his victim's chest. It was too heavy. Fine, the victim was large, but this heart... It was triple the normal size. This was no glamour; the stranger's heart was the size of a baby.

The man slid the small dagger back into his belt and took the first one from his teeth. Magic bellowed a deep, happy note when he began to flay the organ—only, instead of tubes and flesh, the man found a normal-sized heart, hot and twitching, nested inside of the larger one.

Curiosity was practically banging down the door of his mind, but Magic's screaming song screeched louder than his thoughts, so he just thrust the heart out at its buyer and said, "Here's your snack. Mirror and wife and shirt, please."

The man sighed. He dropped the heart of hearts on the corpse's belly and forced himself to stop thinking about how the animal pelt started to groan.

A soft wind opened the door of the room's closet, and there—the single article of clothing on the rack—was his green shirt. A bit frilly, but green nonetheless. And on the desk was a rather fine mirror that had not been there before.

After the man stuffed both items in his bag in the cleanest way possible, he looked up to the rafters, eyebrow quirked.

"You did not say when you wanted to see her," Magic said.

The man's chest panged. *Of course* it was too good to be true.

"Oh, stop pouting. You shall find your wife just as you first met her."

The man didn't know what that meant, but arguing with Magic about an unfair transaction was the fastest way to lose an arm. Instead, he packed up his anger and threw his leg out the window, ready to get out of this place.

"Thank you, Favorite. You have done us all a favor."

The man huffed and said, "Well, I won't be doing it again," then slid out of the window and jumped to the ground below. His knees sang, but then he remembered that he didn't just drop four stories. He wondered how sore he was going to be in the morning.

The man took the slightly brighter alley by the inn to a part of the city that was well-kept and clean. He dug through his pocket to look at that signet ring. Fine, he *was* broke, but that wasn't the only reason he'd snagged this hunk of gold. The ring would tell him who he'd just

murdered.

But the second the man tried to squint at the ring under the light of a lantern, his foot caught in a rose vine. He tripped into a puddle of something too thick to be water and too black to be blood, and the ring flew from his hand. The man looked up just in time to see it roll off the curb and drop down a drain.

The man picked himself up and shook the rose vine off his ankle, then adjusted the bag on his shoulder, only to hear the tinkling of shattered glass.

The man didn't have to look. That mirror was shattered, and the ooze he'd fallen into had definitely soaked through his bag. The shirt was ruined. He felt fire rise in his throat, but what had he been expecting?

A nauseatingly pleased giggle tinkled above him.

The man muttered something vile and promised never to go to Amaris ever a-fucking-gain.

1

HEART EATER

Esme laid down on the archway curving over the entrance to Amaris's finest prison, aptly named Muhnir's Hole. The black stone torture chamber was a beast crouched at the southernmost tip of the city, waiting to maul prisoners like a wolf. Its grounds had been scorched after a recent escape plot. The masterminds decided to try and burn down a *stone* prison. A wreath of heads now decorated the archway Esme lounged on.

She was lucky not to have a sensitive nose.

It was later than late. Her mark, a prison guard with sticky fingers, was supposed to leave his post an hour ago. Where in Ojalla's name was he? The Bond scratched at her throat like a starving cat, and if she didn't kill it soon, it'd drive her insane. The air was thick, seasoned with Magic, and stung when she breathed. Esme pulled a book out from

her midnight-blue cloak to distract herself. Just as Princess Pemia was beginning to believe Marcus, her bodyguard *and* her father's assassin *and* her sister's betrothed, could really be The One, a whiskey-warped voice tore her from her swoon.

“Oh, you're feisty!”

Esme slapped her book shut and prowled to the edge of the archway. A guard stumbled out of the entrance, encouragement and hollering from his friends following him as a night lady pulled him away. Brined air blew his hair into his mouth, and he spat it out between the mouthfuls of wine she forced down his throat. Esme followed them close, slithering through trees and buildings as the poor bastards tripped through Amaris's spiral streets, bricks jutting out jagged as knives. They looked half-confused about where they even were, but Esme couldn't judge. She'd once spun these circles for three days after a night out.

Then again, if it took this fuck three days to make it back to his house, Esme was going to rip her hair out.

The night lady propped her drunk on the pole of a street lantern and sighed. Yellow light spilled over his extremely ordinary features: broken nose, thin lips, scar on his face. Esme smirked. Ojalla loved her indeed. The man's name was Nathan Harrel, and the necklace he'd stolen from Queen Isobel Asterou a week earlier—a black glass bauble on a chain—sat against the sickly pallor of his skin. Isobel had thrown a royal tantrum when it had disappeared from her jewelry box, and Turiel threw a tantrum because she threw a tantrum, and now Esme was splashing around in shit and piss.

The night lady took out a cigar and lit it with her striker. Dim light glowed like a halo around her dyed red hair. Esme's stomach turned. There was no color more blessed than Asterou crimson, the red of a freshly split vein. Queen Isobel had crimson hair and so did her

nephew, the Lake Prince, and so had Omniel Asterou before them. If one even hoped to approach their level of perfection, one had to dye one's hair that sickening, bloody shade.

Esme had made a promise never to let a drop of dye touch her scalp.

Clapping stole Esme's attention. Across the street, a man wowed a crowd with tricks. As a snake popped out of his sleeve, his assistant relieved his audience of their valuables. Ah, such was South Amaris.

The buildings slanted sideways, each one simultaneously propped against its right neighbor and crumbling under the weight of its left. Cheap candles belched smoke from blackened lanterns. Ashy light draped over the night lady's bare shoulders like the finest of fur stoles. Another working woman stopped to steal a puff of her smoke before gliding on, dodging the craters in the pocked street with a dancer's ease.

This part of the city was known as the Foot, and it was the single most important place in the country. The nobles waddled on uselessly in East and North Amaris, named the Hand and the Head respectively. The middle-class folk of West Amaris, known as the Stomach, grumbled too much when faced with harsh work. So Amaris dropped all its weight on its Foot: the processing of poisonous plants into medicines, dangerously ambitious building projects, running the underground castle kitchens, all of it.

Tonight, the Foot hobbled on. Every crumbled corner boasted a salesman in a long cloak flashing a peek of the night's powdered offerings. A few streets over, cheers rang out and screams just after. Fighting pits were the city's favorite pastime, and the southern pits were lawless. That was what made them so popular.

Esme watched the night lady who'd dragged Nathan from Muhnir's Hole contemplate leaving him to the thieves and smugglers. Then she pursed her lips and tossed down her smoke before taking

on Nathan's weight again. Esme scoffed. That woman had a much kinder heart than she.

Neither night lady nor drunk heard Esme tailing them all the way back to the shack Nathan called home. It took damn near an hour. *Ojalla on fire, could they speed this shit up?* A candle burned in the tiny second-floor bedroom. Nathan's wife was home and still awake. The night lady didn't seem to care as she unlocked Nathan's door with one hand and lugged him in.

Esme snuck to the little window around the side of the house. The night lady stood between Nathan's legs, fixing him with the most unimpressed look a woman had ever leveled at a man.

Esme had been there before.

One of Esme's shadows slid under the crack of the window and silently raised it. Esme slithered in softly and crouched in a dark corner of the kitchen hidden by a half-wall. The whole place was a shrine to despair. Birds' nests were cramped in the cracks of the walls and colonies of vermin were discovering civilization in the floors. Esme found the only sturdy surface in the whole kitchen and dropped a sack of silver talons on it.

"Sorry to cut in on such a romantic evening," she said, stepping out of the shadows, her golden hair catching the drop of candlelight. She held her hands behind her back, standing straight and unguarded. "But I'll be taking him off your hands."

"You didn't even make sure your wife was asleep?" the lady asked, tossing out her hip. She turned to Esme and fixed her with an apologetic look. "Apologies, miss. I'll make it quick."

"s not m'wife!" Nathan tossed out a drunk hand. "Unless ya'd like to be." He gave her a winning grin.

"You wish," Esme said, rolling her eyes.

A fist of shadow ripped from the black ceiling and grabbed Nathan

by the middle. He flailed uselessly, spitting and screeching. The night lady dropped to her hands and knees and scrambled around the floor like a bug. “Put me down!” he hollered.

Esme walked a wide circle around them, settling just behind their backs. “I might if you guess who I am.”

“An abominable spirit!”

“A tax collector!”

Neither of them were very good guessers.

Normally, Esme might drag out her game, but she’d been wearing this glamour for a whole day and she was tired of being small. So, she tore open her placid throat with a silver claw. Dark brown spilled down her skin like blood. Black swallowed the pale blue of her eyes and blinking stars connected inside of them. Flaccid hair cringed tighter to her head, shifting into a cloud of moon white. New fat made parts of her swell, and muscle filled out other hollows. Her skull clicked and cracked, fixing flat cheeks with high cheekbones and correcting a square face back to its heart shape. Her nose shifted up, to the right, and then left again, flattening and widening on her face. Esme thanked Ojalla when the top three buttons on her shirt grew tighter. She always feared that one day she’d glamour her tits so flat they may never return.

Not today.

“Have a guess,” Esme invited them again. She rolled her shoulders back, happy to be free of her oppressive glamour. She still wore a thin one—just enough for these humans to keep their dinner. She raised a brow at her new friends. Their pupils quivered, and the night lady screamed so high that Esme had to plug her ears.

“Viper! Heart Eater!” Nathan was shaking too hard for his words to spill out smoothly, still hanging sideways in a shadow hand.

Esme pursed her lips. Song’s breath, it was *one time*. You eat one

heart, and all of a sudden you're the Heart Eater. As for her other title, the Viper... well, she couldn't complain about that one. Esme was indeed dark and vicious, and the fangs in her mouth could bite deeper and kill quicker than those of any snake. She did take offense to her meticulously maintained skin being compared to scale, but she imagined people were picturing a very well-moisturized snake when screaming at her.

"Righto." Esme clapped and the shadow dropped Nathan on the floor, face down. Before he could scramble up, another shadow grabbed his arms and hauled him into a chair. Esme turned to the night lady. "Now, I know you were probably so, so excited to do this job, but could we have a bit of privacy?"

The night lady blinked at her trapped client for about three seconds. Then she nabbed Nathan's wallet and bolted out the front door. Esme waved at her shrinking back and a shadow locked the door behind her.

"You can stop crying now." Esme bent down to Nathan's height, squinting at him now that they were close. "I just want to talk."

"Heart Eater!" was all the poor bastard could manage. Tears blinded him, his face twisting with terror at the very image of her. He thrashed against her shadows, but each fling of his body just exhausted him until all he could manage was a slump in his chair.

"I don't want to eat *your* heart, Nathan. It's not even been marinated."

He didn't laugh. *Boo.*

Esme rolled her eyes. "Just give back what you took and we can all leave alive."

"I didn't steal anything!" he blubbered, sliding further down in his chair.

"Come, now. I'm not stupid," Esme wheezed out. The Bond that

forced her to follow every rotten command uttered from the Micrean sovereign's lips stung around her throat, inching its collar tight enough to starve her lungs. She wiped Nathan's tears away with her thumbs and a shudder ripped through him at the fridity of her hands.

Despite the beating of her heart, Esme was little more than a well-oiled corpse. She'd been born dead until her mother plunged her into a river of holy metal. The goddess Ojalla had been the one to resurrect her as a baby, and Her Magic had kept Esme alive ever since. It was Her blood freezing in Esme's veins, Her saccharine tint to her breath, Her otherworldly stirring in Esme's eyes.

The only thing Esme hadn't inherited from Ojalla was Her patience.

Esme ripped Nathan's shirt open and yanked the little glass bauble off his throat. The Bond's stinging dulled to nearly nothing. This strange little thing was what King Turiel had thrown a fit over? It was egg-shaped, black, and hollow. Isobel was so strange in her jewelry choices. She had sapphires as blue as the sky, gold as bright as the sun, and this little black thing, not even the least bit shiny. Esme rolled it over in her hand before shrugging and stuffing it in her back pocket.

Nathan blubbered so much he drooled down his chin. "I just took it from her room," he said. "I didn't even think it was important! I just thought it'd sell well because it was from the castle! I'm sorry!"

Esme nodded. It sure didn't look important. But Nathan had a point. The Asterou family had its fanatics, and they'd drop Nathan's entire yearly pay to hold something that once sullied the neck of *the* Queen Isobel Asterou.

"Was that so hard?" Esme asked.

Nathan shook his head.

"Exactly. Truth is easier than deceit, Nathan. You'll be good to remember that."

He nodded.

“Now, truthfully, I’m going to kill you.”

Nathan didn’t even get to make a sound. A shadow swept down from above and cleaved his head from his neck. Esme tried to avoid the blood, but a bit got on her boot. She cursed. Mina hated it when she tracked gore in.

“If she scolds me, I’m blaming you,” Esme told Nathan’s corpse. If it had been up to her, Nathan would have walked out just fine. Unfortunately, King Turiel was one for overzealous revenge. *Bring back the thing he stole from my wife and take his heart!* he’d said. She hated commands like that. Take his heart where? To dinner? *Idiot.*

But that had been the command, so Esme did just that. She dropped her glamour to free her silver talons and sliced Nathan’s chest with her thumb. Then, while wondering if Mina had left dinner out of the coldbox for her, she wriggled her hand around inside his still-warm body and ripped the still-spurting heart out whole.

“Murder’s done!” Esme yelled up the stairs behind Nathan’s body. His wife peeked down from the floor above, eyes wide.

“Sorry for the mess,” Esme said. “Lye soap does wonders.”

The wife nodded, staring at the steaming heart that used to live in her husband’s chest. Esme smiled and turned to leave via the front door like a regular guest.

“You’re not taking the body?” Nathan’s wife asked.

“Why?”

“To eat,” she said.

Esme scoffed, but she couldn’t help the smile that curled her lips.

“Not my preferred flavor. Chop it up, bury it, grow some mushrooms.” Esme turned again. “I left the money in the kitchen.” All one hundred talons. Esme’s original offer had been seventy-five, but Nathan’s wife had driven a hard bargain for her husband’s life.

Esme escaped out the front door and took a big breath of smoky, Magic-brined air. Summer was unfolding and the nights were still nippy, but it was good to take a breath without the Bond wringing her throat. The shadows churned under her feet, flicking away a speck of blood she hadn't noticed.

"You're so kind," she said with a wink, then patted her pocket to check on the necklace and turned her back on the Foot.

Thank Ojalla this was over. Now she had to find a place to put this heart.



DISHEARTENED

The sun was a damn traitor.

It didn't wait before rising, mockingly bright as Esme threw herself over the back gate of a modest townhome. A small garden of greens lined one side of the back plot, and a fenced-off pen of goats wreaked havoc on the other. As soon as her shoes hit the dirt, the natural disaster of a creature she called Fuck-eyed Francis bleated bloody murder.

"Shut up or I'll eat you!" Esme hissed. The bastard piped down.

Esme snuck up to the back door and slid into the home. There was a plate of food left out of the coldbox, and Esme smiled when she saw it.

She swept the kitchen. A trio of hooks on the lilac-and-sage walls held two adult-sized aprons and one smaller one. A coldbox, an oven, and

a cauldron lined the far wall and a fresh loaf of golden bread basked by the windows facing the back plot. A host of misshapen fruits sat on a wooden table in the center of the room because Esme had a soft spot for the crooked ones and always brought them home from the market. But most important, the home was still silent. That meant she wasn't totally screwed. She'd left Nathan's heart in a pig trough a few houses down, but her shirt was ruined up to the forearm and she didn't know how to explain to a twelve-year-old that she'd—

“Gia! Gia, if you're late, the carriage will leave you!” The motherly urging snapped Esme out of her thoughts.

So much for not being screwed.

Esme sped for the opposite wall, peeking down the lilac-and-sage hall that led to the front of the house. There, Willimina stood in her morning frock, arms crossed below her chest. Her hair was done up in a million curlers.

Esme's heart warmed. In a most un-Wraithlike tone, a contented little sigh rushed out of her, and Willimina's curled head snapped in Esme's direction before she could even try to hide.

“What are you doing hiding in the kitchen?” Willimina whispered as she rushed down the hall. Esme just barely remembered to grab her with her non-bloody arm before snatching Mina and spinning her round. Mina pursed her lips and cocked her head. “You're covered in blood again, aren't you?”

“Covered is a very dramatic word,” Esme drawled, using her Wraith strength for the only valid reason to have it: hoisting her wife high on her hips and walking her over to the kitchen table. Esme held up her bloody hand. “It's just this.”

Mina raised a brow at the bits of bone under her wife's nails and crossed her arms. “Spleen?”

“Try again.”

“Liver?”

“Closer.” No, it wasn’t.

“Stomach?”

“Well, now you’re not even trying.” Esme leaned on her clean hand and loomed close to Mina’s nose. She was the single most beautiful woman in the world. At least, according to Esme, who was the only person whose opinion mattered. When her hair was not wrapped around little wooden trinkets and powdered, it was warm brown with streaks of silver Esme liked to pick out on her laziest mornings. Her skin was tanned, one half thanks to her maternal grandparents, the other thanks to that meticulous garden out back. She was a touch shorter than Esme, and a few good meals fuller bodied. Her eyes shone the halfway color between brown and green, a little too knowing for her thirty-eight years.

“Let me guess,” Mina leaned back on the kitchen table, letting her robe fall open just enough to have Esme’s eyes stitched to the valley between her breasts. “Turiel made you rip some poor bastard’s heart out? What an evil thing to do.”

Esme hummed, sitting her chin on Mina’s sternum. “Nothing compared to what you’ve done to me. At least I left his heart in a hole. You’ve stolen mine and refuse to return it.”

Mina failed to squash her smile at the shit line. She shook her head, and one of those curls fell loose.

“Perhaps because you stole mine first. An eye for an eye, a heart for a heart.” Mina brushed their noses before leaning in for a kiss. Their lips touched for all of a second, until a twelve-year-old stole their moment.

“Ms. Esme? Why is your hand all red?” Gia, Mina’s daughter, stood in the doorway. The women split immediately, but Gia didn’t particularly care that her caretakers were smooching on freshly wiped counters.

Priorities. She was the spitting image of her long-gone father, down to the unruly brown-black hair and deep brown eyes. Mina liked to say she'd stolen the poor man's bones, too, as she was lanky for her age.

"Well, I..." Esme hid her hand behind her back, twisting away each time Gia tried to bend to look at it. "I was painting."

"We don't have red paint."

"I bought some."

"Mother doesn't let you buy things," she said. Mina snorted and Esme thinned her eyes at her. Esme might have been the breadwinner, but Mina was the bread distributor. When the North Amaris fashion houses dropped their autumn collections, Esme could often only be trusted with the thinnest of slices.

"I didn't consult her."

Gia's own eyes thinned, and her lips pinched into a mischievous smile. She had her mother's shrewdness.

"If I don't go now, mother says the carriage will leave me," she said, and cast her arms wide.

Esme bent immediately to hug her, her bloody arm still hidden behind her back. Gia squeezed her tight before giggling over her shoulder.

"I knew you had guts on you!" she yelled over Esme's back, reaching for her gore-crustured arm.

"You sneaky little creature!" Esme gasped, hauling Gia up and over her shoulder as the little girl shrieked with laughter. Esme delivered her to the front door, and Gia slid down to sit in the bend of Esme's arm like she used to as a baby. She was much taller now than she was then, twelve whole years under her belt.

"Have a good day at school, little love." Esme grinned and pressed her lips to Gia's cheek. The girl always giggled at the frosty mouth tingling her skin.

Gia hugged Esme with the strength of a grown man as Esme put

her down.

“I missed you, Ms. Esme,” Gia told her with a final squeeze.

“Well, I’ll be here when you get home. Promise.” Finally, after weeks, she would be.

Gia grinned and turned on her heel to run out to the carriage stopped precariously on their busy street. The girl was extremely curious, and too smart, and never trusted a lie from Esme’s mouth. She loved them, though. Loved *Miss Esme’s* bedtime stories and dinner-table yarns—too much, Esme feared, for the girl wished to become a Wraith when she grew up.

Esme waved her goodbye from the window while Mina did the same from the porch. A neighbor grinned to Mina and the leaving carriage. When she found Esme in the window, she turned back to her garden.

She wasn’t rude. She was doing what Esme paid her to.

“We really must remember to wash the blood out before the child sees,” Esme said with a sigh, pulling the front curtain closed.

Mina rolled her eyes and snorted as she slipped back into the foyer and shut the door behind her. “Oh, to protect her innocence?” she said, pushing Esme up against the wall by the door. “As if she isn’t completely aware of what you are already.”

There was no sadness in Mina’s voice, but there was a twist of it in Esme’s gut. Gia knew too much. She’d seen too much. Sure, they lived charmed lives now, but they were precarious ones. Esme and Mina had been together for seven years, and married in a tiny, illegal ceremony in their back lot three years ago. But before that, Esme had kept Mina and Gia tucked away in a manor a day’s ride from Amaris. She and Mina had met, actually, when Esme was auditioning women to serve as her head of house. Mina had gotten the job (completely on merit, and not at all on the fluttering of her lashes), and moved into Esme’s manor,

where Esme escaped to a few days each week. For years, they made a mismatched family in the countryside.

Of course, when word got around that Mina was working, the nearest village headman dragged her to jail. It was illegal for unwed mothers to hold jobs—and no, a necklace exchanged with another woman didn't count. Esme had to leave Amaris to raise hell and have Mina cleared of the charges against her. After that, she moved Mina and Gia to Amaris, enrolled Gia in a school for orphans at the Lap of Virya, and told Mina to tell everyone her name was Gwen and she was the girl's aunt. It was a thin lie, and it certainly didn't help that a Wraith could often be found lurking around the home in frilly robes. But when Esme supplemented the household incomes of their entire line of neighbors, not a whisper of the truth left their block. As far as anyone knew, Gwendolyn Rahl was raising her niece, Giadonna, completely alone, and that Wraith-shaped object in the window was a collective hallucination.

"Perhaps innocence is worth protecting," Esme said. Mina grabbed onto that thread of sadness in her voice and pressed herself up against her wife a touch harder.

"Do not feel guilty for providing for us." Mina grabbed Esme's chin and brought them eye to eye. "So she saw a little blood. We have goats out back, and one day they will be stew. She's bound to see the inside of a ribcage at some point." Mina shrugged and Esme rolled her eyes.

"Shouldn't we be trying to give her a normal childhood?" One that didn't include seeing the Wraith her mother married crawl through the back door smelling like carrion.

"Oh, the normal childhood where her father died in the single most embarrassing wild-boar accident imaginable and her mother married an immortal woman with big metal teeth? That classic

childhood?” Mina sighed and took Esme’s cheeks. “Gia has a warm home and is getting an education all because of you. That’s more than I ever got, more than I ever dreamed of for her. How you come home to us doesn’t matter, my love. Just as long as you do.”

Mina leaned up to bring them together, and Esme sighed into her kiss. It felt impossible to hold any bad emotion with Mina close, with her mouth leaving tiny, dragging pecks on Esme’s lips. She forgot what she was supposed to be angsty over. Esme’s arms wrapped around Mina’s plush body as her wife’s fingers worked into her hair, tugging lightly on her curls. Mina snuck her kisses down to Esme’s chin, and then smooched across her jaw. Esme briefly opened her eyes only to be met with a headful of curlers, and she chuckled at the slightly powdered smell of Mina’s hair.

“You can’t laugh at my hair when you’re covered in guts.” Mina bit Esme’s earlobe. “I’ll have you know I curled my hair to look nice when you returned. This mess is for you.” Esme gasped as Mina trailed those kisses lower.

“Oh, really? I figured this was for that lady with the peach tree down the block,” Esme rumbled.

“Oh, I hardly have to do anything to have her.” Mina winked. Esme and Mina loved each other dearly, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t also love others.

“Hardly have to do anything to have anyone.” Esme sighed, eyes slipping closed as Mina put her nimble fingers to work on her buttons. “And I swear I tried to get home before the sun, but Turiel had me all the way in the Foot stalking some guard for the world’s ugliest necklace.” To prove it, Esme pulled said little black marble from her pocket.

Mina stopped, mid-wife-disrobing, just to cringe. “I thought Isobel was supposed to have good taste?”

Esme scoffed. “Have you seen her husband?”

Mina snorted before putting her drugging lips back on Esme’s chest. Esme damn near dropped that stupid little necklace, but just barely remembered to smuggle it back into her pocket. Technically, her job wasn’t finished. She still had to return the necklace to Isobel, and the Bond hissed at her throat to remind her. But she had the item in her possession and would be returning it soon enough. That had the Bond’s throttling tamed down to a buzz. It wouldn’t release its grip until this shitty little thing was back in Isobel’s hands, but Esme could take a magical bee sting if it meant a night or two with Mina.

“You know, I’m supposed to go to work today,” Mina said, Esme’s shirt now completely open. Esme slumped against the frame on the wall to keep herself up, trying to wrangle her lungs into breathing normally as Mina looked up at her through her lashes. “We have Wallain prep.”

“Fuck that stupid holiday,” Esme said, dazed. “Far as I can see, you’re extremely unwell and coughing blood and cannot work today lest you sneeze on a cake and give the king pertussis.”

Mina snorted as Esme’s eyes drifted closed. Just as the sting in her neck was fading against the sensation of finally being back in Mina’s arms, a rapping on the window next to them jolted the women out of their embrace.

Mina and Esme shared a look. Then they got back to their business.

Another string of raps, too sharp to be from a hand, interrupted them again. Esme rolled her eyes and threw her senses out to her porch. *Urias*. She could feel his magic, the prick of a thousand birds’ beaks, through the door.

“Stop bothering beautiful women!” Esme yelled through the door at the bird he was puppeteering.

The bird banged its beak on the shrouded window again, and Esme whipped the curtains open, finger already stuck up at him, only for her stomach to drop right to her boots. Not just a bird. A raven.

“Does that mean...” Mina began, grabbing Esme’s waist. That bird meant that duty would rip her wife from her. Again.

“Why don’t you go upstairs, sweetest?” Esme kept her panic leashed, kissing the crown of Mina’s head and watching her pad up the stairs. It wasn’t that Mina wasn’t trustworthy. Magical death birds pecking against the glass at seven in the morning was where Esme’s work began and Mina’s safety ended. Esme refused to drag her love any deeper into this wicked life.

Esme raised the window to let Urias’s raven in. “You’re ruining my vacation,” she grumbled. The bird hopped onto her hand and Esme brought them eye to beady eye. “You better have good reason.”

“The king is dead,” croaked Urias through his bird’s vocal cords, the squawking a garbled mimicry of the man’s voice. Esme’s heart, which had never stopped in all her one hundred and thirty years, did so just then for a second.

Turiel couldn’t be dead. Everything was going entirely too well for him to ruin it.

“How?” He hadn’t died naturally, she was sure. He wasn’t the fittest thing, fine, but Asterou men didn’t die naturally.

“Someone ripped his heart out of his chest.”

Esme leaned back on the windowsill and ran her fingers through her hair. Not just dead but murdered—the most problematic thing he could possibly be.

“Well, that’s a dramatic way to go. When?”

“We found him about an hour ago. I need you here.” The bird nuzzled her chest. Esme gave it as much of a hug as you could a raven. She imagined Urias needed a hug.

“Where’s Isobel?”

“Exactly where you think.”

Astride Mak’kon, then.

“Give me an hour,” Esme said with a groan, pinching her nose. The bird nodded before hopping off her arm and onto her shoulder.

Esme made her way upstairs and to her room, where she found Mina with a bag already packed for her. The knapsack was nearly overflowing with her favorite books and clothes and even Esme’s favorite little pen. The second she saw the purple dyed feather poking out from the top of that bag, tears swamped her eyes.

“I figured you were leaving,” Mina said, holding out the bag, her mouth pressed into a thin line. There were candles behind her shoulder on the nightstand. This was supposed to be their day.

Esme told Gia she’d be home tonight.

Another death struck her. With Turiel gone, Esme knew this way of life was over. This peace with Mina and Gia where, yes, she went around killing and stealing but still had enough time to carry on happily here, was over.

“I don’t know when I’ll be back this time,” Esme said, grabbing the knapsack but then dropping it on the bed to hold Mina’s face. “I’m sorry.”

“As long as you come back, I’ll forgive you.” Mina reached up to kiss Esme’s cheek. “Besides, you’re a Wraith. You have a job to do.”

“I wish I could quit.” And spend her time here, planting veggies with Mina and yelling at their teenage goats. “Everything here is yours. You can still access my accounts, yes?”

Mina nodded.

“Don’t come to work today.”

Mina’s face darkened. “Is it something terrible? You look like it’s something terrible.”

Esme pulled back, tucking an escaped curl of Mina's hair behind her ear. "If I tell you, you'll probably lose your mind."

"I'm always losing my mind."

"Then let's just say there will be a royal announcement soon." Esme sniffled, not because she cared about Turiel—fuck Turiel—but because she wanted her wife. "But you'll be fine. We'll all be fine." Esme leaned down and caught Mina's mouth in a kiss. She stayed there, just holding her, in a desperate bid to keep this moment forever.

And then it was over, and Esme had to go. She jogged down the steps, out the door, and into the sun. Magic stung her lungs, more than she'd ever smelled this early in the morning. Fear curled in her stomach. It was already beginning.

A mare materialized out of the shadows before her and Esme swung onto the horse's back. Mina stood at the doorway, arms crossed, shaking her head.

Esme simpered at her. "Don't look so upset. I'll be back."

"You'd better. Who else is going to traumatize me?"

"Exactly. I love you, Willimina."

"I love you more, Esme."