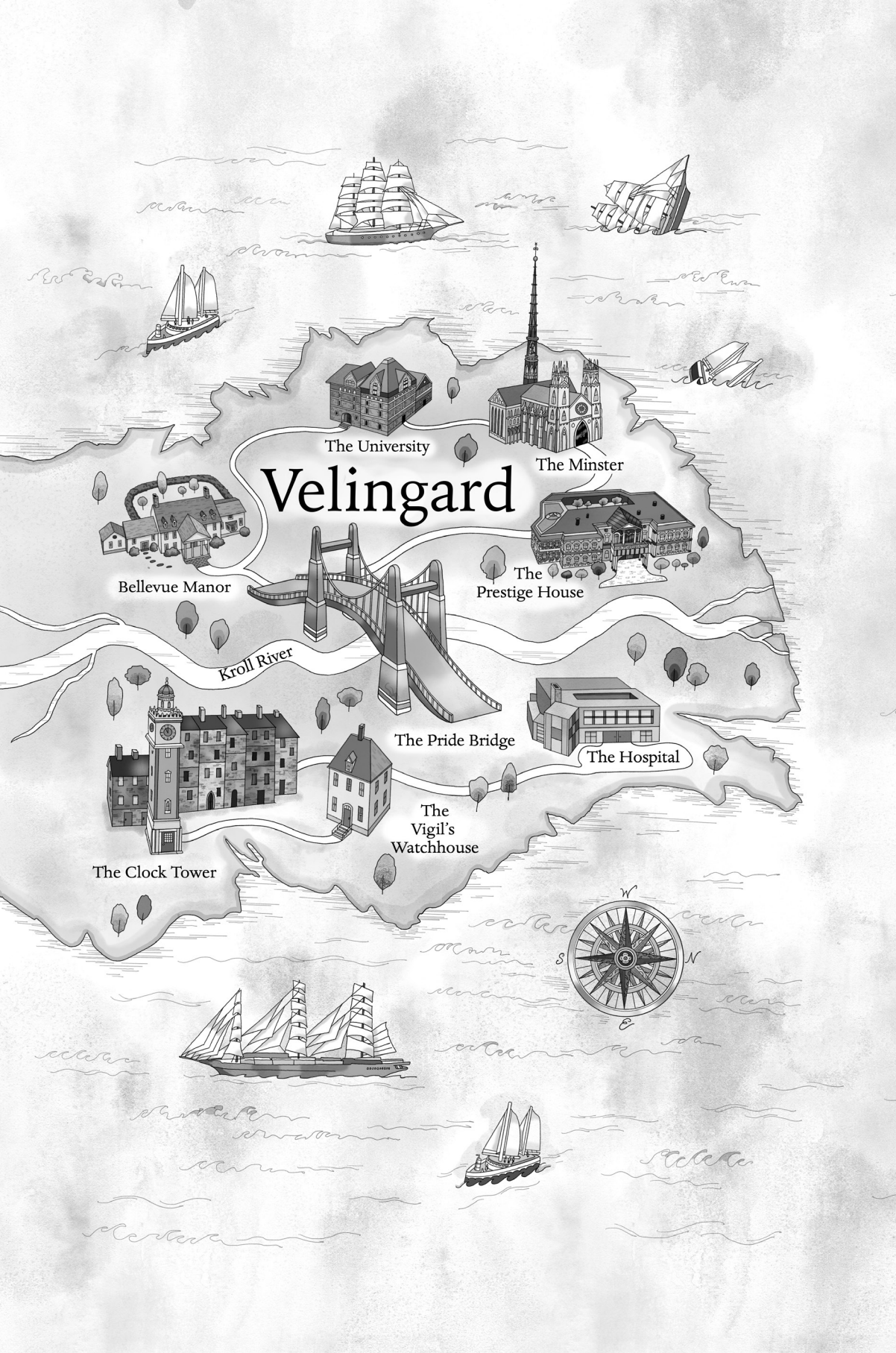


AN EDGE  
SHARP  
ENOUGH

JESSE Q. SUTANTO

 Daphne Press



# Velingard

The University

The Minster

The Prestige House

Bellevue Manor

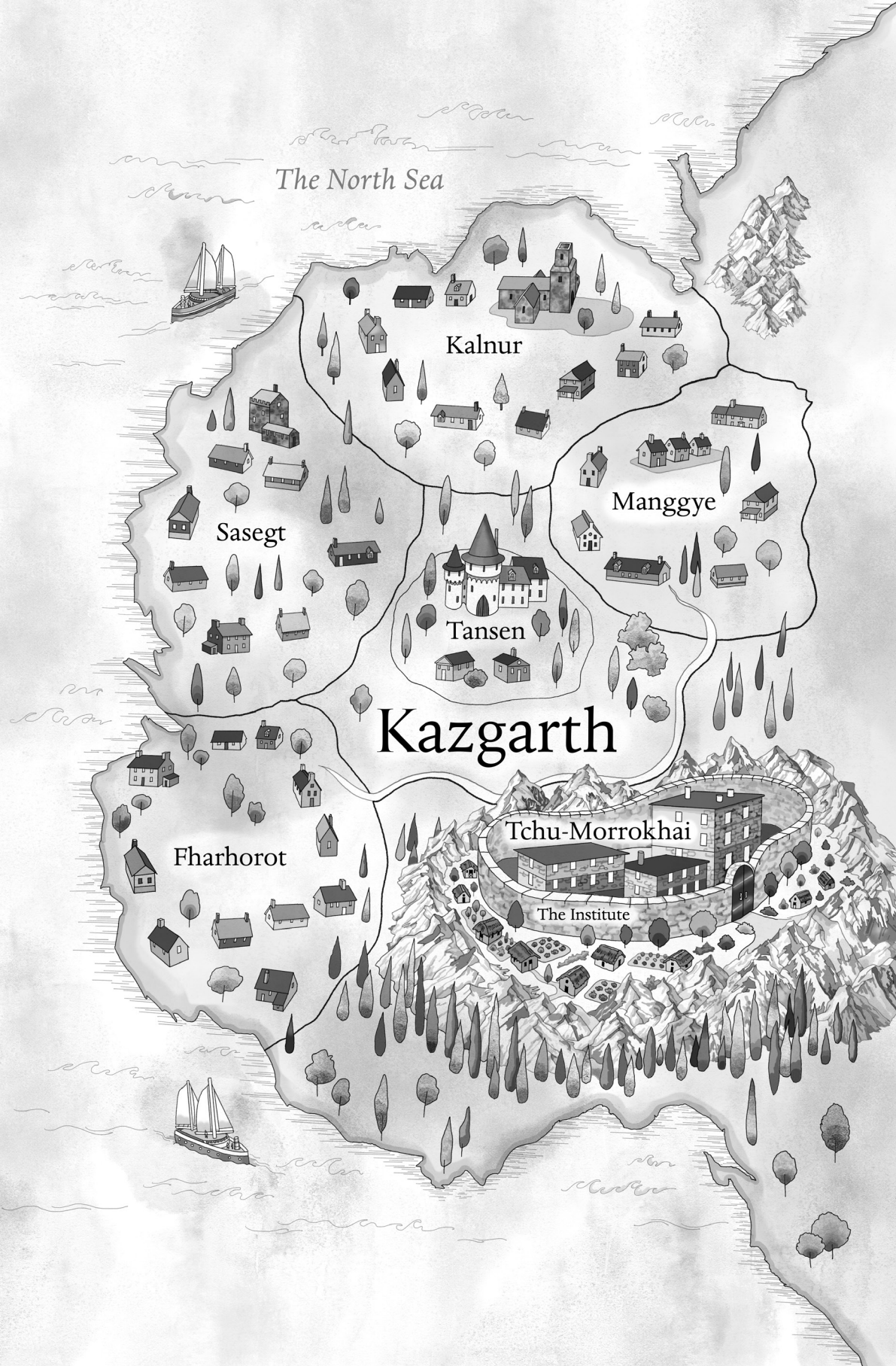
Kroll River

The Pride Bridge

The Hospital

The Vigil's Watchhouse

The Clock Tower



The North Sea

Kalnur

Sasegt

Manggye

Tansen

Kazgarth

Fharhorot

Tchu-Morrokhai

The Institute

# 1

## MARA

*Tchu-Morrokhai*

**W**HEN MARA TURNED five, her parents fed her a hearty breakfast, dressed her in her best clothes, and hugged her tight. That was when she knew something was wrong, because her parents never hugged her.

Years later, she came to learn that five was a very important age. At five years of age, most children were able to think at least two steps ahead, and to form elaborate manipulations to get what they want. At five years of age, their physical abilities revealed the limits of their potentials; such things as dexterity, flexibility, strength, and agility were visible in a five-year-old's physique. As such, five was the age of testing, when the Institute opened its big, bronze doors and welcomed all the five-year-olds they could get.

She didn't remember much of the tests. There were so many of the damn things. As they prodded at her and told her to stretch this way or throw that ball or solve that puzzle, she looked around the vast room, searching for a familiar face. She found none. And when the Elder testing her glanced up at the balcony and nodded, she knew that she wouldn't be going home.

She tried to cling to every memory she had of her parents—their

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faces and their smells and the things they used to do. But over time, she forgot everything, even the sound of her mother's voice. The only thing she remembered was a song, one that her mother used to sing to her. She clung to the words with desperate fierceness.

*Shut your eyes,  
quiet your words,  
sleep the sweet sleep of death,  
my baby,  
my love*

Mara had this vague memory of her parents being happy, or truly loving her, but that couldn't be right, because if they were happy—if they'd loved her—then they wouldn't have sold her to the Institute.

SHE WAS GIVEN A pallet on the floor. It was made of woven rattan and came with a thin, blue blanket stuffed with cotton. She thought of her bed back home and how she had complained to Mama about it. It had been a modest bed, but a proper one, with a wooden frame that Baba had built himself. The mattress itself was filled with straw, and scratched at her skin, and sometimes it had bugs in it and so she whined and groused and maybe that was why they had sent her here. Maybe they'd wanted her to learn that there were worse ways to sleep.

And though the Institute was in the center of Tchu—the village's beating heart—it felt like that bed was now continents away.

The Institute was over fifty years old, established well before the Art Famine. Back then, it was where disciples came to learn Art, but of course there was no Art to be studied now. Now, everyone knew that the Institute had been turned into a training ground for darker lessons.

The Institute consisted of three buildings—the dormitories, the Elders' and Emissaries' residence, and the main school building—

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surrounded by a huge thick stone wall that kept the complex separate from the Outer Ring. Mara had never seen anything like the Institute. Back in the Outer Ring, most houses were made of wood, with thatched roofs. Mara had often gazed at the imposing walls of the Institute and wondered what was inside. She'd conjured up thin, needlelike towers that pierced the clouds, and a sprawling palace guarded with dragons, but there were no dragons or towers. The Institute was imposing, but built with efficiency in mind. She'd never been inside a stone building before she got there, and the first thing that struck her was how cold the floors were, and how intimidating it felt with its silence.

There were sixteen pallets in the room. The other children filed in one by one, having passed their tests . . . or failed, depending on how one looked at it. A boy bumped Mara with his shoulder as he walked past, and when she stumbled, he laughed and said, "Runt."

Other children glanced her way and snickered, their gazes taking in her small, skinny frame. Mara sat down on her pallet and pulled her blanket over her shoulders, willing herself to become even smaller, to disappear. Luckily, she had a corner pallet, so she only had one other person next to her.

The last child walked in and marched to her pallet like she owned the room.

"Runty runt," the other kids chanted in a cheerful rhythm. Even the ones who had been sullen earlier were now clapping and singing along, obviously glad to have a target.

Mara looked up and met the girl's eye. She was frowning down at everyone. Mara broke eye contact. This girl didn't seem like the type of person Mara wanted as a friend. Too fearsome.

She was right. The next second, the girl whirled round and rushed straight through the crowd of children. She found him, the boy who had started the chant, and punched him, hard. When he fell, she kicked him in the stomach. He screamed, curling up into the shape of a cashew. She stopped a split second before a matron rushed in. Before the matron

could ask what was going on, the girl had crouched down and put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Are you alright?" Her voice was high and small and full of concern.

"What's going on?" the matron said.

The girl looked up with a world of innocence in her eyes. "He has a tummy ache." She looked down at the boy, who was staring at her while whimpering. Her back was to Mara, so Mara couldn't see her expression, but the boy did, and fear was written clearly across his face. He blinked, gulped.

When he spoke, the words came out squeaky. "I have a tummy ache."

The matron frowned. "Such screaming over a small discomfort. Unacceptable! The Elders will hear of this. Now go to sleep. I won't hear another noise out of any of you." She bustled out.

The girl released the boy and turned around. She was smiling, her face aglow. Mara never did see a smile as sunny, as though it were made of pure sunshine. She looked like a god. She was looking straight at Mara, like they shared a little secret. That was when Mara realized that she *did* have a secret. It was unlike all the other secrets she'd had in the past, ones made over pinky promises, designed to be revealed in a fit of giggles. This was different. This was a secret she would keep for years, burying it so deep within herself that some days, she had to take a moment to dig it out, to study it and feel its shape, caress its surface, to luxuriate in it, in the knowledge that this was something that she alone possessed. Nobody else would ever know. It was hers, all hers.

The secret was this: Mara was in love with this other girl.

LIFE AT THE INSTITUTE was strange, everything so different to what Mara was used to, even down to the simple act of bathing. Back home, she had wiped herself every evening with a damp washcloth and bathed

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once a week. On hot days they had plunged into the Baihe River. The Institute, however, had a bathhouse, and they were required to bathe every day, which struck her as wasteful.

“Emissaries are clean.” Elder Ratnah padded back and forth inside the steamy bathhouse as the children undressed. “Emissaries do not emit odors. Odors will alert enemies to our presence. We do not wear perfumes to mask any stench.” She paused when she got to Mara, and her eyes traveled down Mara’s body deliberately. The corner of her mouth twitched with contempt. Mara glanced at the other children, all of them taller than her, with solid-looking limbs. She looked down at her own body, noticing the way her ribs stuck out and how frail her arms looked. Everything about her screamed fragile and useless.

*Then why did you take me from my parents?* she wanted to complain. Yet she already knew better.

“The Divine Empress has machines made out of indestructible metal,” Elder Ratnah muttered, “and we are combating them with underfed children.” A tremor crossed her chin before she sniffed and turned away. Mara looked around and saw cruel delight blooming on the other children’s faces.

Muted laughter rose like a mist, too soft a blanket for Elder Ratnah to identify. She pretended not to hear the gentle susurrations of mocking giggles as she picked up a rectangular bar and said, “This is soap. Splash some water on it before rubbing it on your skin, like so.” But Mara could no longer hear her words. She gazed at the floor and studied its uneven surface, narrowing her focus into a singular hot beam, taking in every crack and pattern of the marble. She was barely aware of herself going through the motions of bathing, except that she knew she avoided touching her own body. Now that she had received confirmation from an Elder that her body was a thing to be ashamed of, she felt betrayed by it. She held the soap in such a way that her fingertips wouldn’t touch her skin as she swiped it all over herself. She rinsed off quickly and dipped herself in the large communal bath for barely a second, plunging in and

out, before scrambling out and scurrying away, the others' eyes crawling on her back.

In the changing room, she was alone. She avoided the mirrors as she searched for her robe. Locating it, she pounced and wrapped it around herself, yanking the belt around her waist so tightly that it bit into her skin. *Good*, she thought. *I deserve this pain*. She tied it in an unforgiving knot, reveling in the way it made it impossible to suck in a full breath.

"Have you heard the story about the evil huntsman who wanted to kill the maiden?" The voice was high and clear as stars.

Mara swung round, her cheeks prickling with heat.

It was the other girl. The golden one. She stood just two paces away, her eyes on Mara's. "He pretended to be a ribbon seller and tied the ribbon around the maiden's waist so tightly that she couldn't breathe and fainted dead away."

"What happened to her?" The words slipped out before Mara could catch them. Stories were what fed her imagination and fortified her soul.

The girl studied her with an unreadable expression. Her gaze did not waver. It was as steady as a full-grown oak, loyal and sturdy. Mara wasn't sure what she saw in her, but whatever it was, it pleased the girl. She could see it, that slight shift in the girl's eyes, her mind moving Mara so neatly from neutral to positive. When she finally spoke again, the decision had been made. "Her friend came to save her."

A small part of Mara understood what the girl was saying. What she didn't understand was why this was happening, why she deserved saving or even a friend in the first place. She was unworthy—wasn't that clear? Unworthy of her parents, and now unworthy compared to the other disciples here. But she wasn't about to question it then. A drowning person does not question the lifeline they are thrown. She gripped tight and didn't let go.

"I understand." Her chest expanded. Her voice came out sure and strong. "The maiden and her friend went back and found the huntsman together."

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The girl smiled. “And they killed him.”

“Together.”

“Together.”

“I’m Mara.”

“I’m Lia.”

Mara had walked into the bathhouse in a neat line with the other disciples, alone in a sea of other children. Now she walked out with Lia, her heart singing. It was the first time that the crushing weight of grief and longing for her parents lifted and she felt as though she could breathe once more.

EVEN AS YEARS PASSED and they grew from skinny kids into tall teenagers, Mara still didn’t know if Lia felt the same way about her. Or anyone else, for that matter. Sometimes, after lessons had ended for the day and it was just the two of them, sitting by the Baihe River, Lia would turn her head, revealing the delicate arc of her neck, and her lips would curve into a smile, the sunlight turning her eyes brown as she glanced at Mara, and Mara would think: *She loves me too. She does.*

But on hard days, days when Mara hated her body with more viciousness than usual, or days when she fell over and over during physical training and wondered once more why they had accepted her here, Mara told herself that even if Lia were to break the rules and fall in love with someone, it wouldn’t be her. Not Mara—too skinny, not enough muscle, despite years of training. Slow, too slow for the Elders’ liking. A brilliant mind, they said, yet trapped in an Inactive’s body. Utterly disappointing. No, it wouldn’t be her Lia fell in love with, if she ever did fall in love with anyone.

Mara needn’t have worried. Lia didn’t have the weak emotions she did. When they were first told that Emissaries weren’t allowed to form romantic relationships, Mara had glanced ever so fleetingly Lia’s way.

But Lia kept her gaze straight. She didn't look at Mara. She wasn't thinking of her, or of anyone else. She was the perfect disciple.

WHEN THEY WERE IN Year Thirteen, everyone was summoned to the main quad. They were in the middle of Agility. As usual, she and Lia had gravitated towards each other as partners, a habit that Mara was now regretting as Lia threw her blunted wooden blades at Mara with unwavering precision. They weren't allowed to move out of the way until the blade was thrown, and of course Mara was never fast enough to avoid the blades. Each time they hit her, there was a sharp thump and a split second of numbness. Then the pain, bursting like an overripe fruit, bloomed from where she got hit and surged outward, until even the tips of her hair hurt.

Lia was frowning. "You must clear your mind. Do not anticipate each throw; you can't possibly dodge them by thinking about it. It needs to be instinctive."

Mara loved Lia, but sometimes she also hated her in equal measure. "I think it's your turn."

Lia nodded simply. Her movements were like that, simple, elegant. Her body knew how to perform every movement efficiently, so as to conserve energy. Sometimes, Mara found herself staring at Lia, following the fluidity of her movements as she raised a hand to retrieve a throwing knife from her belt, or dipped her cupped hands in the Baihe River and brought them to her mouth. She made even the most mundane of movements beautiful.

She stood against the pole now, her spine straight, the back of her head touching the wood. She didn't lean on it—she wouldn't disrespect Mara by being lackadaisical. Lia always took her seriously; she was one of few who did.

Mara licked her dry lips, slid one of her blunted knives from her belt. Her palms were moist, her grip too tight.

“Breathe, Mara.”

Lia shouldn't be giving Mara advice while she was technically her target, but Mara listened to her because that was what she always did. She took a deep inhale, held the breath in for a second, and released it through her mouth. She adjusted her grip. She trained her eyes on Lia, taking in, just for a second, her beloved face—her eyes that were of the deepest velvety black, the slope of her nose, and her mouth, one corner slightly quirked up in a tiny smirk. She was so fresh-faced, like she had all of the innocence in the world and expected others to be just as blameless as she was. That was one of the things that was so unfair about Lia—that she looked like she couldn't possibly hurt you.

As soon as the knife left Mara's hand, she knew the throw was off the mark. Lia didn't have to move at all. It went wide, missing her left arm by a full inch. It thudded onto the grass a few feet behind her and bounced harmlessly. Elder Saya noted Mara's failed throw with a small look of displeasure and no surprise.

“Do not look at the knife.” Lia was still trying to be helpful. There was no condescension in her voice—nothing but a sincerity that she gave only to Mara. “Look at where you want it to go.”

Did Mara want to hug Lia or did she want to shove her away? It didn't matter—she couldn't do either.

She tried following Lia's instructions, focusing her gaze on her mid-section. She thought of the knife as an extension of her hand, completely under her control. She swung her hand back and let the knife fly. It went straight to the center of Lia's chest. Dead center. But Lia was no longer there. The knife bounced off the pole behind her, making it vibrate. Lia had done it perfectly, stepping in between the molecules of the world like a shadow slipping in and out of the light.

Elder Saya nodded at Lia. It was as big a show of approval as they got at the Institute. Lia didn't smile or puff out her chest the way the other disciples sometimes did. Mara often wondered if Lia knew what she was—gifted, a supernova—but if she did, she never acknowledged it.

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The other disciples were as transfixed by her as Mara was, their wide eyes following her fluid movements, everyone doing their own calculations—*Can I be her ally? Can I eliminate her?*—enthralled and threatened by her in equal measure.

Only Mara didn't feel threatened. She was more than enthralled.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, WHILE the sun still beat down with an enthusiastic hand, the Elders gathered all of the disciples round in the quad. The little ones stood looking rather lost. A boy and a girl, both around fourteen years of age, were kneeling in the center, surrounded by the large group of disciples, a circle six rows thick, their eyes riveted on them.

They'd been stripped down to their underwear, their backs rounded so that the knobs of their spines stretched against their skin. The skin on their backs was swollen red; they'd been kneeling here like this the whole morning, past noon, slowly baking under the harsh sunlight.

"They're ripe," an Elder said to another.

Mara felt her skin bursting into gooseflesh. *Ripe*. As though they were fruit about to be picked and eaten. She wasn't sure what was about to happen, but she felt it, the crackle of twisted anticipation brushing against all of them, down to the youngest disciple. They were all about to partake in the punishment. They were all about to enjoy it.

She glanced at Lia. Their eyes met, and Lia's face softened, almost imperceptibly. She knew Mara would not enjoy it. She knew Mara didn't have the same sort of appetite for punishment that most others in the Institute did.

A basket was passed round, filled with smooth, fist-sized black stones picked from the Baihe River. No instruction was given, and yet they all instinctively knew to pick one. When the basket was empty and each disciple clutched a stone, Elder Ismus stepped forward.

"The transgression is clear: these disciples before you have broken a rule. They kissed."

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Mutters, whispers, a few jeers. Lips curled into sneers. Eyebrows knotted together.

Were they angry because a rule had been broken, or because they weren't the ones breaking them? Mara knew why she was angry. In a place as unforgiving as the Institute, when the stakes were as high as they could get, how could these two disciples give in to their base instincts? How dare they, when Mara herself was so tightly wrapped up in her fear that she couldn't even allow herself to dwell on such things? It was in that moment she knew that, like her peers, she was slowly going mad in here. Maybe they were already mad. Certainly the Elders, who had fought in the war against the Divine Empress and seen unspeakable atrocities committed against their colleagues, must have gone mad a long time ago. Maybe it was inevitable for anyone who lived here, caged in by the mountains, with the Divine Empress's fist closing in around them by the day.

Maybe too many of her peers welcomed madness.

"Lift your stone," Elder Ismus said. She was the oldest of them, in her sixties, her hair snowy white and her thin lips lined with wrinkles. She was a walking miracle; Emissaries didn't usually live past thirty. "Before you cast them, though, consider this: Why do we do this? It is not out of enjoyment, for we do not revel in the physical suffering of others. We do not do this out of pleasure, for pleasure is nothing but decadence. We do this out of *need*. We do this to save our people from the Divine Empress's army. Every day, she marches forward and conquers more of Kazgarth. Every day, she forces more and more Kazgarthians to turn their backs on the idea of Art and worship the false god Ezeri. Every day, her terrible machines come closer to our peaceful land. We train you so you can fight back. There is no room for . . . this." She looked at them, and though there were hundreds of disciples there, Mara felt her gaze heavy on her face. She wondered if the Elder could sense the thoughts lurking inside her head like a big, pale worm, forbidden, reviled.

The need to look at Lia, to transport herself out of here was so great it was all she could do to not run to her friend and wrap her in her arms. But Mara knew that if she did, if she so much as glanced at Lia now, it would be the end for her. And maybe for Lia too, if she returned Mara's gaze. And more than anything, it was the thought that she could hurt Lia that held her still. Mara kept her eyes on her stone instead, so solid in her hand. She squeezed it tight and thought: *Stupid. The two before us were so stupid to get caught.* She imagined the stone turning red with the heat of her own shame and anger.

"We do this for survival," Elder Ismus said.

And Mara understood her completely. She wanted to throw the stone. For her own sake, she had to do it. It was a true necessity.

Elder Ismus nodded.

They cast the stones.

The boy's skull was crushed and he died sometime between the first stone and the last. Nobody knew whose stone had done it; that was the beauty of the ceremony. The girl managed to protect her vitals, and at the end she was still alive, though barely. Two Year Fifteens were tasked with removing her. They picked her up without bothering to be gentle, and she squawked when her broken arm bumped against them. She sobbed, her eyes wild, and they met Mara's before sliding away, searching . . . but for what? Comfort? There was none to be had, least of all from Mara.

They carried the Year Fourteen to the gate and dumped her outside for the Inactives to claim—those disciples who had failed their trainings or final tests and so were fated to spend the rest of their lives doing menial labor in the Outer Ring. Hidden within an unforgiving mountain range, the village of Tchu was completely isolated. No trade agreements with other cities, no news aside from what came from Emissaries in the battlefields. Everything that the Inactives in the Outer Ring farmed or produced went to the Institute so it could continue churning out Emissaries to fight in the war. Everyone in the Institute

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knew that many Inactives were bitter and resentful; every year, there would be a handful that tried to escape. The mountains took care of them, mostly. The rest were hunted down by Emissaries and made examples of. Most of the Inactives harbored a deep-seated hate for those still inside and would not miss the chance to harm a disciple, much less one as wounded and helpless as the girl.

But nobody came to get her. Mara was relieved.

Apparently Lia had noticed Mara gravitating towards the gate after their lessons, and she came for her, eyes hard as flints. “What are you doing?”

Guilt coursed through Mara’s veins, hot and sluggish. She was supposed to be heading for the bathhouse for yet another dreaded bath session where she would be reminded of how she did not belong. In the silence that greeted Lia’s question, they could hear the girl’s whimpers, the sound jagged with pain. It was hard for Mara to swallow; a lump of rock had lodged itself in her throat. She glanced at the wall.

“No.”

It was said so simply. For Lia, everything was black-and-white, with no room for doubt. Mara often admired Lia’s certainty. Now she envied her for it. Mara must have looked aggrieved, because Lia’s mouth quirked slightly as a look of sympathy crossed her face. She knew Mara well enough by now to know that she couldn’t help being soft. Like the tofu they were given daily, Mara was prone to crumbling, giving way at the slightest pressure. Quietly Lia added, “It’s for your own good.”

She was right, and they both knew it clear as the icy waters of the river. Emissaries lived on a knife’s edge, leaving no room for indulgences such as empathy or compassion. If Mara was caught showing kindness towards someone, especially a former disciple who had just been condemned by the Institute, she would be severely punished. They didn’t know exactly how, but it would probably involve more rocks and her own place outside the gates. Lia gave Mara one last hard look before turning away. *Go to the baths like you’re supposed to*, the look said.

Mara followed.

Three days the girl lay slumped outside the walls, crying and mumbling to herself. The first flies arrived before her last sobs faded away.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE other thing that came close to Mara's love for Lia, and that was her love of Art. They were first introduced to it, or rather, its history, three years ago, and now, at age eighteen, Mara had read everything she could get her hands on about Art.

What was Art? It was hard to describe in words. Maybe it was easier to answer what was not Art. Mara could sense in her bones that Art existed in everything. It was the soul of the world, divided into five elements: Blood, Shadow, Astral, Earth, and Ice.

Less than a quarter of a century ago, her people had practiced Art with ease, weaving it out of the elements, curling it around their fingers like silk and manipulating it to their will. Mara often ached imagining that long gone past.

Then, twenty-four years ago, the Divine Empress—a princess from the city-state of Tansen, who had gone to Velingard to study and come back a believer of Ezeri—had declared Art an aberration of god. She'd been largely ignored at first, even by her own people, but then the Art Famine struck, so swiftly, overnight. The cause wasn't clear, but in seemingly an instant, Art became near impossible to extract from the land and the air, and the little that was extracted was slurped up by the earth, as though the soil itself had turned its back on them. Many across the continent had frantically tried—and failed—to solve the problem. And in that time, the princess took over her city's throne and declared a holy war against her own people. Across Kazgarth, people were forced to quickly forget Art, and turn their attentions to weaponry and fighting back in a war they were all ill prepared to face.

But Art was not completely forgotten.

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Under the tutelage of one of the Elders, Mara privately learned more about Art. It wasn't extinct, she discovered. And with that knowledge, she learned how to tease sips of Art out of things around her. The darkness of a locked room gave her a drop of Shadow Art, the coldness of the Baihe River granted her a wisp of Ice Art, and from the sap of a broken tree she pulled a strand of Blood Art.

All of these she hoarded in devices she'd created to trap Art. For lack of a better term, she started calling them Artifices, and sometimes, when she longed for something different, for a life that wasn't haunted by the Divine Empress's army, she took out an Artifice and detonated it, marveling at how the trapped Art exploded into the atmosphere with surprising fury. Maybe that was why she loved Art. Sometimes, the crushing weight of hopeless love was so overwhelming that Mara wanted to shatter to pieces and tear everything around her asunder.

## LIVYA

*Veltingard*

IT WAS CERRA who woke her that morning, as she did every morning, but on this particular day, Cerra was practically bouncing as she bustled in. “Do rise, Livya, there’s such good news to be had,” she cried, throwing open the heavy velvet curtains and bathing the room in unacceptably bright sunlight.

Livya groaned and buried her face deeper in her mountain of silk pillows, but cruel Cerra was not having any of that today.

“Livya!” She wrenched a pillow off Livya’s face brutishly—if Matron Heida had been around to see it, she would’ve tutted at Cerra. But Matron Heida wasn’t around, something which Livya for the first time in her life regretted as Cerra put her face inches away from Livya’s own and said, “You. Have. An. Invitation.”

“Sod the invitation,” Livya mumbled. The past month or so had seen a flurry of the cursed things, each one more boring than the last. A luncheon with Madam Nerran and her insipid son. A tea with Mr. Buckthorn and his eagle-eyed sister. A party at Madam West’s summer villa, where the wine had been watered down and the music so lackluster that hardly anyone bothered gracing the dance floor. Another party at Mr. Koline’s estate, where she and Cerra had been the youngest people

in attendance by over twenty years. That last one had been particularly grating.

“Save me from these dull parties!” she had cried to her mother the morning after the Koline soiree. “Where are the meetings of the minds? The debates, the philosophical discussions, the evenings spent sipping whiskey and talking about astronomy or Art? I thought this was supposed to be the age of discovery, but these people might as well be living in the age of the Revvrens!”

Mother had laughed then. “Prove yourself as a scholar, and the invitations to those meetings will come. But until then, I’m afraid people will only see you as, well, a beautiful young lady who is on the cusp of marrying age.”

Livya had gagged. “Marriage? I think not.”

“I did see Willem giving you a rather lingering look at Madam West’s ball,” Cerra had giggled, before Livya glared at her.

“Willem West has the appearance and wit of a clam,” Livya had said.

“That I can’t disagree with,” Mother had said to Livya’s relief. “I think my daughter would be better matched with a young man who has a passion for intellectual pursuits. Speaking of which, how are your studies coming along, dear?”

Livya had slumped onto the chaise longue at Mother’s office dramatically and bemoaned, yet again, her foolishness for choosing the subject of Ezerism Versus Art as her concentration at the University. “Not very well. I can’t help but wonder, Mother, why are we even studying Art? No one has practiced it for ages. There is so very little to know about it, and more often than not, I feel like I’m groping about in the dark, making wild guesses about the very nature of Art. And so much of Ezerism is buried in mindless worship. I want to study it as an objective scholar, not as a believer. I need to switch concentrations. Perhaps to Metallurgy, so I can follow in your footsteps.”

A corner of Mother’s mouth had twitched then, and Livya had groaned again. “You’re about to say ‘I told you so,’ aren’t you?”

Mother had merely shrugged in such a way that confirmed that she was very definitely thinking something along the lines of “I told you so.” To be fair, she’d been against Livya choosing Ezerism Versus Art as a concentration during her first year at the University. In fact, deep in the recesses of her heart, Livya might admit to herself that perhaps she had chosen the mysterious subject of Ezerism Versus Art as a concentration *because* Mother was so against it. Sometimes, it was hard being the only child of the woman whose invention in Metallurgy brought about the fall of an entire dynasty and ushered in a new era. No other concentration offered the same amount of excitement, but in Metallurgy, anything Livya did would be dwarfed by Mother’s invention, so what was the point?

Now, Cerra’s eyes glittered as she grabbed Livya’s hands. “It’s not a party. It’s a debate. At the Sades Drinking Room.”

That woke her up. The Sades Drinking Room was where all the notable philosophers and scholars gathered to debate. The up-and-comers, fizzing with nervous fervor; the older, grizzled scientists, weathered by years of dangerous experiments; and everyone else of note in between. Thanks to their respective positions in the Prestige, Mother and Father were regulars, and how she’d begged for them to let her tag along, but they’d always told her that she had to get in through her own achievements.

“Nepotism,” Father had once intoned, “is but a branch on the tree of monarchy. Kings and queens are born into power. Do they deserve it? Not at all. I will not have my daughter be born into power. You want a place at the Drinking Room, you will have to earn it, my dear.”

And now, it seemed, she had indeed earned a place there, all on her own accord. She leapt out of bed, her blood effervescent, fizzing with energy, and she just about snatched the cream-colored paper out of Cerra’s limp hands. Cerra, dear Cerra, was always weak and soft, like a drooping flower. One night years ago, Mother had had one glass of wine too many, and she’d confessed to Father that she wished they had

taken in a different girl to be Livya's Sectator because Cerra seemed too weak-willed to match Livya's spirited personality. Father had muttered a low laugh before saying that Cerra was already bound and sworn to be Livya's Sectator, and that her quiet and calm disposition was a perfect balance for Livya's fiery demeanor. The cruel detachment in their voices had shocked Livya. She was glad that Cerra hadn't been near her, to hear Livya's parents speak of her in such a way.

Livya read the words on the invitation out loud, reveling in the rich way they sounded coming out of her mouth. "'To Miss Alivya Bellevue, First Year Scholar at the University of Velingard.'" She paused to squeal along with Cerra. "'We hereby invite you to attend an evening of discourse on the following subject: demons and Art in the time of Ezeri.'"

"That's exactly your dissertation!"

"So it is." Livya swallowed. What were the chances of that? The Sades Drinking Room debate society had started twenty years ago as soon as the dust from the revolution settled, and not once in that time had they discussed Art, even in passing. They were snooty, turning their noses up at anything that was even mildly occult, and Art wasn't just occult, it had been extinct for long enough now that many scholars and laypeople alike had started to debate even its existence. And demons were an even more taboo subject than Art, because they were such a major touchstone of the Minster of Ezeri. The High Priest was always preaching about how demons used to rule the land and only Ezeri's light and blessing could dispel them, and how, as the city progressed away from Ezerism, it was only a matter of time before the demons started to come back. Whoever had decided on this topic of discourse must be a risk-taker. Livya felt a sense of excitement at the thought of meeting people like her, people who weren't afraid of delving into topics that everyone else found ridiculous, or volatile, or dangerous.

Gone now was her regret over choosing Art as her topic of study. She was clearly wrong about it being a dead subject, especially now that it was to be the subject of a debate at the Drinking Room. And the fact

that they'd given her an invitation must mean that they'd noticed her at the University, maybe even read her essays on the topic.

She continued reading the rest of the invitation: "The discourse will begin at exactly midnight tonight. IMPORTANT: The debates are often highly sensitive and contentious in nature. A true scholarly discussion explores all angles, sometimes even those considered wrong by less inquisitive minds. Therefore, as per the tradition of the Sades Drinking Room, we ask that you do not reveal any information about the debate to anybody. If a breach of confidentiality is detected and traced back to you, you will be permanently banned from the Sades Drinking Room. Exceptions are allowed for Sectators."

Cerra's eyebrows rose about as far up as they would go. "Does that mean I'll be going with you?"

A laugh stole out of Livya. She hadn't even dared to hope that Cerra might be allowed to attend, but as she paused to ponder the invitation, it made more and more sense. Of course Cerra would be allowed to attend. As Livya's Sectator, Cerra had sworn a blood oath to be her loyal subject for the rest of her life, and thus she should be privy to whatever knowledge Livya had. She'd attended all of Livya's lessons at the University, after all, and taken the exams alongside her.

Instead of being giddy with joy, Cerra chewed on her lower lip and said, "It strikes me as odd that this is to be kept secret."

"This is how it always is!" Even as Livya said this, she knew in her heart of hearts that, well, she didn't actually *know* if this was how the Sades Drinking Room ran its discussions. But it seemed completely reasonable and believable that they might do it this way. "Like they said, these debates are often of a sensitive nature, so it is only sensible to expect discretion from those who partake."

Cerra nodded. "Yes, that does sound sensible."

"An invitation to the Sades Drinking Room! This is wonderful!" Livya clapped like a small child, and Cerra giggled.

A discussion of Art! Oh, but if Livya could only tell Mother and

Father. They would be delighted. They would tell her how to prepare, what to expect. What if she was called upon to remark on the subject? Her skin prickled at the thought. Surely not.

But maybe . . .

She washed while Cerra prepared her dress. True to her thoughtful nature, she'd picked out a dark green today, accompanied by a rich brown underskirt. It made Livya look older, more somber. Respectable. Livya's hair was braided into a tighter knot than usual, adding yet more years to her otherwise youthful features. At twenty years of age, Livya was sure to be one of the youngest present at the debate.

"There. You look every bit as boring as any old scholar," Cerra announced, stepping back.

Livia gazed into the mirror and took a deep breath. The outfit lent her a certain gravitas. She would make sure to take along her biggest leather briefcase, as well as her darkest leather ledger, and perhaps she might even swipe Father's reading glasses? Yes, that would work very well. Livya lifted her chin, studying herself from different angles. "First Year Scholar, Alivya Bellevue, reporting for tonight's debate."

"Cerra Bellevue, also First Year Scholar, Sectator to Miss Alivya Bellevue." Cerra hopped up so she was next to Livya and the two of them grinned into the mirror. Times like these, Livya wondered how it was that they could be so similar and yet so different. They were about the same stature, though on good days Livya was perhaps a pinch taller than Cerra. They were both blond, but Livya's hair was shiny and smooth, thanks to Cerra's patient nightly combing, while Cerra's was flattened into a matronly bun that made her look much older than her own twenty years. There, however, the similarities ended. Cerra wasn't much to look at, and she liked it that way. The only makeup she wore, she did so to blend in—no rouge or lip stain or charcoal on the brows, only a light layer of powder to smooth her complexion and make her even more unnoticeable. Whenever Livya tried to push something of decadence on her, whether it be a small trinket or a spritz of perfume, she would say, "It is not a Sectator's purpose to stand out."

She stood out in the ways that mattered to Livya, though, and that was enough. She was the best sparring partner in both studies and sports. At dinnertime, with Mother and Father often stuck at this late-night meeting and that important briefing at the Prestige, it was Cerra who kept Livya company, the two of them covering all sorts of topics, from the Minster to all of the exciting scientific discoveries that the Prestige was making now that they were no longer under the Revvens' regime.

"You mustn't look too pleased at breakfast," Cerra reminded Livya as they bustled out of the room, "or else your parents will know that something has happened."

"Argh," Livya groaned. "It's killing me, not being able to tell them! How come they're allowed to tell me bits and pieces of their nights at Sades?"

Cerra shrugged. "Perhaps they are more confident of their standing in the society?"

"Good point."

"And far be it from me to tell you of your standing amongst the other scholars, but it is only our first year at the University, after all . . ."

"And unlike Mother, I have not made a discovery that led to the revolution and birth of our current government. Yes, I am aware, Cerra." Livya let out her breath in a sniff. "You're right. As far as the folks at the Drinking Room debate society are concerned, I am a lowly nobody and shall be treated as such. I'll have to prove to them that I am trustworthy. I won't tell anyone, not even Mother or Father."

"Don't look so sour." Cerra nudged her with her elbow. "This will be the first invitation of many, I'm sure of it. And just imagine the looks on your parents' faces when they attend one of these meetings and see you at the podium, giving an impassioned speech on Art."

Livya couldn't help laughing at that. "You are ridiculous." Despite that, she got a secret little rush of excitement at the thought of Mother and Father seeing her as Cerra had described. One way or another, Livya had to get behind that podium one day.

## AN EDGE SHARP ENOUGH

Cerra didn't have to worry about Mother and Father noticing the girls' unusually gay spirits; when the two young women walked into the dining room, Mother and Father were so deep in conversation with each other that they barely glanced their way. Livya did not resemble Mother or Father. Instead of the fair hair and pale skin Livya had been born with, both Mother and Father had dark hair and skin that remained a light shade of milk tea, even in the darkest of winters. It was something that used to bother Livya, as a child. She'd ask Mother when her hair would turn dark like Mother's, and Mother would laugh and tell her that she was her golden child, and she didn't want Livya any other way.

Cerra and Livya exchanged looks as they each took a plate from the side table. The dining room was grand, bright and airy with high ceilings and golden morning light streaming in through the large windows. As usual, there was a modest but satisfying assortment of baked goods and fresh fruit, as well as a big bowl of yogurt. And as usual, Livya tried to control her appetite, as was befitting a young woman of her stature, but soon succumbed to the temptation of a second pastry as well as a second handful of dried fruit for her yogurt. Cerra was more sensible, chewing every mouthful slowly to keep from overeating. When was Cerra not sensible, that would be the question.

But even after they were done eating, Mother and Father still did not seem to notice their presence. "Good morning!" Livya called out, louder than necessary.

They both jerked up as though they'd only just noticed their surroundings. There was a split second where something crawled through Livya's stomach, curdling everything. Fear, trailing a cold finger across her skin. Her parents looked so serious, so worried. Something was wrong.

"What's the matter?"

Father broke into a smile. "Nothing, darling. Good morning, girls. Had a good night's sleep?"

He wasn't giving anything away, so Livya moved her questioning glance to Mother, who seemed preoccupied with folding up her news-

paper—or maybe she was valiantly avoiding Livya’s eyes. “Mother?” Livya’s voice came out sharp-edged.

She glanced up and stretched her mouth into what was probably supposed to be a smile but looked more like a mouth being tightened. “Morning, girls! You’re up late today. I heard you received some mail, Livya. Was it another invitation to a party? I hope it’s a fun one this time, not like that last one.” She laughed, a terrible sound, like hollow glass.

“Something is wrong.” Livya didn’t say it as a question, because it seemed painfully clear that something was amiss.

Father sighed loudly. “It’s nothing to worry about, Livya. It’s just these damned Kazgarthian ships.”

“Ah.” Livya released her breath. This would not be the first time that Father had a problem with the Kazgarthians. They were Velingard’s main trading partners, over in the far northern continent, a place so different from their own land as to be almost alien in nature. Livya loved hearing anything and everything about Kazgarth. After all, Art originated there. Her studies would not be complete without a journey to the north, something that Mother said would happen only over her dead body. Livya never fought her on that, mostly because she held a firm belief deep down inside that she would one day make it happen on her own. “What about the ships?” she asked.

What about the ships indeed. The ships were a major part of the trade agreement between Velingard and Kazgarth. Velingard gave them the best ships, modern ones that were made of adther, and in return, Kazgarth gave them silks, grains, unrefined ore of various metals—things that were harder to come by in a city as developed as Velingard. The Empress of Kazgarth was a hard negotiator and had driven a bargain so exacting that Father’s hair turned ever grayer each time he dealt with one of her envoys. But as far as Livya knew, the deal was done—had been done decades ago, right after the revolution. It was a deal helmed by Father, and it was one of many things that made Livya so proud of him.

“They’re claiming that the ships aren’t well-made,” Father grumbled, displeasure lining his face. “As if that were possible! As though we don’t pride ourselves on our workmanship.”

Mother tossed the newspaper onto the table and Livya picked it up and opened it. Sure enough, today’s headline screamed: DIVINE EMPRESS OF KAZGARTH FURIOUS AT THE PRESTIGE. Below that, in slightly smaller letters: *Thousands dead as dozens of Kazgarthian ships sink in the North Sea.*

“They sank?” Cerra gasped, horror apparent in her voice.

“It’s not on us!” Father snapped.

Cerra and Livya both started. Father rarely raised his voice, if at all. He was the mildest-mannered man Livya had ever known, always so measured and calm—precisely why President Garian appointed him the Head of Foreign Relations at the Prestige. But now, red tinted his cheeks as he continued on his rant. “That’s the problem with these—these Kazgarthians. I told Garian, I said to him, ‘We shouldn’t bother trading our ships with them.’ But does he listen? Of course not. ‘Oh, we needed the funds,’ he said, so here we are. I bet the problem is that their armies hadn’t bothered maintaining the engines, and the salt water’s gotten into everything and broken down the mechanisms. They’re at the bottom of the ocean now, though, with no way to investigate, and so they’re blaming it on us.”

“Can’t you send engineers out there to the remaining fleet?” Livya said, desperate to help. “Refresh the Kazgarthians on how to maintain the sophisticated mechanisms?”

“It’s too late for that now. Their ships have sunk. I doubt a refresher course is what they want.”

Livya blanched at the shortness in Father’s tone. He was usually so patient with her, always happy to hear her philosophical and scientific musings. He rarely told her outright that she was wrong. Instead, he gently nudged her to considering alternatives or pushed her to go deeper into her reasoning.

Before Livya could say anything else, Father let out a frustrated sigh and pushed back from the table. “I have to go. Garian will be screaming for someone to put out this fire.” He turned to Mother. “You should come too. He’s going to want to hear from you as well, mark my words.”

“Yes.” Mother finished the last of her coffee as Father stormed out.

“Why do you have to go as well?” Livya said.

Mother glanced at Livya and Cerra, as though just recalling that they were in the room too. “The ships are made with adther, Livya—you know that as well as I do. And anything that involves adther naturally would involve me.”

“But adther is indestructible,” Livya said, and it wasn’t just blind loyalty that made her say it. She was a scholar through and through; back in prep school, she’d done extensive reading on this precious metal that her mother had invented. Everything about adther was perfect. It was lightweight yet stronger than anything ever invented.

“Unfortunately, my dear girls, you will come to realize that science isn’t always as straightforward as you might think. If you’d chosen a more respectable subject to concentrate on at the University, you would know that, darling. And now, please excuse me while I clean up this mess.”

Livya looked down at her hands and noticed that they were both balled up into fists. She forced herself to release them. Mother just couldn’t help herself, could she? She always claimed that Livya had the freedom to choose whatever area of study she was interested in at the University, but the truth came down to this: Mother considered only the hard sciences to be subjects worth studying. The worst part about this wasn’t actually Mother’s disapproval, but Livya’s sneaking suspicion that she was right. It was rare to have a single day go by without Livya secretly worrying that she might be wasting her time studying Art and Ezerism—which was why Livya also studied as much as she could about the hard sciences in her spare time. Who knew? Maybe one day, she could come up with some kind of scientific breakthrough, just as her mother did. One could hope.

## AN EDGE SHARP ENOUGH

And this whole mess with the Kazgarthian ships . . . Well, she was sure it would blow over within the week.

Mother would do as she always did—locate the issue and fix it. Father would smooth things over. Everything would be back to normal by tomorrow. And all she had to worry about, really, was the debate tonight.