
She who
spins the cloud,
weaves the storm
WE
ARE
BLOOD
AND
THUNDER
KESIA
LUPO
BLOOMSBURY

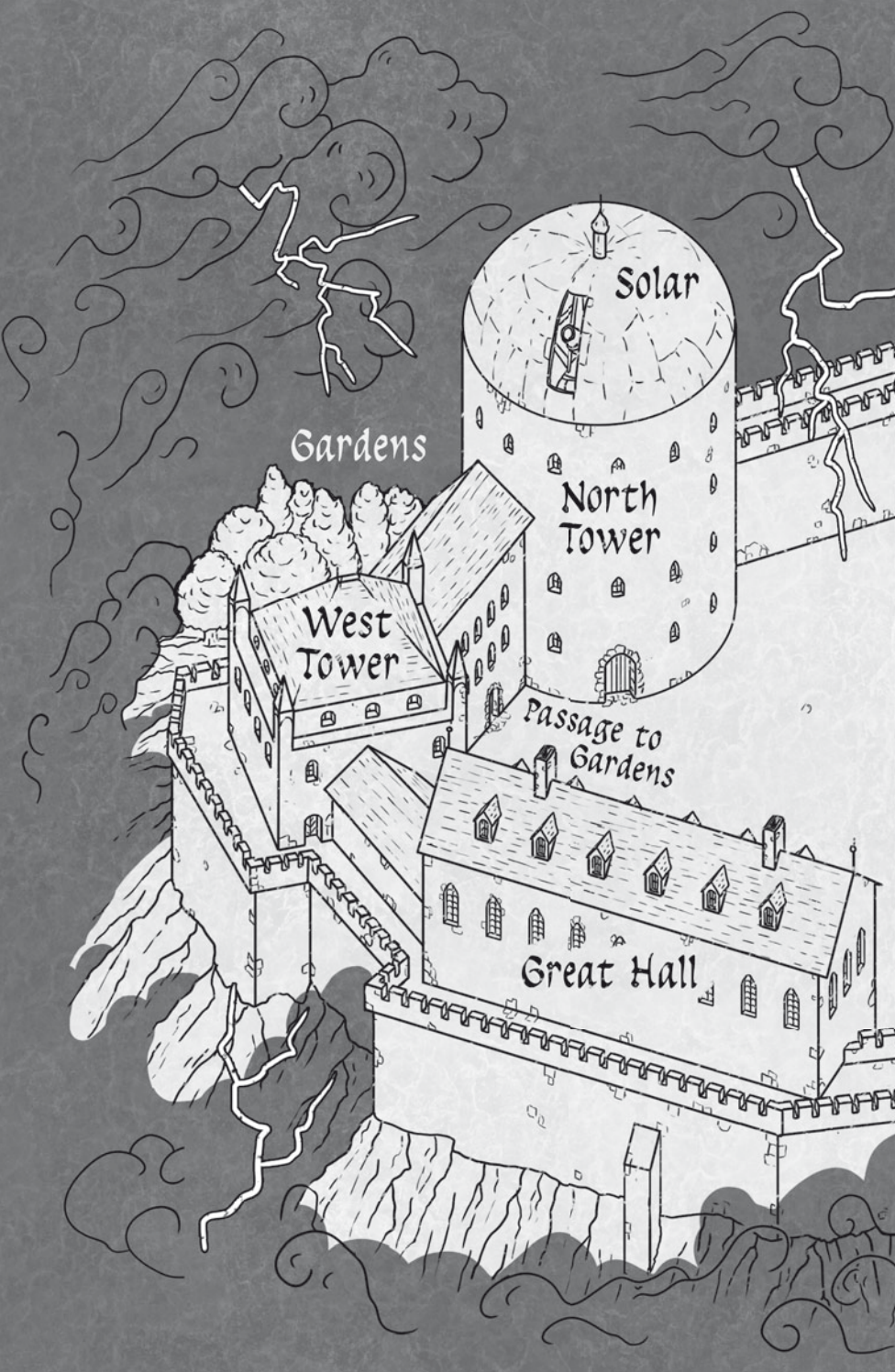
WE ARE BLOOD AND THUNDER

KESIA LUPO

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY


VALORIAN CONTINENT
Storm Cloud
Duke's Forest
King's Road
Foothills


N
W
E
S
Wastelands
City of Kings
1
2
3
Port Regal
1. Temple District
2. Commercial District
3. Royal District
Scarossa
The Wishes


Solar
Gardens
North Tower
West Tower
Passage to Gardens
Great Hall


The Gates
The Castle
East Tower
Kennels
South Tower

HOLY COUNCIL OF THE NINE GODS



FAUL
THE HUNTSMAN GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **SILVER**

Disciples of Faul are responsible for policing the magical population. They are tasked with finding and bringing in rogues, despatching radicals and capturing magical criminals. Few are suited to the magic of Faul, and the life-threatening demands exacted upon disciples are sure to dissuade some potential candidates.



MYTHRIS
THE MASKED GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **PURPLE**

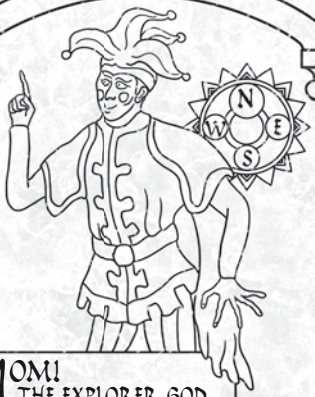
Disciples of Mythris are known as spies and assassins, often employed by the state, sometimes by private individuals for the right price. Little is known about the specific content of their work, and their temples tend to be hidden away.



JOK
THE WARRIOR GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **RED**

Disciples of Jok are combat specialists, learned in the arts of fighting and military tactics. This temple is one of the most populous – few major wars have been fought in recent times and disciples are instead well compensated as general peacekeepers and guards.



NOMI
THE EXPLORER GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **GREEN**

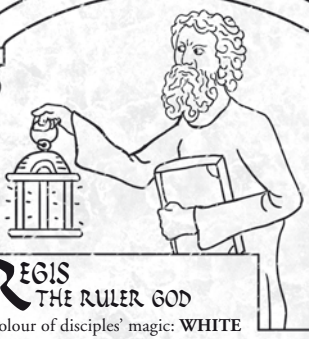
Disciples of Nomi are skilled in spells of navigation and particularly scrying (the finding of lost things). Very few people are suited to this set of skills despite the lure of the exotic locations to which disciples are posted.



IMRIS
THE HEALER GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **BLUE**

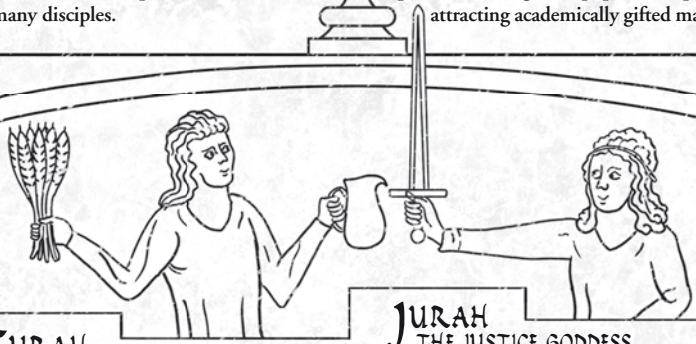
Disciples of Imris are specialist healers and physicians. Although priests of other temples may be physicians, the disciples of Imris are multifaceted and incredibly delicate in their expertise. Imris has many disciples.



REGIS
THE RULER GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **WHITE**

Disciples of Regis are cut out for leadership and politics. They have truth-seeing and divinatory abilities, useful in both these professions. Regis is a popular temple attracting academically gifted mages.



TURAH
THE LAND GODDESS
One of the twins

Colour of disciples' magic: **OCHRE**

Disciples of Turah are skilled in agricultural magics, sensing and encouraging growth in the soil and even (for its most powerful disciples) controlling the weather. Turah was once a most revered goddess, but these days few are attracted to this temple.

JURAH
THE JUSTICE GODDESS
The second twin

Colour of disciples' magic: **BLACK**

Disciples of Jurah are rare in Valorian, although in the past they were among the most esteemed, their powers allowing them to null and manipulate the abilities of other mages. Nowadays the few remaining disciples of Jurah play a largely ceremonial role as the king's executioners.



AMORIS
THE GOLDEN GODDESS

Colour of disciples' magic: **GOLD**

Disciples of Amoris study the magics of good fortune and seduction. They are the financiers of Valorian, with their temples (which operate variably as bathhouses or the only legitimate brothels in the continent) by far the most profitable of the nine. An enduringly popular temple.

In the Year of Kings 554, the mountain city state of Duke's Forest was beset by a mysterious vapour. It started out as little more than a few wisps of grey cloud, emanating bafflingly from the earth of the lower town, ruining the townsfolk's garden crops. But gradually, month by month, it grew – vapour became mist, and mist became fog, and the fog, eventually, became a storm cloud.

Inside the cloud, a traveller could expect to encounter flashes of light and rumbling noises, sudden gusts and squalls of thin, poisonous rain that stung bare skin. And sometimes, like the eye of a storm, the cloud appeared to sleep – as still and immutable as the mountain itself.

In the first two years, trade was crippled, domestic animals sickened, the rose gardens of the upper town were ruined – yet the cloud, insatiable, crept uphill towards the castle at the mountain's summit. By the start of the third year, the mountain was swallowed up entirely … and that's when the Pestilence came.

At the start of the fourth year, the Duke shut and chained the city gates, declaring a state of quarantine. After six years, the people of Duke's Forest, ravaged by disease, cut off from the outside world and shrouded from the sky, had sunk into isolation and despair.

Duke's Forest: A History

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PROLOGUE
A Cryptling

Before the storm cloud

Lena swept the last of the dust into her sack and stood up tall, wiping a grimy hand across her forehead. Her brass lantern flickered across the crypt's rough-hewn walls as Hunter slunk past, a twitching rat hanging from his jaws. He dropped it and purred at her, before savaging the poor creature's torso. The largest mouser prowling the crypts, Hunter was vicious, ginger and apparently immortal. For the hundredth time, Lena wondered why he'd picked her bed in which to sleep, leaving dubious gifts of rodents and birds at its foot.

Lena tied the dust sack shut and hoisted it over her shoulder, casting one last look at the empty, fresh-polished sarcophagus where the body would be laid in the morning for its last rites, the Descent. Her stomach twisted and she swallowed hard as bile rose in her throat. Earlier in the afternoon, she'd been allowed to watch while Mortician Vigo prepared the body in one of the special rooms beneath

the gardens. She had managed – but only by digging her nails hard into her palms – to stop herself from fainting.

The dead man's Ancestors lay all around, stretching into darkness. Now, attuned to the scent of the morticians' special preserving ointments, Lena picked out sharp herbal smells beneath the ever-present musk of her world. The tomb itself was relatively small, and while noble families had the luxury of individual sarcophagi, the stonemason's family – like most others – had cut long body-shaped niches into the walls, one over another, or shared two bodies to a resting place. Husband with wife. Sister with brother. Baby with mother.

Each body's empty eye sockets had been sewn open, their eyes replaced with smooth rocks painted as eyes, or sometimes glittering gemstones. Mortician Vigo said that the Ancestors were sleeping, but Lena didn't think so. They were staring at the ceiling, at the floors of the living world above. Waiting.

Waiting for what?

A chill ran down her spine. She touched her forehead, lips and heart in the old sign of reverence. When she'd been very little, the Ancestors had frightened her – she'd had nightmares about the staring stone eyes, about the way the older corpses' flesh and skin were shrunken and leathery, but their hair as thick and lustrous as the day they died. How, from certain angles, even the oldest of the Ancestors looked like living people lying in the dark. But now she was eleven, almost a grown-up, and she wasn't afraid of anything.

Hunter mewed and Lena nearly jumped out of her skin. *I'm not afraid of anything*, she reminded herself firmly, calming her racing heart.

'All right – let's go,' she whispered to the cat, after a deep breath. 'It's a long walk back.'

She tried not to hurry as she started down the passages under the upper town, leading to the network of small cellars beneath the castle that the cryptlings called home. You weren't meant to hurry – it wasn't respectful, Mortician Vigo said. Hunter weaved through her legs, in and out of the lantern light, very nearly tripping her up.

For a time, everything was quiet and ordinary, the only sounds the occasional scuttle of a rat, or the snap of one of the mousetraps Lena had set out on her way down – the cryptlings and the cats were supposed to keep the vermin at bay. But as she drew further through the cobwebbed passages, she started to hear something strange … a voice. It grew louder, gradually: a low, rhythmic murmur, drifting from somewhere up ahead.

Lena frowned and stopped. Who else might be down here in the dead of night? As far as she knew, the stonemason's was the only funeral tomorrow, and she was the only cryptling on duty. No one else was allowed down here.

Suddenly she was frightened. She flicked off her lantern and stood in the dark for a few moments. She didn't like the thought of being seen – didn't like the way people's eyes settled on her, on the black mark on her cheek. She felt

Hunter slide past her legs, hurrying ahead impatiently, as she stood listening in the quiet. The voice carried on – distant and musical. A sad song, perhaps … or a poem. But Lena couldn't make out the words. She wondered if they were in another language.

She continued down the familiar passages in darkness, trailing her fingers along the wall, her footsteps silent in the padded canvas slippers they had to wear in the crypts. The voice grew closer, louder as she neared the passages she knew were directly beneath the castle itself, where the noble Ancestors and their households were interred. But she saw nothing – and after a time, the voice stopped.

Her heart beat faster. Somehow the silence and darkness were more unnerving now that she knew someone, somewhere, was sharing them with her. And that's when she saw it: the flicker of light. She clutched tightly to the iron handle of her lantern and to her dust sack, half-convincing herself to run. Cold sweat broke out across the back of her neck.

At first, she wondered if it was a trick of her eyes in the dark – she'd known it to happen before, green-purple shapes blooming like strange flowers, disappearing and re-forming at a blink. But this was real, she saw, as it grew closer – a clumsy, winding speck of light, fluttering on and off, bright then dim. A … butterfly?

She watched, her heart hammering. She'd never felt so terribly alert, every sense sharp, nearly painful.

The creature was made of metal – filigree wings, a smooth brass body. It landed on the edge of a sarcophagus

nearby, its wings gently rising and falling, rising and falling, like the breath of a tiny animal.

It was beautiful.

Lena set down her things and stepped closer. The light emanating from the creature's body was flickering, like a sputtering candle. She reached out to touch it … but hesitated, fingers outstretched.

All the rules Vigo had ever told her ran through her mind at once, like a flock of startled birds. *Don't reveal your face above ground. Don't touch anybody, especially not anybody who's not a cryptling. Don't touch the Ancestors, except as your duties demand. Don't touch the grave goods. Don't touch anything. To other people, Lena, you are dirty. Everything you touch is sullied.*

And yet … she'd never seen anything so beautiful. Lena stopped thinking. She reached out and cupped the butterfly in her hands. She felt its delicate legs like feathers on her palms. It was incredibly light and made a faint whirring sound like a watch as its wings fluttered weakly.

Suddenly its little light extinguished and the crypt was plunged into darkness. Lena shivered. The creature was silent and still, the slight warmth quickly fading from its body, as if it had never been.

Is it broken?

She waited a few moments more, her heart in her mouth. Somewhere, she could hear hurried footsteps, a voice calling – but if they were searching for the butterfly, they were moving in the wrong direction, some way off to her left. Lena opened her palms and ran her fingers along the

butterfly's body. Its wings were fully outstretched, and she liked the feel of the filigree patterns against her fingertips. It was strangely soothing.

But the butterfly didn't belong to her. She should drop it here and go home.

Even though her mind had decided, her body didn't move. She shouldn't take it, should she? She couldn't. If anyone found out she had removed anything from the crypts, she'd be in trouble. Even if she hadn't found it on a body, it was still grave goods. Who would believe her when she said it had been flying towards her, as if it had chosen her, as if it had *wanted* her to take it?

Somehow it didn't matter: the determination was already hardening in her heart. She wasn't allowed to have things of her own: even her clothes were shared hand-me-downs, her soft shoes worn thin by other cryptlings' feet. And above ground, she knew, the un-Marked children of the upper town had rooms filled with toys and trinkets – and even clothes that only they had worn. Except for the dark birthmark on her cheek, she wasn't any different from them. So why shouldn't she have the butterfly? She felt her breath quicken. It was only one thing. Such a small thing. She'd keep it secret of course. She'd never tell a soul. It would be something hers and hers alone – her only possession. Was that so much to ask?

Lena slipped the metal creature into the inside pocket of her habit, picked up her lantern and sack, and carried on through the tunnels.

ONE
The Hounds

Sixth year of the storm cloud

Lena ran until her lungs felt close to bursting, her feet thumping, sliding on the steep cobblestone road, down the peak of the city towards the walls and the forest beyond.

The Justice's words rang loud in her ears.

You have been found guilty of magecraft.

The storm cloud was all-encompassing, a thick, poisonous gauze clinging to her clothes, obscuring her path.

I sentence you to die.

Islands of muffled light trembled in the gloom – a lit window here, a patch of fading sunlight there. Her feet thumped into greyness, invisible.

The hounds will eat your flesh.

She could hear them – howling, growling. Had they finished off Vigo? Or had they grown tired of his old flesh, now lusting after hers? He'd bought her time, but it was all for nothing. Tears stung her eyes as she pushed herself faster.

Your bones will lie bare under the sky, banished from the sacred crypts.

She could never outrun them. Nobody could. At seventeen, she was far from the youngest to have fallen under the hounds' vicious teeth; you only had to see the chewed-up remains at the foot of the city walls to know that. But there was a chance – just a chance. She had to try.

Your soul will never join the Ancestors, will never feast on the glories of ages past, will never guide the fates.

Lena found herself down in the lowest tier of the city. The fog was thicker here. She stumbled to a halt, suddenly unable to breathe, a crushing pain in her side. Pulling up the neck of her habit to cover her mouth and nose, she felt tears welling behind the glass of her shield-eyes.

You will be dead, in this world and the next.

A howl broke the gloom, then a chorus of howls, swiftly followed by frenzied barking; the hounds were gaining. No time to cry. She turned and ran, harder than ever, hobnailed boots clacking against the pavement.

Soon the city walls loomed above, a small bone crunching under her foot. She felt sick, but pressed on round the curve of the wall, desperately scanning the base where the dark stone met the bone-littered ground. The gates had been locked for two years, bolted with broad beams of oak, ivy grown over the rusted locks – but nearby … Vigo had told her …

Lena scanned the rotted undergrowth for the outline of the old rose bush – and found it, her heart no more than a

hollow, fluttering thing in the back of her throat. She could so easily have missed it altogether, a tangle of bare thorns almost lost among the skeletal remains of its neighbours. Parting the branches with her thick leather gloves, she spotted a slight dip in the earth. So small.

I used it as a child, he'd said, in the few moments they'd had together before the hounds. *I would slip out into the forest to play when I was supposed to be at my lessons. It was before my … deformity.*

She'd shaken her head wordlessly, clutching at his old arthritic hands, the hands which had first picked her up from the steps down to the cryptling cellars as a baby, wailing into the dawn. She'd been crying again, then.

Lena, I cannot run. But you might just be fast and small enough to escape.

It was her only chance.

Lena threw herself to the ground as the howls behind her grew in intensity – along with the clink and scratch of claws on the cobblestones. She pressed herself under the bush, the old thorny stems snagging at her habit and showering her with rot, and scrabbled into the musty darkness beneath the wall. Curling her fingers as best she could into the damp soil, Lena pulled herself forward, wriggling until her feet were almost concealed under the rose bush, the weight of the great thick wall bearing down over her head, dark and cold and ancient.

The gap was tight, her lungs constricting as she forced her shoulders further, her arms outstretched. She thought

she could feel a wisp of air from the other side – but it was then that a bark came from close quarters, followed by a frenzy of growls, a snapping of teeth. Something closed around the tough leather heel of her boot; a surprising strength pulled her backwards. Panic fuelled her. She gripped on to the wall's slick underside with clawed hands. Her shield-eyes snagged on a root, the leather strap snapping. She let them fall, kicked out hard and redoubled her efforts, squirming frantically under the wall until she could see the light filtering through the other side. She squeezed her shoulders forward and, with more difficulty, her hips, ripping the coarse material of her habit. By this time, she had begun to sob – but somehow she forced her way out.

Lena staggered to her feet, half-falling into the forest. Her heart plummeted as she absorbed the sight confronting her. The forest was a picture of decay, the trees visibly withering. A grey residue veiled their bark and occasionally bumped outwards in a strange fungus. The storm cloud was as thick as it was within the walls of the city, flashing and rumbling between the trees. She thought of her shield-eyes, fallen under the wall – but where she had crawled, the hounds could surely follow: she couldn't risk retrieving them. She ran instead, stumbling over roots, slipping on wet leaves. Here and there, a rotted trunk had fallen across the path, or a branch half-snapped from a larger tree threatened her head.

Gradually, the howls and barks faded altogether, but it was a long time before Lena allowed herself to be certain she had not been followed – perhaps the dogs, penned for

so long within the city walls, had been spooked by the alien scents and noises of the forest. Or perhaps the houndmaster had assumed her dead and called them off, or perhaps he'd feared losing them forever among the trees, as so many travellers had been lost before. In any case, she was painfully grateful. She slowed down, rubbed her stinging eyes and caught her breath. She rested her hands on her knees for a moment, her heartbeat slowing – and then she reached for the brass butterfly she kept in the pocket of her robe. It was as big as the palm of her hand, warm from her body. Tracing the delicate filigree of its wings, she felt her breathing slow.

Whenever she held the butterfly, she remembered how she had felt the night she'd found it – or rather, the night it had found her. She had felt wanted. Calm. Secure in the knowledge that she was worth something, because she had something of worth.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a shape – a human shape, hunched at the foot of a tree. Her stomach convulsed and she ducked behind a rotten tangle of undergrowth, pressing her hand against her mouth to stifle a rising scream. But the figure didn't appear to have noticed her. The cloud shifted, alternately revealing and concealing a long cloak, brown boots, large leather gloves. So still, so quiet, his hooded head resting on his chest. Sleeping? But she saw no movement, not a twitch, no rise and fall of breath. Slowly, Lena realised the man was dead.

She slipped the butterfly in her pocket, stood up and walked towards him, her whole body still trembling – but

gradually calming as she approached the corpse. She wasn't afraid of the dead – not unless they … She shook her head, not wanting to think about it. No, it was the living who frightened her.

She crouched, examined a blade dropped near the body, glinting in the faint evening light filtering through cloud and trees. It was a short dagger, the hilt twined with a dragon motif in silver, its eye picked out with a green gem. Hardly thinking, she picked it up, slid it carefully into her belt. As she carried on, she realised the man had been resting on the edge of a small clearing. And she saw another body. A woman, her back turned to Lena, marked out by her perfectly preserved, long red hair, splayed in the mud. And another – a man curled up under his cloak by the blackened remains of a fire. Without meaning to, she glimpsed his face, decayed and ghastly.

These bodies had been here for a long time. Had they been trying to reach the city? They were strangers, surely. What had killed them?

She didn't want to wait to find out.

She returned to the narrow path and carried on at a stumbling run.

After a time, it grew so late that she could barely distinguish the trees from the darknesses in between – but soon she began to see other things, shapes in the fog twisting into suggestions of hands, eyes, mouths. She blinked, rubbing her eyes and cursing the loss of her shield-eyes. No one in Duke's Forest would step outside with their eyes unprotected – the toxic storm cloud caused visions if they were exposed for too

long. Every now and then, larger shapes loomed from between the trees, and she could not prevent herself from starting backwards before they dissipated, even though she knew they weren't real.

She imagined the strangers' bodies in the clearing moving, rising up, following her. *Don't. Think.* But despite her stern thoughts, and the exhaustion screaming at her to stop, she quickened her pace.

Eventually, Lena could continue no longer. Her legs gave out, and she felt her fingers burrow into the mossy mulch of the forest floor. The hallucinations were worsening. She knew she was vulnerable out here – to *real* threats – if she wasn't able to run. She remembered Vigo's tales of the giant snakes and wild boar that infested the wood, and screwed her eyes shut against a wave of terror. She took a deep breath. She needed her wits now more than ever.

But the forest stretched in all directions, and she had long lost the road – how would she escape? And even if she were to find her way out, what fate could a girl like her expect in the wider world? She felt for the birthmark on her cheek, several shades darker than the brown of her skin. Even the people of Duke's Forest had regarded cryptlings – marked out by their various deformities – with a mixture of disgust and begrudging respect for their duties. Vigo had said the gods were cruel, their followers toying with dangerous magic. What would they make of her? What did they do to Marked people outside of Duke's Forest?

Would *they* try to execute her too?

Lena felt a sickly chill spread from her throat to her stomach as she considered the most terrible possibility of all: what if the storm cloud had swallowed everything, leaving the city of Duke's Forest the lonely centre of the universe? What if those people had been trying to reach Duke's Forest to save themselves?

No – she could not give up. Lena opened her eyes and dragged her exhausted body upright once more, determined to continue, but now she was surrounded, not by trees, but by a mass of people, each one of them turning towards her – each one of them familiar. These were the dead of Duke's Forest, the dead the Pestilence had taken, the dead she had helped to undress, wash and embalm, replacing their eyes with the painted stones and glittering gems that now bore into her.

She was a convicted mage, and an outcast, and the Ancestors were angry.

She stumbled back against a tree, touched her forehead, lips and chest in a silent prayer, her hand shaking. 'Please …' she managed, but the Ancestors' hearts were hollowed out. The world turned black.

Lena had been sixteen the first time it had happened, a year before the Justice had condemned her to die. She'd been helping Vigo embalm an old guardsman, dead of the Pestilence, in one of the special preparatory chambers beneath the castle's gardens. Thick glass bricks had been set

in the ceiling, allowing weak light – and the occasional flash of the storm cloud's blue-green lightning – to filter down on their delicate work.

She had pulled up the guardsman's left eyelid to sew it in place with the curved needle and special white thread. Eyes were something of a specialty of Lena's, with her slender, accurate fingers – and although she had once hated the feel of the cold gems slotting into empty sockets, in time she had come to find it satisfying.

'Have you thought about what you're going to do?' Master Vigo had said, in the manner of one who had asked the question a hundred times. He was in the process of removing and potting the organs, a special stoneware jar for each one. The smell of spoiling flesh filled the air, but Lena had grown used to it long ago. 'You ought to. You've barely a year until you come of age.' He deftly pulled the liver through the small incision he had cut in the body's side and slipped it into the waiting vessel, already packed with the sharp-smelling preservative oils and herbs.

'I haven't thought about it,' Lena lied, trying to sound dismissive. 'A year is a long time.' In fact, she'd been thinking about it a lot recently. She'd never chosen this life. The birthmark on her face had chosen it for her – or rather her parents had, whoever they were, when they decided to abandon her to the fate of a cryptling rather than raise a Marked child.

'It's not, and you're a fool to pretend you can put it off for much longer.'

Lena shrugged as she pulled the fourth stitch neatly through the thin skin of the lid. Vigo was a miserable old goat, but she'd come to love him, and she knew he was right. As she leaned forward to make her fifth and last stitch, she felt the weight of the brass butterfly in her pocket. Her secret, ever since she had found it fluttering in the catacombs. She knew if anyone saw it, she'd be accused of stealing grave goods, a terrible crime for a cryptling – but somehow she couldn't bear to let it go. It was the only thing she had.

'You'd make a good mortician,' said Vigo, limping around the body to inspect her work as she tied the thread and snipped it with a pair of small, sharp scissors. 'You've a steady hand, Lena – and you're quiet, respectful.' She glanced up at him. She could tell his leg was hurting him today – the tension around his eyes and mouth showed itself in hard lines through his pale, papery skin. He had a wooden peg from the knee down to replace the limb they'd had to amputate, but no matter how hard Lena tried to find him the right kind of padding, and the right sort of salve, the place where it met the stub was nearly always sore.

She smiled at him weakly and shook her head, setting down her needle. She couldn't tell him the truth. She couldn't admit that because every option involved working in the crypts for the rest of her life, she didn't feel like she had a choice at all. Subconsciously, she touched the mark on her face, a black stain as big as a child's clenched fist. If it weren't for the mark, she'd be ordinary. Imagine. Where would she be now? *Maybe with my parents in a*

mansion in the upper town, eating sweets and laughing … Lena pictured strong sunlight spilling through tall windows, no cowl to shadow her face. She tilted her head slightly towards the glass roof, imagining how the warmth would feel against her skin.

'Lena?' Master Vigo shot her a concerned glance. 'Are you all right?'

'Sorry,' she said, returning her attention to her task, slotting more of the white thread through her needle. It was stupid to fantasise as she had done when she was younger. Life was difficult for everyone now: for a year, the city had been under quarantine. Instead of eating sweets in sunny rooms, half the people of the city were dead, rich and poor alike, and the other half lived in fear. As the cloud had deepened and darkened, strange flashes and rumbles disturbing its noxious peace, the Pestilence raged through the population, spreading its fever of hallucinations and shivers that left each victim dead in a matter of hours. The disease had visited three times – always in the warmest months, as if it thrived on the meagre heat of a mountain summer. It was September, and the latest flurry of deaths was drawing to an end.

'Why not be a mortician?' Vigo went on, warming to his subject as he pulled out the intestines. 'People need us more than ever. We are busier than we've ever been. And the Justice knows he won't find any mages among our number. You'll be safe here.'

'The Justice,' Lena whispered. 'Yes … I am glad to be safe from him.' Ever since the Duke had fallen ill, the Justice had

ruled the city with a cold, hard grip. Like most of his citizens, the Justice knew the unnatural storm and Pestilence could have but one cause: magic. Unlike most of his citizens, the Justice had dedicated his attention to searching for the mage or mages responsible. He was obsessed, the other cryptlings whispered, ordering his guards to search for evidence of magic, burning the few magical books and toys in the city, his vicious hounds chasing suspect after suspect to an early, gruesome grave at the city walls. Lena could hear the dogs sometimes, howling in the kennels at dawn, and the sound chilled her to the core. But the cryptlings, dedicated to serving the Ancestors, had never suffered under his rule. The Justice *loved* the Ancestors. Since he'd accepted the reins of power, the ceremonies and rituals dedicated to their honour had grown threefold – old prayers and ceremonies resurrected, new ones invented.

Vigo slid the remains of food from the intestines on to the floor, a system of flowing drains transporting the waste out of the city. 'But what do you say, Lena? Would you like to be a mortician?'

Lena wasn't listening. All right, so she was safe down here – but it still wasn't enough, was it? What if she wasn't meant to be here at all? What if this was all some big mistake – like her parents had left her little basket on the steps just for a moment, and returned to find it gone? Or she'd been swapped with another child by accident? What if there was some other life she should be living, some other place where she would belong? She didn't feel like she

belonged here, that was for sure – and yet this was where she was trapped. She found her vision blurring, frustration trembling her fingers.

'Why aren't you answering?' Vigo snapped. Quickly he tried to soften his voice, though he still sounded irritated as he packed the intestines into their stoneware grave. 'If you want to try something else, you only need say.'

He'd misunderstood her silence completely. Lena felt instantly sorry: it wasn't his fault she felt this way. She gathered herself together and spoke at last. 'I would like to stay with you, Vigo, of course I would. I just wish … I just wish there were more options to choose from. Before the quarantine …' She looked down at the corpse. One eye sewn open, one eye shut, his face was frozen in a grotesque wink.

Vigo sighed, sealing the intestine jar with a deft twist of his swollen-knuckled hand. 'Before the quarantine, you would have had the option to leave Duke's Forest altogether, is that what you're saying?' As he set the jar down and wiped his hands, he looked very old and tired, and Lena knew he understood.

'No, I just …' She shook her head. 'This is my home, Vigo. But it sometimes feels like a prison too.'

He sighed. 'People like us are marked out for the life we lead, Lena – marked out by the Ancestors themselves. I understand your frustration. When I was your age, I wanted to see the world too – but what was I to do, as a cripple? It is cruel, in a way, the fate that we are handed. My parents abandoned me after my accident. I was a child of six, old

enough to remember who they were, to remember their love, our home, my brothers and sisters, my name.' Lena said a silent prayer of thanks that she had been so young when she was abandoned. It was easier not quite knowing what you had lost – and although Vigo spoke briskly, in his usual matter-of-fact tone, she could hear the pain beneath his words. 'It is cruel,' he carried on, his voice quickening, 'to give it all up. But it is also an honour. Our families abandon us, divest us of our names and sever our ties to our own blood Ancestors – but it's only in order that we might serve *all* the Ancestors. Think on it.'

Lena thought on it, but found herself wondering which of the corpses under the mountain were related to her by blood – and whether she'd prepared a body for a grave that was an aunt, or a cousin, or a brother, without ever realising. Had Vigo ever prepared one of his parents or siblings, recognising their faces but unable to acknowledge them for who they were?

'Ordinary people *never* see the Ancestors,' Vigo continued, 'except at funerals. Are we not blessed to be around them constantly? The work we do is the most sacred of all work. I have been here seventy years, Lena, and I feel my life has had purpose, and joy, and sorrow, as much as any other life. I had a wife for many years.' His eyes grew suddenly watery and he turned aside. 'I had a child.'

Despite the sincerity in his voice, the suppressed tears, she wasn't in the mood to play along. Not today. 'Seventy years in darkness,' Lena said, setting down her needle and

picking up the green painted eye-stone, not caring if she hurt the old man's feelings. 'A wife and child who lived and died in darkness. Sounds bad enough to me.'

'It is not as if we never go outside, Lena,' he snapped.

'Hidden under a cowl!' she protested, grasping the eye-stone tightly, feeling it cold and hard in her palm. 'We might as well be underground. It's like *they*' – she gestured at the frosted glass ceiling, at the city above – 'can't bear to see us. Like we shame them. I don't feel chosen at all. I don't feel special. I feel the opposite of special.' She turned to the opened eye, scooped out the eyeball with a spoon and slotted the gem in its place. She sullenly plopped the eyeball in a copper dish.

Vigo went quiet for a moment, studiously tending the herbal mixture with which he would pack the dead man's cavities, the whisper and rattle of the pestle and mortar the only sound in the preparatory chamber. In the silence, Lena grew to regret her words about his wife and son, who had died years before she was born, but she wasn't sure how to say sorry. Eventually, Vigo apologised instead, his voice slightly unsteady. 'I am sorry you feel this way. If not for the quarantine, you would have had the opportunity to leave forever. But now …'

'I never said I wanted to leave forever.' Lena hung her head, feeling shame burn tight and hot in her chest. 'I don't. No one should have to face such a stark choice – to stay forever or leave forever. What kind of a choice is that? I just … I just want a *real* choice. I want to feel like I'm in control for once.'

She picked up her needle again and started to pull back the second eyelid to sew it into place.

That's when it happened.

That's when the dead man's eye turned to her face and looked right at her, accusingly. She felt the swivel of it under her touch.

She leaped backwards, dropping her needle and thread and knocking an urn of priceless embalming oil with her elbow. It toppled and shattered.

Vigo looked at her as if she'd gone mad.

'He …' Even as the words started to leave her lips, she swallowed them. The man's eye was dead and sightless once more. 'I … I'm not feeling well.'

It was true: she felt sick. She had imagined it. She *must* have imagined it. Vigo sent her back to her cell and cleaned up the mess – despite his infirmities – insisting that she rest. Lying on her bed like a corpse herself, staring at the ceiling, she had felt terrible. She played the moment over and over in her mind. Even when Hunter had sat on her chest, purring like a furnace, she'd felt somehow detached from the world, trapped in that moment of horror. *Was* she going mad?

Later, in the refectory at dinner, she'd asked the other cryptlings if they had any stories – Ancestors moving or twitching as they were prepared … But it was the usual stuff. The hunchbacked boy who sat opposite Lena told her he'd prepared a corpse that farted. The deaf girl next to her mimed how she'd watched as a dead man's arm had risen up like a

balloon, and everyone laughed. Lena nodded, smiling, pretending her experience had been similar. It was true: the contents of bellies could sometimes flood the body with gas, and that could make a corpse move. She told herself that was what had happened. But deep down she knew it was different. Who had ever heard of gas moving eyes? And besides, the man's eye had fixed on her like he knew what she was doing – what she was *thinking*. Gas couldn't do that.

Next thing Lena knew there were footsteps, and she started from the forest floor, spitting dead leaves from her open mouth, scrambling back towards the protection of the tree trunk behind her. A shadow began to emerge from the fog. Lena tried to raise herself to her feet, tried to run, but she could not, her legs cramped with cold.

The shadow solidified into a darker mass, holding a bulb of purple light. The figure stopped before her, as if Lena had been its destination all along. She recoiled. There was something wrong with the face of this creature – a smooth brass surface with glassy black eyes and a gaping mouth. A faint *tick-tick-tick* noise appeared to emanate from the face, a cog turning somewhere at its jaw. Lena's hands scrambled at the sides of the tree as she pulled herself upright, shivering, and she hurriedly drew the knife from her belt.

'Get back!' she managed shakily, swiping the blade through the air.

The purple light sped towards her, and Lena saw it was attached to the end of a long cane, which rapped the back

of her hand sharply. Her silver knife went spinning to the ground. She snatched her hand to her chest, her knuckles burning.

This was no monster, she realised, raising her eyes. The strange face was a mask, and the figure was a woman's – a rich woman's, at that. This she could tell by the velvet dress, cinched in at a tiny waist, the golden round talisman hanging almost to her stomach, the gold-tipped cane at her side and the slim kid-leather boots. Long fair hair had been wound into a tight coil at the top of the lady's head. But she wasn't just a woman. The light on her cane was no ordinary lantern. How could it be? The light glowed not yellow, like fire, but an unnatural purple.

She's a mage. Lena's stomach twisted in terror.

She watched as the woman observed her own clothes: the faded black habit, the cowl shadowing her face. The lady reached forward with her cane and pushed back the hood; the bright purple light smarted Lena's eyes. She put the bulb of the cane under Lena's chin, and turned it one way and then the other. Lena could feel a strange, mild heat burning inside the glass. Her heart hammered in her chest. The mask's gaze seemed to linger on the dark birthmark on her smooth cheek – perhaps with disgust, perhaps curiosity.

And then, through the grille over the mouth of the mask, a metallic rasp said, 'So you're a cryptling. What are you doing here?'

Lena was silent.

'I said, what are you doing here? What of the quarantine?'

said the woman. 'Speak now and tell me the truth or I shall lose my patience.' She had an authority to her voice that made Lena afraid *not* to answer.

She shook her head, trying to steady her senses. 'I … was convicted of magecraft and sentenced to death. I escaped. The Justice …' She trailed off, clenching her fists as grief and anger overwhelmed her.

'The Justice? What of the Justice?'

'He's been hunting mages since the quarantine. He thinks there are mages in the city, causing the storm cloud. And he convicted … me. He killed my …' What had he been to her? A parent? A teacher? A grandfather? 'He killed my master. For trying to protect me. But before he was murdered, Vigo told me a way out.'

'I see.' The masked lady regarded her coolly, offering no sympathy, no apology. But she lowered her cane, and somehow Lena felt she understood.

After a few moments, she found the courage to speak again. 'I … please, I don't know the way out of the forest. Can you help me?'

The lady nodded slowly. 'I will … but you must do something for me too.'

Lena waited. What could she possibly do to help this lady?

'A man has been pursuing me – you will find him at the forest edge. His name is Emris. You are to tell him that I helped you. Tell him that I said he is mistaken, that I am innocent.' She rapped the side of Lena's head with the cane. 'Do you understand me, girl? Repeat it.'

Lena stammered and flushed with indignation. If she wasn't so reliant on this stranger's help, she'd have told the lady where to stick her cane. 'I … I am to tell the man at the forest edge that you helped me, that he is mistaken and you are innocent.' *Innocent of what?* she wondered.

'Good.' The woman lowered her cane. 'Now go. There are those in the world that do not come from Duke's Forest, nor believe in its superstitions.' Her voice was heavy with a cold kind of pity. And as she walked past, she added, 'Keep walking, mage, and follow the footsteps I have left behind. You will soon find your way out.'

Lena watched her slender figure fade into the shifting air, the unnatural purple light on her cane gradually swallowed by the cloud. *Mage*. A shiver ran through her and she clenched her fists tight to stop her hands trembling.

She took a deep breath, swallowed, and tried to relax a little. When she felt steady enough, she picked up the silver dragon-knife from the forest floor and slid it into her belt. Then she turned her eyes in the direction from which the masked lady had emerged. *Follow the footsteps*. Lena had wondered how; in the darkness, in the fog, she could barely see her hand in front of her face. But gradually, as she watched, the masked lady's footsteps began to *burn*.

A twisting path illuminated the underbelly of the storm cloud in purple imprints, winding into the distance. And Lena knew she would never have found her way without it. The forest's trick paths looped and disappeared and reappeared without rhythm or pattern, and the storm cloud

flickered blue and green between the trees, casting crazed shadows. But the footsteps were steady, trailing far ahead until the thickening vapour reduced them to a blur, then a faint smudge of light.

Lena followed the path.

TWO
Constancy

By the time the masked lady glimpsed the tall wooden gates of Duke's Forest, dawn lit the storm cloud a ghostly white. She heaved a sigh of relief. The journey had felt like an endless nightmare. The hem of her cloak and long trailing dress were smeared and spattered with mud, her left hand trembling as it gripped the pommel of her cane. She had a gash on her ankle where she'd slipped against the loose rock of the foothills.

At least she'd lost Emris somehow at the forest edge. She'd long since felt his pursuit fall behind, his presence slipping from her senses. Sadness tugged at her throat. Would she ever see him again? Either way, she hoped the girl would deliver her message.

She stopped a few paces on, her heart sinking as quickly as it had risen. An enormous wooden gate loomed out of the storm cloud, fifteen feet tall, the mossy stone walls slick and sturdy on either side. Ivy twisted its fingers over the old wood, the leaves sickened and grey, but the stems strong, damp and snake-like. The gates had been locked for two

years, but it looked like longer. A worn sign had been nailed to the gatepost, white paint stark against dark wood. She stepped closer to read it through the dense cloud: *UNDER QUARANTINE BY ORDER OF THE DUKE.*

She drew up to the gate, laid her gloved hand against the chains threaded again and again through the central beams, and wondered what she'd find on the other side. Quarantine. She remembered the articles in the papers two years ago, the shock on the streets as a whole city shut itself from the world. But yesterday's papers were trampled in the gutters, and people had soon forgotten. Who really cared about a place like this anyway? A city on a mountain, in a forest, in the middle of nowhere?

To her surprise, the metal of the chains felt tingling warm to the touch, even through the fine silken material of her gloves. The chains were thrumming with magic.

She adjusted the wheel on the side of her mask. Her view of the world shifted: the physical world faded and blurred, the wood of the gates softening into a waterfall of brown. Instead, the spell-scape came into focus, lending a different kind of sharpness to the masked lady's surroundings. The storm spell fizzed in the air, encompassing her completely. If she glanced over her shoulder, she knew she would find the shining, lightning-like paths – the spell's veins and arteries – which had allowed her to trace her way through the forest. If she glanced down at herself, she'd find not a mere body but a weave of shining purple magic running in tandem with her blood, albeit flickering and

weak after her long journey. But there was something else here. Another kind of magic.

She gazed at the lock and chains, confused. A red glittering magic protected the metal. She reached out to touch the lock with her hands, her magical senses following, examining the work. It felt like armour – hard and unyielding. A protection spell. The faded colour suggested the spell was old – perhaps it had been cast when the gates were locked – but it was clearly the work of an experienced mage. The spell was simple but bold and unusually strong. The colour also suggested a disciple of Jok – the warrior's god. Whoever it was, they'd wandered a long way from home.

She frowned. The girl in the forest had told her the Justice was executing mages – and besides, Duke's Forest was famously anti-magic. The masked lady knew that better than anyone. And yet it seemed a spell had been used to prevent the citizens of Duke's Forest from escaping.

Or, perhaps, anyone else from getting in.

Who had cast this spell to keep the chains from rusting, to keep the lock jammed tight? And had it been cast from the inside or the outside? How did the mage-girl escape? A weakness in the wall somewhere?

You don't have time for this. Not now. Just focus on getting inside.

She drew on her dwindling reserves to unpick the spell, the tremor in her left hand growing more pronounced as she laid her cane against the chains and burned the red magic to frays. 'Gods' balls,' she cursed, clenching her fist harder to steady the shaking. The old rusted metal shuddered

and glowed purple, the lock on the other side clicking open and falling to the ground with a thunk. The lady pulled the chain loose with her steadier right hand, breathing heavily behind her brass grille, and slipped through the slender gap she'd created.

Home sweet home, she thought bitterly.

Her ruined kid boots crunched on a pile of bones. She glanced around, turning the mechanism on her mask to bring the scene into focus, the spell-scape shimmering into the background. A human skull stared back at her from a pile of detritus. And then she spotted a thigh bone. A ribcage still ragged with the remnants of flesh.

She crouched down, picked up a medium-sized bone that must have been the upper part of an arm. Holding it up to the eyeholes of her mask, she spied tiny serrations in the white. Chew marks. She peered through the shifting gloom again, anger sharpening her vision. The mess of human remains pressed up against the gates as if they were still trying to escape. She glimpsed the tiny hand of a child.

A mage hunt? The girl had told her the Justice had been convicting mages, but she could never have imagined anything on this scale. On top of the Pestilence. She remembered what the mage-girl had said: this was the Justice's doing. How had the Duke let this happen?

Dropping the arm bone, she stood straight, suddenly reinvigorated.

She shut the gates – resealed them seamlessly by twisting together the old magic. It was better this way. If anyone

checked, they'd never guess how she got in, or that she'd used magic to do so.

The lower town was almost unrecognisable. Six years ago the shops had been busy, and bright market stalls were set up in the square. Now, it was nearly empty, black windows gazing out over slick cobblestones, the noxious cloud crawling in between. It flashed and flickered intermittently, blue and light green, and a rumble sounded close to her ear, startling her. The storm cloud – yes, that's what they were calling it. Peering at the inhabited houses, windows glowing softly, she glimpsed ragged curtains, dirty blinds, gaps in door frames stuffed with old rags. *Homes under siege.*

The road to the top of the mountain, to the castle crouching on its summit, was steep and ill-maintained – she stumbled several times, leaning heavily on her cane for support, relying on the *tick-tick* of the clockwork in her mask to filter out the vapour and its effects. She passed through the upper town, whose mansions and grand houses appeared to be entirely abandoned. All the way up the mountainside, the storm cloud lay like a slumbering beast stirring in its dreams. Only as she neared the summit did it start to thin, the castle towering overhead. By now she knew she was close to spent, a bead of cold sweat trickling down her brow.

'Who goes there?' Two figures stood on either side of the wrought-iron portcullis at the top of the narrow path, designed for defence. As she drew nearer, she heard the ring of two swords pulled from their scabbards, glimpsed a dull flash in the semi-darkness. 'Stop, in the name of the Duke!'

She obeyed, a few steps short of the portcullis. 'Is this how you treat all your visitors?' she remarked drily.

Hurried footsteps approached, another figure emerging from the gloom. The masked lady saw the hulk of a thick fur cloak, a sword hilt peeking from a shoulder-bound scabbard. 'What's going on here?'

'An intruder, my lord,' said one of the guards.

'I'm no intruder,' she said, surprised at the strength and clarity of her own voice. She drew yet closer, and as a bank of fog passed by, clearing the space between, the guards gasped.

'What kind of creature—'

'Stay back!'

Both raised their swords across their torsos, unbalanced in their haste. Beneath their peaked iron helmets, the masked lady saw the whites of their eyes. She hesitated in confusion, but quickly realised their mistake – she could imagine how her clockwork mask appeared to them: an expressionless metallic facade, a grimacing mouth and wide circular eyeholes, demonic in the grey daylight.

'Relax,' she said. 'It's a mask. Here.' Slowly, she undid the leather fastenings and exposed her face, her skin tingling as it met the damp, cool air. In an instant, she felt her power weaken further. She tried to disguise the growing tremor in her hand, gripping the mask tightly as the shaking passed before slipping it into the special concealed pocket in her cloak. She focused on the wide courtyard beyond the gate. The cloud was thin enough up here not to be an immediate

danger to her eyes, thin enough even to see some of the buildings around the courtyard she'd raced across as a child, spinning her hoop. She felt an unexpected stab of sadness and guilt. Now a washerwoman was hurrying into a narrow doorway with a basket of laundry, casting a curious glance over her shoulder at the commotion.

The third, fur-cloaked figure stepped closer, right up to the iron gate, his face framed by the bars. She recognised him instantly: his black curly hair the picture of his mother's; his alabaster skin, now shadowed by the beginnings of a beard; his tired eyes a warm, dark brown.

She shook her head in disbelief. He'd been a gangly boy of eleven when she'd left, but he'd grown into a handsome young man.

'Winton,' she said softly.

At first, he gazed at her, uncomprehending. But as he studied her face, she watched shock and suspicion pass over his features, replaced by a kind of delight. 'Is it really you, Constance?'

She smiled. 'It's really me. I'm home.'

As Winton shouted an order to open the portcullis, Constance realised her arrival had begun to draw a crowd: a few servants gathered nearby, a black-liveried valet loitered in a doorway, a lady leaned from her upstairs chambers in curiosity. The big iron wheel creaked and popped as it drew the gate up into the walls – others arrived, drawn by the sound. Visitors were clearly an uncommon occurrence at the castle. Constance had never seen the courtyard so

busy with people and yet so still: everyone was watching, waiting.

Once the gate was raised, she stepped into the courtyard. Winton stood in front of her, gazing at her face, his eyes shining. 'For Ancestors' sake, what happened to you?' he cried. 'I thought you were dead!' And without waiting for her reply, he enveloped her in a tight embrace – so quickly she barely had time to tuck her left arm behind her back, out of the way. He was a half-inch shorter than her, but as she circled her right arm around his shoulders, she felt how broad and strong he had grown.

Across the courtyard, a loud bang sounded, echoing strangely across the stones. Winton released her and turned round. Constance quickly spotted the source of the noise: a door had opened violently, thumping against the wall. A man stood on the doorstep of the round, tall tower to the right of the gates – the north tower, she remembered – his rich velvet robes dishevelled, his eyes wild, his beard long, grey and tangled, his wrists painfully thin. And he met Constance's eyes with a wild gaze, hurrying forward through the shifting fog as if he knew her, his black cloak whipping around his legs.

She squinted. Did she know him too?

'My daughter! My daughter!' he cried.

And suddenly Constance recognised the stranger, her heart convulsing.

It was her father. It was the Duke.

She had to stop herself from fleeing from him, and from the shocking truth.

My father is mad.

Six years ago, her father had been the sanest, most practical person she knew – sane to a fault. She remembered his level, determined gaze and couldn't match the father she had known then with the spectre now rushing at her through the storm cloud.

Before he reached her, Constance glimpsed another tall man emerging from the north tower as if in pursuit, his brown coat – the many-pocketed outfit of a physician – flapping in his wake.

The Duke gazed at her – and for a second his dark eyes cleared. She felt confusion drain from her body, replaced by pity and horror. And then his head bowed down, as if with the weight of heavy thoughts, and he buried his face in her neck, clutching her close, shaken by sobs. She felt the wet of his tears on her collarbone. *Is it really Father?* Constance suppressed a flinch as the Duke's bony arms encircled her tightly, and she held her breath: his white hair was greasy and foul-smelling. What did the Duchess think of this? Why had she not ensured he was properly cared for?

Gradually, she forced herself to return the embrace, meeting Winton's eyes over her father's shoulder. Her half-brother lowered his gaze.

After a time, she gently prised the Duke from her and turned to her brother. 'Winton, where is your mother?' she asked quietly.

He shook his head, and for the first time she realised he

was dressed head to toe in black. 'She … she died, not two weeks past,' he said.

'I … I see.' Constance was shocked, but she didn't do Winton the indignity of feigning grief. The Duchess had borne little love for Constance, the daughter of the Duke's previous wife. She'd been a proud native of Duke's Forest, while Constance's mother, Patience, had been a foreigner. The late Duchess was the daughter of a minor noble, while Patience had been born to one of the great families of Valorian. And the Duchess had noticed Constance's … *strangeness* … before anyone else, and made sure that Constance never forgot it. Even so, her heart ached for Winton. She knew what it was to lose a mother.

'I'm very sorry,' she said sincerely, squeezing Winton's shoulder.

The people who had gathered in the courtyard were gazing at the small family reunion with mingled curiosity and expectation. They looked like a crowd of ghosts floating in the air, up to their knees in a thick sea of mist.

'For those of you who do not know me, I am Constance Rathbone. Firstborn of the Duke. Heir to the Forest,' she said, her voice loud and commanding. *A ruse*. She felt weak, her blood pumping fast and shallow. She spied the brown-coated man who had followed her father pushing through the crowd, a determined expression on his face. He slipped into an open doorway nearby.

The Duke stood by her side, holding on to her right arm like a frightened child. As she spoke, his eyes fixed on

her face, a wide, wondering smile on his lips. Oblivious to her trouble.

She clutched her cane with both hands to keep herself upright, feeling the strain in her gloves. The courtyard was silent and solemn.

She forced cheer into her voice. 'Come, is this to be my welcome? It has been six years since I was last home. We shall throw a feast tonight to celebrate!'

A few murmurs broke out, an uncertain clatter of excitement. Constance beamed, trembling inside. 'And tomorrow, at midday, we shall hold a Witenagemot—'

A door to the side of the courtyard opened with a click and swung wide, the fog skittering around it like an agitated animal. The man in the brown physician's coat held the door, closely followed by a taller, broader figure dressed in the King's black military uniform. He had straight silver hair tied flawlessly at his neck and a large moustache. The King's Justice. She felt her fists clench tighter.

At the Justice's heels, a huge hound slunk into the courtyard, growling at the gathered crowd. Constance recognised the breed – identical to the hunting dogs in her father's kennels. But it was white instead of the ordinary brown or black, and enormous – its head nearly reached her waist and its body was corded with muscle. The hound's right eye was a scar, a gash of shocking pink against the creature's short pale fur, while its left eye was a hideous, livid yellow.

From the corner of Constance's vision, she caught sight of her brother smothering a scowl. As the Justice stepped

towards her, the buttons on his black greatcoat gleaming gold, disapproval naked on his face, the courtyard fell silent. No whisperings. No curious glances. No more murmurs of excitement for a feast. Eyes fell to the ground like stones, and people shrank back from the hound, folding their arms as if afraid it might snap at their hands. Six years ago, when she'd left, the Justice's role had been purely administrative – he was the King's representative, sent to oversee the royal taxes and the interpretation of the law in Duke's Forest, and to serve as an ambassador of sorts. Constance remembered the previous King's Justice, who had been a kindly and very elderly man with a penchant for cream puffs. He'd died of extreme old age about ten years ago, and they'd sent this one to replace him. He'd always been seen as strict, by comparison. But glancing between her father, the Justice, Winton and the people, it was suddenly clear that he was more than just strict: the Justice held the true power here. A retinue of black-uniformed guards followed him into the space that spread around Constance like ripples in a pool. The dog barked at her three times, a rough, tight sound. She flinched, in spite of herself, scowling down at the creature.

'Sit, Barbarus,' the Justice said sharply, and the hound obeyed, its muscles coiled. A whip mark showed half-healed against the dog's flank.

The physician reached his hand out to the Duke. He was tall and heavily built, with a thin, blandly handsome face, his brown hair cropped short in a military fashion. A kind of

cruelty revealed itself in the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw.

'Come, my lord. Let me return you to your apartments, it's past time for your medicine.'

Her father cringed, as if afraid, and Constance placed a steadying hand on his shoulder.

'Get away from my father,' she snapped at the man. 'Who are you?'

'Dr Jonas Thorn, my lady.' His voice was dry as kindling. 'The Duke's physician. And I believe you've met our Lord Protector, the King's Justice?'

Lord Protector? That meant he truly was ruling in her father's stead. She drew herself up and met the Justice's steely gaze. Although Constance was tall, and the Justice must have been nearing his seventieth year, he still had the advantage of height.

'Six years,' he said, his voice low and unyielding. 'We all thought you were gone forever.'

'You thought wrong,' Constance said archly.

'You do realise this city is under quarantine?' The Justice's question tripped after her reply, dismissive, as if he'd hardly listened. 'Did you not see the sign? The locked gates? How did you get inside?' The white hound growled up at Constance, but the Justice lifted his hand – ever so slightly – and the dog fell abruptly silent, cowering at his feet.

'I am aware of your quarantine, and your mage hunts,' she said, remembering the grim truth told by the bones stacked around the gate. A native of Duke's Forest, it was said that

the Justice had served in the King's army for twenty years before returning to his home with a fresh disapproval for foreigners and a determination to reaffirm his connection to the Ancestors. He had long been known for his hatred of magic. Constance wondered what had happened in the army to turn him so bitter.

'It is my duty as the King's representative to ensure the storm cloud and its Pestilence does not escape Duke's Forest. It is equally my duty as Lord Protector and guardian of the Ancestors to root out the mages responsible for the storm cloud and destroy them.' He fixed her with his burning steel-blue eyes.

'Why are you so sure the storm is magic? And even if it is, why are you so certain the mage who cast it remains within the city?' Constance demanded. 'Your actions are cruel and senseless.'

The Justice's lip curled. 'The storm is clearly unnatural. In seeking out the perpetrator – as well as in persecuting those who practise the foul craft of magic – I follow, as ever, the laws and customs of the kingdom and Duke's Forest. I shall repeat my question: how did you get inside?'

She ignored it. 'I saw the bones of hundreds. Were they all mages? Even the children?'

The Justice's stare was so cold that she felt her soul shiver. 'The nature of magic is mysterious. But this is beside the point. You have broken the law, and you are refusing to answer my question.' A shudder ran through the watching crowd. His words had turned a few faces doubtful – others

full of fear. At a nod from the Justice, one of his black-clad guards stepped forward, grabbing her right arm, pulling her aside from her father, whose face crumpled. 'I'm placing you under arrest, pending trial, for breaking quarantine.' His voice was horribly calm.

The Duke began to weep, a keening sound emerging from the back of his throat.

At the temple, she'd often dreamed of returning, and she'd never expected it to be easy. But this? Her father was incapable of helping anyone, and the city was torn apart by the Justice and his mage hunt, ravaged by fear and grief. And now her journey would end in a prison cell – or worse. She clenched her fists, her left hand tight around her cane. *No, it cannot end this way.*

Then another voice emerged from the crowd. 'I believe it's illegal to *leave* the city, Lord Justice, but – though ill-advised – is it actually illegal to enter?' A tall, slender man dressed in bright indigo silk, his face swathed in scarves, pushed to the front.

'Lord Irvine,' said the Justice calmly, a thread of hatred running under his voice. 'As Swordmaster, I don't believe you have a great deal to offer on points of law.'

Lord Irvine? Constance's heart beat a tiny bit faster. She remembered him aged seventeen, sparring against her in the gardens, the flash of their blades in the sunlight.

'Indeed … Lord Veredith? Ah, there you are.' Irvine addressed an ancient man with tissue-paper skin, whom Constance vaguely recognised from her childhood. 'I believe

you are an authority on such matters – can you clarify the point for the Justice?'

'Y-yes …' the old man stuttered, looking up at the Justice with a clear expression of terror. 'Forgive me, but … I'm afraid … if my memory serves … that is—' He coughed. 'I believe, alas, the Swordmaster is correct.' He raised his voice and began to recite, his voice warbling: '*The Book of Law*, section eighteen, point thirty—'

'Very well, my lord,' interrupted Irvine. 'I think that settles it. My men and I will be happy to escort Lady Constance to her apartments and ensure she has everything she requires for this evening's festivities.'

Constance glimpsed a number of men dressed in vivid sky-blue livery sliding from the crowd. At a glance, she guessed the Justice's and Irvine's retinues were about evenly matched. For a few moments, the two men locked eyes.

'For Mythris's sake,' muttered Constance, as she shook free from the uncertain grip of the Justice's man. 'Stop this nonsense.' Irvine and the Justice blinked in apparent shock. 'I'll take my old apartments at the top of the south tower. Can someone be prevailed upon to bring me some hot bathwater? Thank you.' She took a deep breath, leaned forward and kissed her weeping father on the cheek. 'I will see you at the feast, Father. Please don't cry.' She turned to Winton. 'I am sorry about the Duchess, Brother. I really am.'

And with the *tap-tap-tap* of her cane sounding hard on the cobblestones, she walked through the parting crowd and into the square south tower.

She climbed the staircase slowly, her breath shallow, the steps swimming in front of her eyes. *Nearly. Home.* One of her gloved hands was clenched around the bannister. The other, the trembling left hand, held fast to the cane. The tremor was continuous now, a soft shuddering that set her nerves on edge. As she neared the top, she heard the courtyard door open and close.

'Constance?' Irvine's voice.

'I'm fine. Leave me to rest,' she half-shouted. She'd reached the door to her old apartment. It was just the same, down to the scuff marks where she used to kick it shut, and the two angry initials she'd scored into the wood with a penknife as a girl of thirteen. *C.R.*

'Constance, wait!' He started to take the stairs two at a time.

She sighed and pushed the door open.

Her bedroom was a heap of junk. She leaned heavily on the door frame, shaken. The bed was dusty and piled high with papers, its curtains ripped and ragged. The play chest at the foot of the bed – painted garish pink and yellow by Constance's own childish hand – was barely discernible under a heap of upturned broken chairs. The main part of the room was a mass of furniture in various states of disrepair, and smelt of old wood and rot. Weirdly, she could still see her hairbrush where she'd left it all those years ago on the dressing table, thick with dust, strung with cobwebs and barricaded in the corner by the grimy window. She stepped inside, her mouth open, just as Irvine reached the landing.

'Constance …' His breath was even and slow, despite his swift climb up the tower. 'I was trying to stop you seeing this. I'm sorry.'

'What happened here?' Her voice was weak. She hated the sound of it.

'When the fog got worse, when the lightning and thunder started, everyone wanted a place in the castle – it's better up here, thinner and calmer. Most of the upper town moved in. The Pestilence has brought numbers down since then, of course … but at the time, space was at a premium.' He sighed. 'Your father refused to let anyone stay in your room. And so …'

'It became a dumping ground. Guess that shows what everyone really thought of me.' She felt annoyingly close to tears.

'That's not true, Constance. I think in some way he was keeping it for when you'd come back.'

He told me never to return, she thought, shaking her head. She turned to face him. 'I had my enemies, even at sixteen. The Duchess, for one.' She remembered with a jolt that the woman was dead. 'I'd been preparing myself to confront her, but now …'

He pulled the silken scarves from around his face. Six years on, he looked different – and yet somehow just the same. He was a little older than her – twenty-three, or thereabouts – with high, angular cheekbones and the brown skin of eastern Valorian, his mother's legacy. He'd been gangly, aged seventeen, and clumsy – except with

a practice sword. But since she'd left, his face had sharpened, and he'd grown tall and lean and self-assured. His bright green eyes still glittered like gems, just as she remembered.

'I'm glad you're back,' he said suddenly, colour rising to his cheeks under her scrutiny.

Constance's mouth flickered into a smile, teasing. 'So where do you suggest I sleep?'

He cleared his throat. 'The apartments on the first floor are relatively habitable – I'm afraid that's the best you can hope for these days. We're rather short on manpower. I've already sent some servants to prepare it for you.'

'Those were my mother's apartments once,' said Constance. She'd only been four when her mother had died, but she remembered clearly enough.

He blinked. 'There is another empty suite in the east tower, and I hear the north wing has vacant—'

'It's all right. Downstairs it is.' She wasn't sure she could cope with another trip across the courtyard.

The first floor was already a hub of activity. As she descended the last few steps, Constance caught a glimpse inside the apartments through the open door as a manservant brought in a basket of firewood: a small team of maids had started on removing the dirty dust sheets from the bed, bringing in clean blankets, sweeping the floor and laying a fire in the soot-stained chimney. The door shut behind the manservant and Constance hesitated outside – old habits died hard, and the masked priestesses had taught her to

listen before she stepped into a room. A snatch of gossip from the servants reached her ears:

'They say the hounds came back still hungry. They never caught her.'

'D'you think she's still in the city?'

'Constance?' Irvine was waiting at her back.

'Sorry,' she said, shooting him a small, apologetic smile. 'It's a long time since I've been here.'

She swung the door open, Irvine at her side, and the voices fell silent. Here, the furnishings had changed substantially since her mother's time – they were depersonalised, stripped of character. She wondered who had lived here since, and whether they had died here too. And yet … the window seat, in particular, caught her eye. The sagging blue velvet cushions on the ledge, beaten free of dust, felt familiar against her knees as she leaned against them, peering out over the murky courtyard. She hadn't sat here since she was a little girl. Once upon a time, her mother had sat here too, outlined in sunlight, her chestnut hair wound in a foreign style around her head. Even after all this time, the memory was clear. Constance had always been able to remember things better than other people.

Irvine joined her at the window as the servants bustled out. 'I will leave you to rest before the feast. I've asked for refreshments to be brought up to you, and you'll find clothes in the chest at the foot of the bed. They should fit you. They belonged to Livia … She … she died last summer. The Pestilence …'

His jaw was suddenly tight. Constance remembered his sister, three years his senior. She'd been beautiful, with her mother's brown skin and laughing black eyes, and had loved to dance. Constance had often wished, as a pale, awkward child, that she could be like Livia. 'I'm so sorry,' she said simply. 'Was that the last time the Pestilence struck?'

Irvine nodded. 'Ancestors be thanked, it has been over a year now. This summer we have been spared. Perhaps … with your arrival … I wonder if this horror is finally ending,' he said.

'Perhaps,' she murmured. She turned away from him, trying to disguise the jolt caused by his words. *It has been over a year now*. She cycled through the descriptions she had studied, detailing the growth of the spell …

Six years in full the spell shall gestate. First year, a vapour, a mist. Second year, a fog, a storm cloud. Then three years in summer, it shall feast on death. In the sixth year, the sickness stops – the quiet before the storm. And then, in autumn, the contractions begin …

Her eyes flicked back to Lord Irvine, who was gazing out of the window. She joined him. The cloud was thickening and thinning, concealing and revealing the courtyard like a cheap conjurer's trick. *The quiet before the storm*, she thought.

Her mind drifted over what she had learned, and she frowned. 'But then … how did the Duchess die?'

'She had been ill for some time – a malady in her lungs. It was no great shock when she passed, but …'

Constance finished for him, hearing his hesitancy. 'But of course that doesn't make it any easier. Poor Winton.'

But Irvine was shaking his head, as if she'd misunderstood. 'The shock really came at the Duchess's Descent,' he said. 'It was … traumatising.'

Constance turned to face him. 'What do you mean?'

'It's the talk of the castle. There was a girl there. A cryptling. She was administering the sacred ointment for the last time, but when she touched the Duchess's lips …' He shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe the words, even as he spoke them. 'The body … It moved.'

'It moved?' Constance's heart was racing, chills running down her spine. 'But surely there are natural reasons … The cryptling could have knocked it …' Her voice trailed off.

Irvine was shaking his head again. 'The action was far too determined. Trust me, I saw it.'

'What happened?'

'The Duchess's hand flew up, quick as a cat, and grabbed the girl's wrist. As if to stop her. It held tight for a full second before it fell, lifeless.' He paused, as if thinking through the words he spoke next. 'There was no doubt in my mind: it was magic. The girl was tried and convicted yesterday, and of course the Witenagemot sentenced her to die. The Justice set his hounds on her, as he does with all his convicts.' Irvine swallowed. 'Whatever she did, nobody deserves such a death.'

Constance tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. 'How horrible for Winton. For a moment he must have thought his mother was alive, after all.'

'He rushed to his mother's side, convinced there had been a mistake. A moment of hope makes grief even more difficult to bear.' Irvine smiled sadly.

They were silent for a few moments, feeling the horror of everything that had happened. And then Constance spoke again. 'Before we came in here, I heard the servants talking about a girl, saying she escaped.'

Irvine nodded. 'They say the cryptling evaded the hounds somehow. The Justice thinks she's still in the city. He's imposed a curfew and is tearing the lower town apart, looking for her.'

But she's not in the city at all. Constance felt a small thrill at the knowledge that she'd helped the cryptling mage escape from under the Justice's nose. She gazed out of the window at the swirling cloud licking against the glass, now flashing blue intermittently. She remembered vividly when her own magic had started to manifest, causing objects to float or fly around the room. Yes, that must have been it. The cryptling girl had just been extraordinarily unlucky to have been standing in front of an audience of hundreds, attending on an important body.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, a knock on the door.

'Enter,' Constance called.

Four servants bustled in, each carrying two copper kettles full of hot water for the bathtub in front of the fire. Irvine turned to Constance and smiled, focusing on her face. 'It's so good to see you again,' he said softly. 'I didn't think I ever would. I'm sorry you have returned to such a changed place.'

'I'm glad to be back,' she said, smiling too. And it was true.

'I will talk to you in private later,' he said, glancing over his shoulder at the servants. 'I'm sure you'd like some time to rest now. Can we meet in the gardens after the feast? I'll wait by our fountain.'

'All right.'

He turned to leave.

'Lord Irvine?'

He hesitated.

'Thank you.'

He flashed her a smile, and then he was gone in a swirl of silk.

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