

## Note from Ais, June 17, 2018:

This is a draft version of the first four chapters of Incarnations, Book One of Wildwood Rising, an LGBTQIA+ fantasy/sci-fi series I'm writing. Wildwood Rising will have at least 3 novels in the series, and probably more. Because it's a draft, you may find some minor typos, grammatical errors, or later upon completion of the book I may change some minor things around from these chapters.

I technically finished writing Incarnations in late 2016, but I'm in the process of editing it to improve some aspects of it. I plan to release new chapters first at my Patreon, and later for free to the public, until or unless I can get this published officially as a book/series.

If you would like to read more about Wildwood Rising and/or Incarnations, please visit my Patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/ais> and/or my site at <http://aisylum.com/incarnations> and <http://aisylum.com/writing-masterlist/>

If you have any questions about Wildwood Rising and/or Incarnations, you can find me at my site, my Patreon, or my tumblr at <http://ais-n.tumblr.com/>. Ask away! I'm excited about the series and get most excited when people interact with me regarding my stories. I would LOVE if you commented anything related to the story, world, characters, series, etc, or asked me questions, or anything at all :)

Included at the end of this document is a glossary of terms used in these chapters and other important information to help readers navigate the world of Ariwyn.

### **Quick breakdown of pages if you need it:**

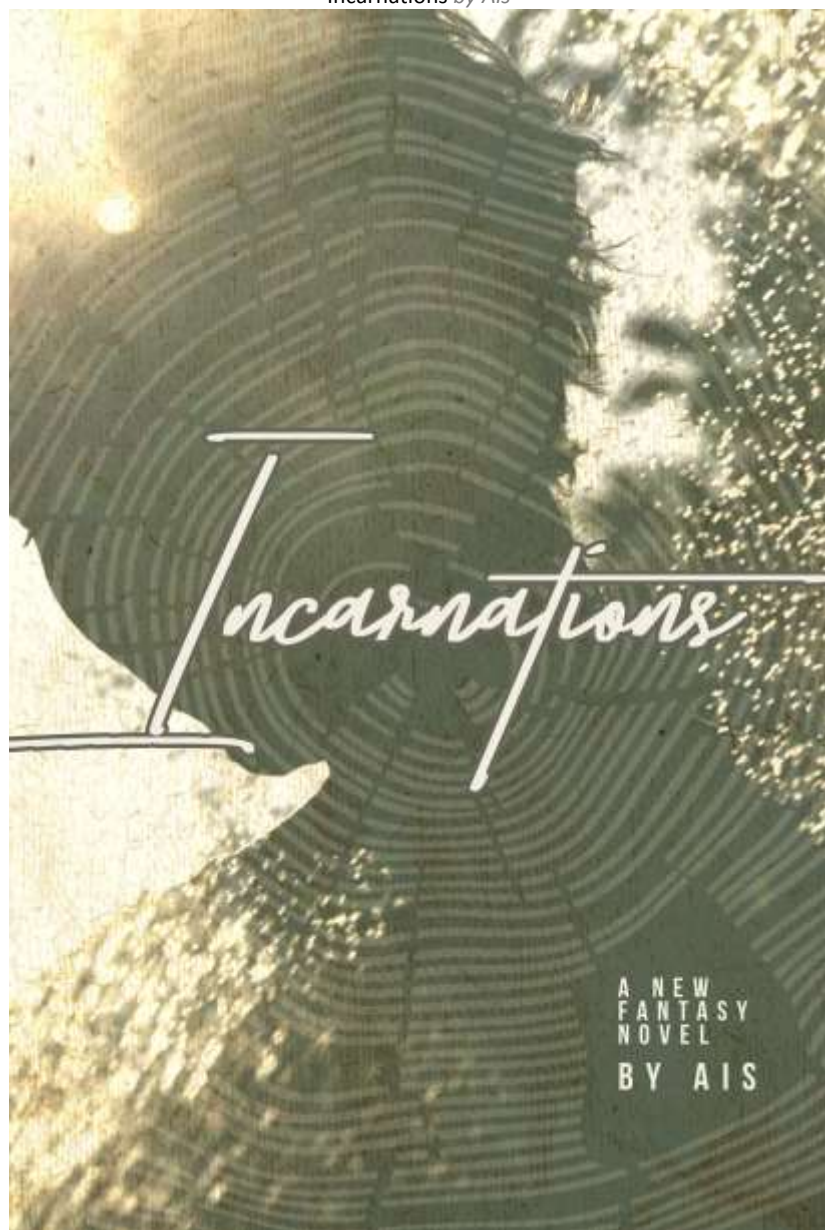
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### Credits:

*The Wildwood Rising logo and Incarnations cover are both made by the amazingly talented Oak Antony – find her at <http://oakantony.com/> and <http://oakantony.tumblr.com>. The Incarnations cover contains a photo from unsplash by Issara Willenskomer that can be found at <https://unsplash.com/photos/rOkLqIRCKu4>. Thank you!!*



Incarnations *by Ais*



# PART ONE

## BODIES

# 1

"What in seiyunne is this?"

Vikenti stared at the body coated in a thin, shimmering layer of magic. Beneath the translucent film, the young man looked pristine and untouched. The forest rustled around them; leaves and branches caught in a warm wind.

Annoyingly pleasant, considering the months' worth of work staring Vikenti in the face. On top of the rest waiting for him back at Irridian Enforcers Headquarters.

Keiran crouched near the edge of the clearing, her forearms resting on her knees with one hand absently twisting the ends of her heavy braid. She had been staring intently at the dirt for a while, and Vikenti didn't have to ask what she was doing: categorizing all the magical energy she saw, checking for signatures and running them against her internal database for a match, looking at the physicality of the setting to see what clues it may give her for how this guy had died. All the normal things the crime scene techs did that Vikenti didn't have to worry about until she came to a conclusion and he could get to investigating.

At his question, she glanced up at him. "It's the latest."

"You can't be serious," Vikenti said flatly. "I'm not even done with the last." He patted around his coat and pulled a roll of estes from an inner pocket. He extracted one and waved toward the body with it. "Give that shit to Farmer. Maybe he'll see something I don't."

"Can't. DC Zima's orders say give them all to you."

Vikenti thought about grumbling that the Deputy Chief wasn't here so whatever she wanted didn't have to make its way back to her unless Keiran told her, but it was only a daydream. Come report time, Zima would notice if it listed Glen Farmer instead of Vikenti Shaw as the investigator.

Keiran turned back to studying the crime scene from within the perimeter that she had told him to avoid. The woods crowding Selin were utterly ordinary, as far as Vikenti was concerned, so it pissed him off to see something that was going to be a pain to decipher. Somehow, these things were less annoying when they happened in already abnormal locations.

The vic was pretty ordinary looking; the latest Degrenan fashion trends in his bright and practical clothing, the latest trendy cut in the man's dark hair. He looked like he was sleeping, not dead. If not for the odd bubble surrounding him, Vikenti might have passed the guy by if he'd stumbled upon him in the woods.

They were in sight of Gulf of the Night, a cerulean swath of water sending sparks of light between the filter of trees. The small, oblong clearing they were in was either already naturally there or was somehow made without leaving a visible trace. The underbrush was flattened in a circle around the corpse, and nearby Vikenti saw a thin scrape or two on the trees, but it was hard to tell if it was related or simply a byproduct of being in a forest.

Keiran knelt next to the corpse, careful not to touch whatever it was that surrounded him. Her open hand left a shimmer of seirene in its wake, like a boat through water, as she passed her palm above the soil. Vikenti could have activated his Enforcer sight to watch the fluctuations of the magical energy around them, to see her spells turned into form and light, but he didn't bother. He knew her sig; he'd seen it often enough.

He pulled out a self-contained fire spell. A flame flared into existence, caught on the end of the paper, and burned. The spell disintegrated in his fingers. He inhaled deeply, letting the faint pull of estes calm his nerves.

"They don't think I've got enough cases already?" He continued irritably when she didn't speak. "I'm not even supposed to be doing DOAs. Special Crimes is supposed to be for *special crimes*. Not this."

"I'm not even sure they *are* DOAs," Keiran muttered.

"What, you're crying homicide on this?"

Keiran crouched on all fours and leaned closer to peer at the dirt. "Well, they *are* contained in a spell..."

"With no visible wounds." Vikenti flicked some ash outside of the perimeter and scowled down at the body. "For all we know it's another of those damn cults. Maybe this guy volunteered to help out."

Keiran shot him a doubtful tick of an eyebrow.

Vikenti returned it. "Crazier shit's happened."

"Maybe, but the unTalented don't usually dabble their way into magic this refined. Besides," Keiran added, straightening to a stand and dusting off her pants. "I've matched a signature."

Vikenti scowled. "Damn."

"I'll have to compare it back at the office. There's something strange about it."

"Double damn." Vikenti glowered at the body. "Just what I need. The press on this is going to drive me insane."

Keiran snorted. "You mean you aren't already?"

Vikenti ignored the jibe. "Bag it and write the report. I'll alert DC Zima."

"I'm not a friggin' intern," Keiran muttered sourly but still knelt to follow his directions.

Vikenti paused. "You taking Harper back to Irridian?"

She gave him an odd look. "Yes. He's the one who sent us out here, right?"

"Yes..."

"So, why would someone else pick us up?"

"Degrena's closer; why don't we use one of them?"

Keiran canted a look at him. "Be serious. They're pissed enough that Ariwyn Division took over. No way they'll lend us a Conjurer to get back home; not without a lot of paperwork. Unless you have connections in Double D-land from your dad. Which I don't think you do?"

Vikenti's lips thinned. "No current connections."

"Okay. So, then. Harper."

There was a long pause, with Vikenti glowering at her and Keiran staring straight-faced back, until a smirk bloomed on her lips.

"You don't want to be around him," she said knowingly.

"Isn't Atos available?" he grouched.

Keiran outright grinned and leaned back on her heels. Her heavy dark hair swung behind her. "Busy, I heard. And seeing as they're our only two designated Conjurers for Ariwyn-wide, seems like you're stuck with him for now. What's the matter? He hit on you too much? Or don't you like that Harper told Ven--"

"It's fucking fine," Vikenti snapped and stalked away.

Keiran laughed in the background. Vikenti wished, not for the first time, that seirene would let him use his powers on a person without meeting an inherent moral and social code. Five kinds of magic, five different seiyunne, that fueled the various sects of Mages—and seirene was the only one with those restrictions, with only Enforcers and Healers having to deal with the repercussions. Didn't seem right.

He planned to leave the woods, find that blabbermouth Conjuror, and jump back to Irridian with him—but on his way he felt a pull to the left, sheltered in the woods.

The wind rose in the ages-old trees, rustling the leaves in a low-level harmony. This far south on Halania, the air was warm and humid. This forest was a normal forest, not an ancient spread of massive trees like the e-trelia elsewhere in the world. Still, the leaves were huge and the insects were a larger scale than back home in Irridian. He pushed a spiderweb out of his path and absently activated his seirene sight, looking for any trace of a magical signature.

Shadows of old spells surrounded him in a quiet layer of translucent color over the everyday scenery of the forest. There was plenty of old, innocuous seiyunne activity; primarily seikelle and seitai which wasn't a surprise. Probably some Spiritualists, maybe a Conjuror or two. Almost certainly some Proveniers. Hard to tell exactly, with everything so old and dissipated. He figured he was seeing old wayfinder spells, some firestarters, Enhanced Senses, other run-of-the-mill magic—but nothing stood out to him.

He searched for something more recent; something that would explain the lure that pulled him into the trees. He was led unerringly to a slab of a rock, flat on one side and sticking up at an angle, rising to his chest. He stared at the rock, lips pursed.

It was blank. He didn't see any signatures of recent magic. Yet there was something there, something he could feel but not see. Something that called to him.

A westward breeze filtered through the trees, bringing with it the salty scent of the Gulf of the Night. Woodland animals chirped and chattered. The texture of the forest fell away around him.

Figuring out what attracted his attention to this rock was all that mattered.

Maybe he could find something if he refined the parameters of his



seirene sight. A secondary spell, perhaps? One typically used to enhance an Enforcer's range?

"Vika!"

Keiran's shout held an edge of fear. The incongruity of hearing any uncertainty in the usually confident voice caused him to snap his head to the side. Over his shoulder, he saw Keiran tromping through the woods, her bright hazel eyes darting around frantically until they landed on him. She all but ran toward him.

Vikenti's eyebrows drew down. "What?"

There couldn't be some new drama he had to deal with already, could there? If there was a second body out here he was going to have to kill someone...

"Harper couldn't make it so Atos took me back," she panted, stopping next to him and bracing her hands on her knees. She looked up at him through her eyebrows, her dark brown hair falling over her shoulders and partially hiding her flushed cheeks. "I thought you'd gone back before me but you weren't at HQ. I waited but you never came, so I sylphed Atos. Asked him where you had him drop you off, and he said you never sylphed him. We couldn't find you. I thought—" She screwed up her face and straightened, waving a hand. "Doesn't matter what I thought. DC Zima was about to send a search party for you but I told her I'd check the crime scene first. Make sure you hadn't found another one..."

"What on Ariwyn are you talking about? I've been here maybe a minute."

Keiran gave him an odd look. "It's been six hours, Shaw."

The words took a moment to filter through his mind. Six... His gaze snapped to the surrounding woods. Only then did he notice the shadows, heavy and dark; weighted with the press of the night. The cool bite of the windless air. The creaking of trees and the susurrations of woodland animals.

The hair lifted on his arms for more reason than the temperature.

The idea of unknown magic prying deep into his psyche was more alarming than anything he'd dealt with so far that day, unnaturally preserved bodies from a fastidious serial killer included. He wanted to look back down at the rock but stopped himself, canting his gaze away at the last second.

"Shit."

"What in yenre were you doing, anyway? Scared the light out of me."

Does it have something to do with--"

She started to step around him, to look down at the rock. He shot an arm out, forcing her back a step. "Don't."

"What's--"

"We need the freak."

Keiran's expression went through an interesting shift from indignation to confusion. "That's not exactly narrowing it down..."

"The book one," Vikenti said impatiently. "You know. That geek friend of yours."

"If you mean Besin, he's not my friend, exactly--"

"I don't care if he's your long-lost twin brother," Vikenti snapped. He grabbed her by the shoulders and forcibly turned her around, shoving her between the shoulder blades to get her to move. "We need him back here as soon as possible."

"As in tomorrow?" Keiran asked dubiously.

"As in tonight if he can get his ass out of the library for longer than two seconds at a time."

"Well, we can try..."

"Do it."

Vikenti followed her and was surprised to see how close they were to the clearing where the body had been. Through a break in the trees, he could still see the faint glittering of the Gulf of the Night, cutting between three of Ariwyn's continents. Beyond the woods and east was Selin, the dirty little port town that had called them down here for the corpse. Everything was the same as it had been earlier, minus the body. Since it wasn't there, that meant Keiran and Atos had brought it back to the morgue.

It unnerved him all over again, realizing that he'd been within hearing distance of all that activity and somehow hadn't heard a thing.

He crossed his arms and glared at Keiran. "I'll wait here. Is Atos out there already?"

"Harper, this time. He's looking for you too. I'll sylph him—"

"Look physically. The sylphs have been touchy in the forests lately. They may be fine in this small of woods but no reason to risk it. How long will it take you?"

"Not long. Twenty minutes, maybe. We planned a grid search so I know where he'll be."

"Fine. Hurry." Vikenti felt his stomach rumbling and resisted the urge to

snap at Keiran again.

Keiran paused and looked over her shoulder. "Why do we need the Head Librarian, anyway?"

"Because this case just got a damn lot more complicated," Vikenti said darkly, and refused to explain before she left.

Vikenti felt on edge the longer he had to wait and burned through four more estes rolls. Trying to keep the quiet call of that rock out of his mind was ratcheting his anxiety up by the second, putting him in a rather unsavory mood.

After what felt like forever, he heard voices approaching. Accompanied by enough racket from them walking through the woods to challenge a Kin on a rampage.

What were they doing, creating their own damn path along the way?

"Don't know why you don't bring us directly there," Keiran was saying distantly. "Making us walk forever each time."

"If I did, I wouldn't get to see Mr. Scrolls walk ahead of me," came the drawing response.

At that voice, Vikenti clenched his teeth and inhaled sharply on the estes.

*Patience*, he told himself. *No need to get suspended over that idiot.*

"What's that have to do with anything?" Keiran sounded close.

"Well, you can't tell with the robes on but he has a nice—"

The trio entered the clearing; Besin leading, with Harper right behind him and Keiran at the back. Despite the fact they were all in their 30's and only about five years apart, they were a study of dissimilarities.

Besin was all in shades of light to medium brown, from his features and complexion to his antiquated Mage robes that nobody ever wore anymore except weirdos like him. He had a worn leather messenger bag looped across his body.

Behind Besin was Harper, with every piece of his leather and cloth outfit no doubt specifically chosen to be as fashionable and form-flattering as possible. Whereas Besin's short hair perpetually looked flyaway and Keiran's was often twisted into braids or buns, Harper's black hair and goatee were perfectly coiffed, and his vivid blue eyes stood out like a damn Magelight.

At the back, Keiran was in her blue and green Enforcer uniform she kept clean despite regularly being in the midst of a mess for her job. As Vikenti was used to seeing on her, her lips fluctuated subtly between a wry smile

and a sloping frown. In daylight he could see the freckles faintly dotting her cheeks and the range of colors in her eyes, but the night took the subtleties from her features; leaving her tawny and hazel.

Even their way of walking the same path differed: Keiran strode, Besin stumbled, and Harper sauntered.

Upon seeing Vikenti, Harper cut himself off and broke into a wide grin. Vikenti's blood pressure skyrocketed.

"Well, well, look who we have here. It's our long lost Special Enforcer Shaw. Tell me, did you discover a new fear while you were alone? Ven said—"

"You say another word and I swear to Irridia I will lock your ass in a binding spell and cart you straight to HQ," Vikenti snapped.

Harper's infuriatingly smug grin only grew larger. He slung his arm around Vikenti's shoulder. "Ah-ah-ah," he tsked, wagging a finger. "Can't do that with seirene, not when I've done nothing wrong. We all know that's a lie, En-for-cer."

The way he so playfully said the sect name made Vikenti go stiff with rage.

*I'm going to kill him, he told himself. I'm going to fucking kill him.*

Vikenti shoved Harper off him, ignored that idiot's obnoxious laughter, and rounded on Besin.

"Took you fucking long enough. Did you stop for a five-course meal along the way?"

Besin looked at Vikenti distractedly, as if he had too many thoughts buzzing through his brain to act like a normal human being. It was irritating on good days. Today it was downright aggravating.

"I wanted you here because--"

Besin ignored Vikenti, already orienting himself in the direction of the rock.

"It can't be." He sounded shocked.

He walked unerringly into the forest, with more surety of his step than even Vikenti had earlier. Keiran looked questioningly at Vikenti, whose expression had darkened at Besin's words. Even Harper knew to shut up. The three of them followed the Provenier into the woods.

They found Besin standing perfectly still near the rock, staring down with such intensity that Keiran glanced in alarm at Vikenti. Was that the look he'd had earlier when she'd found him, staring raptly at nothing?

He could feel the pull of that rock, or magic, even more clearly now.

Digging insidious claws into him; winding deep like capillaries beneath his skin.

"Besin--"

Besin cut Keiran off with a gesture. He knelt next to the rock, his hand passing near its surface similarly to how Keiran had skimmed the soil earlier.

He muttered something to himself, frowned, and dug into his bag. Vikenti watched closely to see what he had brought, but all Besin pulled out was a blank, unusually thick piece of parchment. He placed it carefully against the flat side of the rock, and with his free hand reached into a smaller bag at his waist to pull out a small cylindrical brown item. Vikenti couldn't tell exactly what it was; it looked like an empty pen made of brown paper.

Besin placed the point of the pen against the parchment in the center. "Step back."

Vikenti, Keiran, and Harper barely had the chance to hesitate and start to comply before Besin said something quietly.

A small flare of seitai with the familiar feel of Besin's signature was immediately overpowered by a violent wrenching of the air. It felt like there had been an explosion at the base of that pen's tip. A shock wave shook the trees, the power passing through Vikenti gently in the front but feeling like it ripped him apart on the way through his back. The air compacted in his lungs and the three of them were thrown back several steps.

The rock came alive with something for a split second—something Vikenti couldn't quite see or understand but knew was there. Immediately after it flared on the rock it disappeared and flared on the parchment and pen instead.

It was all over too quickly for Vikenti to process.

For a moment Vikenti gasped for air, feeling shell-shocked and unable to grasp what had just happened. Besin considered the parchment with a pronounced frown. It took Vikenti a second to realize that the brown pen had fallen to ash and the parchment looked blank once more.

He dragged in a lungful of air and demanded with a voice that was thin with near-asphyxia, "What in yenre was that?"

Besin looked up at the three of them, startled. He took in their bedraggled appearances and the way Keiran was now glaring daggers at him, her body doubled over and expression pinched in pain. Harper looked

ready to vomit.

"I told you to step back," Besin said, bewildered.

"Warn a girl next time you're going to do some fucking demolition," Keiran growled.

Besin frowned at them but his brown eyes were already starting to slide away, being drawn back down to the parchment. "We have a problem, Special Enforcer Shaw."

"Some of us more than most," Keiran grumbled.

Vikenti had to agree with her sentiment. "What is it? You know what's happening?"

Besin stared down at the parchment for one more moment before he carefully rolled it up and packed it away. He stood and faced the three of them with a deadly serious expression. It lent weight to a face that otherwise seemed boyish and round. It reminded Vikenti that Besin was older than he looked, as evidenced also by the few grey hairs starting to show through his short brown hair.

"I know what happened here. But I don't know how it can be."

"Cut the theatrics and get to the point already. I don't have time--"

"It's the Alurri."

Besin's simple sentence caused Vikenti to fall silent in disbelief.

"What--" Keiran sputtered. "You can't be serious. They've been gone for over a thousand years."

"Over 1800 years, to be exact. And yet you found a rock with their language, Ancient D'ria, scrawled on it." Besin's gaze flitted around, possibly searching for more. "I have no idea why it's here, let alone who could have written it. The language is practically extinct."

"How can you be so sure it's that?" Vikenti asked doubtfully.

"I wondered as soon as Keiran mentioned your lapse in time and that you seemed to be staring at nothing. But I didn't think it was possible..."

Harper eyed Besin, and for the first time Vikenti noticed that the usually smarmy man was unusually serious. "When Keiran told me about it, I assumed Shaw wandered into a rerun. What makes you assume it isn't just a self-contained spell that mesmerized him? Why jump straight to extinct Mages being near a crime scene?"

"Because of what was on the rock. And that level of time loss isn't indicative of a simple rerun; in those cases, the subject still experiences time, just at a slower pace. Special Enforcer Shaw said he didn't remember anything at all."

"And it isn't—you know." Keiran hesitated, glanced at Vikenti and Harper, and edged closer to Besin. "Arrindell?"

She had dropped her voice to a whisper but the other two still heard it. Vikenti scowled at her and Harper burst out laughing, saw she was serious, and unsuccessfully tried to stifle it.

"Are you kidding me?" Vikenti demanded. "First he's saying some Unconscionables appeared and now you're throwing out a mythical fucking city?"

"It isn't a myth," Keiran said heatedly. "I *told* you—"

"It isn't Arrindell," Besin assured her. "At least, I currently have no reason to believe it's directly involved, although of course it's possible that Ancient D'ria was dragged here along the ley lines if Arrindell appeared elsewhere. But, no. He was caught by Ancient D'ria itself. Do you know the legend?"

"All I know is it shouldn't exist anymore."

"Well, yes and no," Besin said. "The Alurri were all hunted down and killed ages ago but people have died because of this language. They can't see it but they can feel it. They forget to eat, to move, sometimes even to breathe. They're enthralled until they expire."

"I didn't," Vikenti said pointedly.

"You were interrupted."

"How can something I don't even see affect me? There wasn't anything there."

"Oh, it's there. Ancient D'ria can only be seen by someone who knows the language. If you have a mild understanding you only see a few letters. The range continues up until you're fluent when you not only see every letter but the enticement tied into each symbol as well. The magic behind the words."

"That's the legend?" Keiran frowned doubtfully at the pocket where he'd tucked away the parchment. "That there's some mysterious language that turns people comatose?"

"Even if you can't see it, Ancient D'ria is too beautiful to leave once it's found you. It's a cruel, flawless beauty that stands impassively by as its admirers waste away. Just like the Alurri did to others." Besin turned a thoughtful stare into the distant woods. "According to the legend, the Alurri's screams, the ultimate song of the sirens, fed into their language. And when the last Alurri drew her last breath, Ancient D'ria stretched and expanded across the world, like a phoenix reborn from the ashes of its

creator. I wrote about it in my book *Aftermath of a Cataclysm*; did none of you read it?"

"Then why aren't you affected?" Vikenti felt slighted by the implication that he was just another idiot getting enthralled by blank rocks.

"Oh, I'm affected," Besin said with a shrug. "I simply know how to divert it. But no one will be affected again for now. I've captured it."

"Captured?"

"I'll explain in detail later. First, this is important." Besin turned intent dark brown eyes on Vikenti. "Have you received reports lately of people wasting away?"

"How should I know? I'm not the whole damn sect."

Vikenti pulled out another estes roll, his irritation level rising as he was presented with yet another case that had to be mired in the unknown. Just his luck.

He liked being in the Special Crimes Unit. He didn't like how much of a pain in the ass the investigations could be, with every other case bringing up some new, unpredictable aspect.

"Can you check?" Besin glanced between the two Enforcers. "It's imperative that I know if this is something happening on a larger scale."

"Why? You following some grand prophecy or something?" Vikenti asked sarcastically.

"No." Besin gave Vikenti an odd look. "I'm just worried."

Vikenti eyed Besin suspiciously, debating the validity of that claim or whether the universe was planning to mess with him.

"Does this Ancient D'ria have anything to do with the preserved bodies?" Keiran asked.

"What preserved bodies?"

"The one we found in that clearing before S.E. stumbled on something straight out of the history books."

Besin frowned. "Preserved how? And how did they die? They don't look wasted away, do they?"

Keiran opened her mouth to reply but then paused and glanced at Vikenti. He could read in her expression that she was trying to figure out how to explain something that was relatively unexplainable. Vikenti sighed explosively and turned on his heel. He put the roll in his lips and lit it, immediately inhaling a deep breath.

"Come with me. It's too hard to explain. Better you just see. Dells, can you bring us to IEHQ? Main area, not the morgue. I'll have to get clearance



for Arenth."

"But of course," Harper said with an overly dramatic bow. "I live to serve. During work hours. I serve a whole other way outside of them."

Harper grinned up at Vikenti from beneath his brow and winked.

Vikenti sighed. For spirits' sake.

He was going to need another roll.

## 2

The bodies hovered in the center of the room, packaged in layer upon layer of spells to keep them cool and untouched. In the center of those spells, the thin, shimmering layer of unknown magic remained unbreached.

There were three bodies in total so far: an old man found out by Ystis Gulf, a teenage girl from Salasia, and now a young man from a copse of trees not far from Selin. The first victim had been a middle-aged woman near Teduria but there wasn't a body left for her.

Postmortem Examiner Janelle Rodres circled the bodies, studying them closely. Where Keiran was tawny, average height and curvy, Janelle was tall and toned, with a complexion as warm as deep umber. She had a sense of humor that reminded Vikenti of Lin, which was no surprise given the two of them had been friends. Today she wore her Healer robes, other days speckled with blood but today perfectly white.

Vikenti thought she would have made a good Enforcer, if she'd been born into that sect. But she was born a Healer, so she was a P.E. instead of a Special Enforcer, and all told that was probably better for the sect at large. It paid to have a competent P.E. when these Ariwyn Division cases came in. Since Irridian was the capitol of Magedom, they overtook local command of higher profile magical cases anywhere in the world. Better Janelle in charge of those bodies than that snarky P.E. down in Degrena.

Vikenti sighed explosively. His fingers twitched for another estes roll but he stopped himself. Couldn't smoke in the morgue. He'd had that fact yelled in his ear often enough to bother remembering.

This time.

"Well?" Vikenti asked impatiently, but all the intellectuals in the room ignored him. He harrumphed and leaned against the wall with crossed arms. Keiran smirked at him, then returned to reading a report.

The newest addition to the room was someone Vikenti had never seen before. Gorgeous, agender. Leh was short and slim, no breasts to speak of in the flat line of lev's chest, a heart-shaped face, warm honey-toned skin, wavy short blond hair, and large eyes. The eyes were what Vikenti found most interesting: they were two-toned, the irises split in half at an angle with violet on top and blue on bottom.

There was something else interesting, a bit odd, about lev; something Vikenti couldn't quite place. Contradictions, mostly. Graceful movements that ended sharply at times, or impassive features put at odds with the expressive dimming and brightening of lev's eyes in surveying the bodies or reports.

Although Janelle had said this person was named Corrin, nobody had bothered to explain who on Ariwyn Corrin was or why it was necessary to let lev in on this corpse party. All Vikenti knew was Corrin had spent the past hour poring over every detail of Janelle's reports and checking those against books leh had brought.

Vikenti grabbed his estes roll and turned it around and around between his fingers. Maybe if he put one in his mouth, the taste would be enough. Maybe.

Maybe he should leave the fucking room and get a hit in while these slowpokes stood around in silence for fucking ever.

But knowing his luck, he'd miss something important. So, he forced himself to remain.

Somewhere between the woods and Irridian Enforcer's Headquarters, Keiran had taken her heavy dark hair and had woven it into a more complicated braid resting on her back. Magelights hovered near the ceiling. They had faded slightly and seemed in need of a boost, but in that pale light he could see her freckles again.

Her green and blue shirt, lightly pinstriped and layered over a white shirt with dark grey pants beneath, showed her status as an Enforcer in uniform. She had rolled the sleeves up, the cuffs blue and bunched at her upper arms, and a silver chain disappeared beneath her shirt. He could see something brush against the fabric now and then even when she didn't move, and he surmised she was wearing the Enforcer sect's symbol. No

one else had their sect's symbol visible, which wasn't a surprise.

He hadn't been in the morgue for a while but it didn't look like it had changed much. The tables that usually filled the center of the room were pushed to the side to accommodate the extra bodies, both alive and dead. A door in the corner led to a second room which housed the bodies that were in stasis. Vikenti always avoided going there because it was cold as the deep sea inside. Even with preservation spells and the chilled environment, those bodies often decayed before they were buried, burned, or reverted to their magical properties.

It pissed him off sometimes, for different reasons depending on how much of an asshole the vic was. Fully innocent vics just made him sad, but others made him want to smoke a whole handful of rolls.

All these people from around the world migrated to Irridian on a hope and a dream, thinking the place would be safe and here they could learn how to be a Mage without endangering others. And yeah, that was true; all the schools here were designed for that. But that didn't mean people had to be idiots about the way they moved to an entirely new fucking city. Maybe leaving an address of origin once in a while would be a good idea so their loved ones could be notified if they died, or maybe, and here was a shocking idea, *maybe* they could recognize that humans were humans no matter where they lived.

Just because Irridian was the city that had never fallen, the place named after the first Mage herself, and just because the Mystic was here to stop most dangers from entering the gates, didn't mean the people inside were inherently good. People still robbed, cheated, lied, killed. The smaller personal dangers of human interaction would never end, whether with Mages, Seers, unTalented, or anyone else. Human beings fucked over human beings when they felt like it because that was what human beings did. That was why Enforcers existed to protect against rogue Mages, or why Healers were there to mend wounds. Spirits' sake, if everyone with ill intent was kicked out of the city, only Healers and Enforcers would remain because their seiyunne exacted a threefold toll on them; use their magic for ill intent and they would be fucked. Anyone else could do it all they wanted and be fine.

So why did everyone think they could come to Irridian and everything would be magically better? Magetowns were filled with everyday magic, not impossible dreams.

"You certainly like to keep things interesting for me," Janelle mused as

she peered beneath the woman's body.

"Thank fucking Irridia," Vikenti growled under his breath and shoved himself away from the wall. "You people done, finally? Someone going to bother talking now? Or are we going to sit here for another hour in silence?"

"So impatient," Janelle commented.

"Tell me about it." Keiran flipped a page in the report. "Finds a way to complain about everything."

"And you're stuck with him."

"Right? With me in Special Crimes Unit we keep being assigned the same cases."

"Entertaining, maybe?" Janelle asked.

"Maybe," Keiran said.

"Sweet Irridia, and now they're gossiping," Vikenti growled.

"Postmortem Examiner Rodres." Besin stepped closer to the bodies. He even raised his hand, as if this were a classroom.

Vikenti scoffed.

"Tell me," Besin continued, "you said before you have not seen a dearth of bodies which have wasted away as their cause of death, but have you seen any at all?"

Janelle shook a roll of dark hair out of her eyes and tilted her head to examine the left ankle of the old man. "As I told you before, call me Janelle. And as I also said before, I have not."

"It seems so unlikely." Besin paced the room, circling the bodies. "What an oddity. Why would there have been no deaths if Ancient D'ria was near?"

"Maybe no one else saw it?" Keiran offered.

"It should have called to them if anyone was in the vicinity, as it did with Special Enforcer Shaw. What were the differences between the bodies?"

Vikenti stared at Besin. "You're kidding me, right? Do you not have eyes to see the bodies in front of you?"

"No, no, no, I mean their surroundings! What was the context?"

"You're getting awfully bent out of shape over this, kid."

"Of course I am! You all should be, too. This is very alarming!"

"Yeah, and none of us get why. Something about some dead language that allegedly seduces other people and blah blah. You know that's all such ancient history that none of us believe you, right?"

"I believe him," Keiran muttered.

"I have formed no opinion." Janelle sighed from her crouch, her elbows resting on her knees. The clothing and hair of the bodies floated gently in an unseen wind; as if they were immersed in water. They looked pleasant and calm; the relaxed visage of a gentle dreamer. "I certainly wish I could touch them, though. It would help a lot."

"What exactly happened to the first victim? It does not specify in this report." The voice was smooth, quiet.

"Oh, look. Corrin lives. By the way—who are you, again?"

Corrin ignored Vikenti and stood. Leh walked over to Janelle and handed her the ream of paperwork from the bodies. Janelle flashed a thankful smile and placed it on the floor. The sandy color of the parchment nearly washed out against the white floor. Janelle stayed crouched and thoughtful, her dark hair twisted back at the nape of her neck.

"The first victim was found near the waterline by a child from Teduria. According to the kid's account, she was out playing when she noticed something dark. She went to investigate and found the body, but because she was a child she didn't understand what was happening. She thought the victim was asleep, ignored the 'colorful bubble,' as she called it, and tried to shake the woman's shoulder. She said as soon as she touched the bubble, 'something scary happened' and the body disintegrated. All that was left was black ash that blew away in the wind."

"And this child didn't mention any time lapses?" Besin pressed, moving next to Corrin. "No one else did?"

Janelle shook her head. "No, no time lapses, nothing. The child reported this to her parents but of course there was no evidence that it had occurred, and the town is largely unTalented. I've heard they've had a strong suspicion of Talented the past decade or so, something to do with Charlatans. I didn't get much information on that. What relates to our bodies is that because of those reasons and because it's in Degrena's outer district, we didn't hear of this at first and we don't know that woman's identity. When Votav was found by Ystis Gulf, as far as we knew that was the first of its kind."

"Why did no one breach the protective layer in that case?" Corrin asked. "If you had no knowledge that it would be problematic to have done so, how is it that this body was not touched?"

"We might have, except we were lucky in that case." Janelle's lips twisted wryly. "The Empath Traveling Division happened to be out in that area searching for Mages—"

"Was it Carina?" Besin asked.

"What?" Janelle blinked at him.

"Carina Arenth, was she there?"

"Oh, yes. She was the one who first brought it to my attention."

Besin nodded and waved for Janelle to continue.

"As I was saying, the Empaths learned of it when the local uTs told them about a body they had just discovered. They said it was Votav, who had been ill with a contagious disease for a long time so he'd been quarantined on the edge of the village. One of the fishermen found him and, believing the bubble to be dangerous, did not touch him. When the Empaths viewed the body, they recognized that some sort of magic was involved, although they couldn't initially identify the specific seiyunne, so they called in the crime scene techs."

Keiran raised her hand idly. "Present."

"Since the situation potentially involved volatile magic in an unTalented zone, I went out as well," Janelle said. "When I viewed the body, I noted the odd protective layer and chose not to touch it until I could research what it was. I noticed that the body did not appear to be deteriorating the way I would have expected as time passed, so it gave me the opportunity to take my time with research."

"Did you Conjure the body back to Irridian?" Corrin asked.

"Yes, Atos did. I worried at first that it might affect the body or that layer, but to go by foot back to Irridian would've taken far too long and exposed it to too many contaminants. Luckily the Conjuring didn't affect it. That's the only magic I've dared use on it, though, aside from the typical levitation and preservation, but I took great care to leave a layer of empty space between my spells and the field on the bodies. I'm worried about triggering latent instability."

"Did any investigator begin researching during that time?" Besin asked. "Perhaps interviewed the witnesses?"

"No," Vikenti said. "Not yet. The P.E. first has to identify cause of death before we assign an investigator. If it's natural causes, no point in wasting time on it. Especially on a uT outside of Irridian."

"Correct." Janelle pushed herself to a stand and circled the bodies to pause near the young woman. The dead girl wore a yellow sun dress and her light brown hair was pulled back in two small braids on either side of her head, holding back the top of her hair while letting the lower part float free. Her hands rested on her stomach, folded one over the other as if she

had lain down for a nap in the sun and had not yet woken up.

She looked so peaceful it was hard to imagine that she was dead, let alone potentially murdered.

"Before I had identified anything, we learned of another body four days later. This time it was Micha from Salasia." Janelle gestured to the young woman. "She was found dead outside the family vacation home, with the same protective layering as Votav. Micha was the first victim we can verify was not unTalented; she was a young Provenier who had recently connected with seitai and was planning to move to Irridian to start academy next semester. The local Enforcers found the body and, noting the oddity of it, sylphed us before touching it to see if we knew of any patterns or if we wanted to check it out. We had Atos bring Micha here without breaching the barrier. That was a week and a half ago. Then, of course, earlier this evening Osin was found."

Janelle gestured to the body that Keiran and Vikenti had recovered.

"What do we know of Osin?" Besin asked.

"Osin Malaiwa, twenty-five years old; born in Degrena, raised in Selin. He was an Enthraller—"

"An Enchanter," Corrin murmured. "Interesting."

Vikenti nodded and continued. "Well known around town; bit of a flirt, mostly a loser. Got in trouble with the local law a lot; stole from others, Enthralled them to do it. Pissed a lot of people off. Owed a lot of people money. Hurt a lot of people, even as recent as earlier that day."

"How do you know?" Besin asked. "You couldn't possibly have had time to interview between when I met with you in the woods and now."

"I sylphed Degrena before coming down here to get more context. They said he'd Enthralled a woman hours before he died. Made her give him all her money even though she needed it for the Healers to save her son, and he knew it. That's how he marked her in the first place, they said; saw the money she'd been hoarding until she could pay, figured he'd get a nice payday out of it. He got her with the kid on the way to the Healers. I got info her kid took a turn for the worse. May not make it now."

Expressions tightened around the room.

"Is it possible that woman wanted revenge?" Corrin asked.

Janelle straightened, letting out a long, low breath. "Honestly, I might have thought that, if he'd died differently. But in this case, this MO matching the other vics means there's some sort of connection between them that we aren't seeing yet, and that might be what got him killed."



"The tally is one unTalented, one untrained Provenier, one unknown, and an adept Entraller?" Besin looked at the others. "What are their similarities?"

"Geography, primarily." Keiran said. "They were all found on Halania."

"Can we be certain this hasn't occurred on the other continents?" Corrin asked. "The other continents do not have as strong of a Mage community. Isn't it possible that the unTalented have not known to contact us or chose not to? And what of the Wildlanders on Vedula Li—do you have contact with them? Or the Seers on Ameset?"

Vikenti barked out a laugh. "You're out of your damn mind if you think anyone will ask the Seers. No one's about to start another world war."

"We have limited contact with the Wilders," Keiran answered. "And you're right that the unTalented population could simply not know to tell us if something happened or could specifically choose not to. So, we're operating on the assumption that these are all the bodies there are, while knowing they're just the bodies we have."

"We sylphed the other Mage departments; told them to watch for something similar," Vikenti added. "Tell us if they found anything."

"And I've done the same with the other P.E.s," Janelle said.

"So, the first body was found in Teduria. Following that, the bodies were located in Selin, then Salasia, and finally Byrraine. Isn't that odd?" The others glanced at Besin at his question, so he continued, a finger ticking against his lips. "That means the killer started south, went north to Byrraine, and then straight south through Salasia and Selin. But Teduria is nearly as south as Selin. Why not stay south first, do Teduria then Selin, and then go up? Or any other order?"

"That's assuming they're physically traveling."

Besin looked curiously at Keiran. "They aren't?"

Her lips edged to the side in thought. "That's another oddity about all this. Other than the possible matched sig I had at Osin's scene, I so far haven't seen indication of anyone else being present. Yet."

"What do you mean?" Corrin asked, intrigued.

Keiran screwed up her face. "Well. *Normally*, it's easier. I can find footprints, broken branches, hairs, blood, a magical signature, *something* left behind. Normally that would give me something to go off. But with these scenes, the only evidence I've been finding so far is that of the people who found the bodies and reported it."

"Is it possible their presence unintentionally covered that of the

killer's?" Corrin asked. "Perhaps stepping over another footprint, and thereby erasing the previous indentations?"

"Possible," Keiran said, "but not likely. You'd have to do that sort of thing very much on purpose to totally erase someone else's presence. And even then, I could usually find some clues."

"So, what does that mean?" Besin asked.

"Nothing yet." Keiran shrugged with one shoulder and swung her hair over her back. "Just another oddity on an odd case."

"But how is it possible to have no indication of anyone else present in any of these crime scenes if this seems to clearly be a case of serial killing?" Besin asked.

"Wouldn't be the first time we had a crime spree with what looks like no solid evidence at first." Vikenti pulled out his *estes* roll and tapped it against his wrist as if to release ash, even though it wasn't lit. Force of habit.

Janelle and Keiran gave him a knowing look.

"What sort of crime sprees?" Besin asked.

Vikenti scrunched up his face. "I've had some annoying ones. Usually Conjurers are involved."

"And the lack of footprints?" Besin pressed. "How does that equate, as a Conjuror would still need to stand somewhere even if he Conjured himself over there?"

"Not necessarily." Vikenti rolled his tongue along the rough bottom of the *estes* roll.

Janelle and Keiran exchanged a grin that turned into a low-grade chuckle.

Vikenti glowered at them.

"What?" Besin asked but Vikenti waved him away.

"Forget it. I'm not telling you that whole story right now." Besin continued to stare interestedly at him, though, and Vikenti felt a flash of impatience. "All you need to know is, this guy could jump from the top of a set of stairs, have his Conjuror boyfriend send him over to another location for a brief second, use his momentum to steal some item, and let the lack of permanence yank him back in time before he landed. He'd be there and gone in seconds, leave no evidence at the scene, and because his boyfriend never used his magic on scene there was no sig to match. And since he used such a little amount of magic in the first place, it hardly registered above typical spell usage, and since he was in his own home, no one would

think twice to see his seikelle littering the place anyway."

"Then how was he caught?"

Janelle and Keiran burst out laughing.

Vikenti sent them a side-eyed glower. "He was caught in the middle—"

Their laughter increased.

"Oh for fuck's sake, grow up!" he snapped at them. He glared at Besin.

"He just was, okay? I'm not getting into it. Look it up yourself."

Besin was perplexed. "But how would I...?"

"Anyway, all I'm saying is here's to hoping we aren't seeing shit like that again here. If the way they're killing them is a similar style of precision Conjuring, it'll be a pain in the ass to solve."

Keiran wiped the tears from her eyes but couldn't quite stop the grin.

"Finding out the cause of death will help determine the likelihood of that. I'd be able to notice downward momentum in a killing stroke if one ends up existing that we can't see right now."

Vikenti nodded.

Janelle barely stifled another round of snickers.

"Do you think that might help explain the reason for choosing those cities in that particular pattern?" Besin asked.

Vikenti shrugged. "Could. Assuming the people who died were not specifically sought out as individuals."

"Your thought is that it wasn't targeted?" Corrin asked.

"Well, targeted for what?" Vikenti patted his chest to make sure the rest of his estes rolls were still there. It was an absentminded habit he couldn't break, even in situations when he couldn't smoke. "There are different kinds of killers. Some have it out for a specific person, some don't. Say I'm the killer, and I want to kill Janelle and not anyone else. I'd have to find my way across the world to where she is."

"Be still my heart." Janelle placed her hand on her chest.

Vikenti made a face at her. "Shut up." He focused on Corrin again. "Or, I could decide I hate Healers and want to kill any Healer, and Janelle just happens to be the first Healer I see. Or could be I wanted to kill a Mage, any Mage, and Janelle happened to be the only Mage in range. Or I could just want to kill anyone and, again, Janelle happened to be my choice. Or maybe I decided she was the best choice and I still sought her out, but not because she was Janelle; simply because she was the perfect Healer or Mage or whatever for my plans."

"In this hypothetical, I hope, scenario," Janelle drawled, "I'd like to know

what I did to deserve such devoted focus of your homicidal rage."

"Oh, that's easy. Your crime was being a pain in my ass."

Janelle laughed.

Belatedly, Vikenti realized he was lucky Harper wasn't around. He would have handed the Conjurer a line that would've been way too easy to run with, there.

He scowled at Janelle as if it were her fault and turned back to Corrin, who was still listening patiently. "Anyway, there's also other variations. It's hard to know why these four were killed and not others, until we can figure out the motive. Either way, maybe as a killer I have an order in my mind, like I'm first going to do a Healer, any Healer, and then an Illusionist; or maybe that I want to kill Janelle and then Arenth and then Keiran. Maybe I have a method to my madness like that, maybe I don't. But if Byrraine or Votav or any of these pieces were of specific interest for the killer, that could be another explanation for why it jumps around geographically."

"There *is* a progression in the bodies in that regard, to an extent," Janelle said. "We don't know the age or, really, anything about the first woman. But our best guess is she was likely unTalented. Next vic was an old, unTalented man who would have posed little threat. Then a young woman who was an untrained Mage. Even though she had access to seiyunne, she couldn't control anything. She would be nearly as unthreatening of a Mage as could be found. Then there's Osin, a fit young man who was an adept Mage. He was the greatest threat of any of them, physically and magically."

"That's an alarming escalation when you put it like that," Besin said.

Janelle nodded gravely. She stood, pulling her Healer robe straight in the movement. "Getting back to the original question, the last point of interest is that Osin was the only one found in the woods. The rest of them were found in the open."

Keiran added, "I didn't see anything initially indicative of the cause of death or even any sort of violent attack at the crime scenes I visited, other than I did notice a similar circular compression of the ground. But I can't verify they are the same because the environments were too different. The other similarity, for what it's worth, is that all of them were in sight of water. Some of them were on the shore or near water, and Osin was the farthest away but still well in sight of the Gulf of the Night."

"Woods," Besin muttered at the same time Corrin murmured, "Water..."

Vikenti eyed the two of them. "That mean something to you nerds?"

"The water, no. Woods... possibly." Besin rubbed his chin. "I will retire to the library."

"Now?" Keiran asked in surprise. "It's the middle of the night."

"Yes, yes." Besin looked around distractedly. "Where did I place my bag? I must bring it with me."

"Wait."

At Corrin's voice, Besin looked over curiously. "Yes?"

"What did Special Enforcer Shaw mean earlier, when he referenced a dead language?"

"Sweet Irridia," Vikenti grumbled, and scrubbed at his face. Why was he always stuck with the nut bags, and the nut bags' lesser evil twins: the wonderers?

"Oh yes, that," Besin was saying. "I believe Osin has a connection of some sort to the Alurri. Or, at least their language."

Corrin's eyebrows shot up. "You do?"

"See? It's insane."

"Special Enforcer Shaw," Besin chastised, "I challenge you to explain why, precisely, it is that the resurrection of our dead brethren and their well-documented, sentient language should be such an unbelievable event to you, in a world that is filled with unbelievable occurrences? Not the least of which being those bodies right there. None of this has been seen for thousands of years, but why should they not be seen now?"

Vikenti stared at Besin. "Is this—" He looked around at the others and pointed at Besin. "Is he asking me a serious question right now, or is he joking? I can't tell when he answers his own question *within* the question."

Besin sighed heavily. "I feel sorry for your lack of imagination. It must be very difficult living your life in such a way." He patted Vikenti on the shoulder awkwardly.

Janelle snorted out a laugh, tried to stop it at Vikenti's glare, then laughed more loudly when Keiran couldn't help joining in.

Vikenti's hackles rose. He slapped Besin's hand away. "Listen, kid. Don't do your condescending bullshit to me. I'm not in the business of academic imagination; I'm in the business of following leads. If you can get me a good lead with *some* form of proof, I'll follow you down your insane trail. But fact of the matter is, you have yet to say how some dead language killed those people, or have even a single shred of evidence of the Alurri being alive aside from their language showing up. You have a theory about it enthralling me, okay. Fine. I know *something* happened there, just not

yet what. But those dead fucking bodies right there didn't kill themselves, far as we know, and you yourself said it doesn't match the expected manner of death for Ancient D'ria being the culprit. So, stop with the legends for the moment and get us a lead that's in the *present*, not thousands of years in the past."

Besin's lips pursed as he eyed Vikenti. "Fair enough. I can search for such proof at the library."

"That reminds me," Keiran said, "you said you'd tell us how you captured the language?"

"Oh." Besin absently patted his pocket, possibly reassuring himself the parchment was there the same way Vikenti did his rolls. "That's simple. First, I've placed dual containment and constriction spells on a special type of paper which has necessary and inherent magical properties that it has acquired from its specially curated environment. Then I create a magical vacuum within the inveiglement calamus which naturally attracts Ancient D'ria in the entirety of its form. The language is drawn into the vacuum but is caught and compressed by the spells on the parchment, thus removing it as a danger to the world at large by imprisoning it within the paper. I hate to remand the language that way, but we have yet to find a solution that is safe for everyone involved that does not include containing it to the page."

"Interesting," Janelle mused, watching him thoughtfully. "Do you think something like that could work on this protective layer? Get it out of the way so I can work on the bodies themselves?"

Besin frowned at the bodies. "I wouldn't dare risk it. I created this method for Ancient D'ria through trial, error, and a strong knowledge base provided to me by my mentor who taught me the language. I couldn't say if it would work on any other form of magic and would fear something calamitous might happen if I tried."

"It's possible there is a different connection to the past," Corrin said. "Head Librarian Arenth, I would like to accompany you to the library. You have a section devoted to ancient medicine, do you not?"

"Of course. We have an entire wing dedicated to archaic and ancient everything. Why, we even have a room dedicated solely to Arrindell, and another for Incarnations—"

Vikenti groaned and Keiran smacked him on the arm.

"This is why I can't stand that freak friend of yours," he growled under his breath to her.

"Shut it," she hissed.

"Why would you like information on ancient medicine?" Besin continued curiously, ignoring the others.

"I wonder about the water connection. There are mundane possibilities for its location, such as a potential mode of transportation for the culprit if they are not a Conjuror, but I would like to approach the question from a different angle. Could their deaths be related to an ancient contagion I recall reading about, that has somehow remained in the water all this time unbeknownst to us?"

"Even though those water sources were nowhere near each other?"

Corrin nodded. "I recall reading about a contagion that could spread through the water via animals and did not harm any but humans. I do not recall how long it could live out of water but even without that, it is always possible that somebody independently poisoned the areas."

"A Conjuror," Vikenti said, brightening. *Finally*, something that wasn't bat shit insane. Still very sketchy with a lot of holes, but at this point a maniacal Conjuror hopping around dropping poison into water supplies, maybe even Jaded-Dragoning it like the other guy, was a better option than a soul-sucking language and/or extinct Mage sect that mysteriously appeared and popped a magic shell around bodies nowhere near each other with no immediately discernible connections.

"Interesting theory. Going to the library would get you more information to strengthen it?"

Corrin shrugged at Vikenti. "Theoretically, although I have to verify I'm remembering it correctly. I learned of this long ago so my memory is vague. Head Librar—"

"Besin," Besin said.

"Besin," Corrin amended, strangely grudgingly. Vikenti did not understand where IEHQ found these bizarre ass people. "Is it alright with you if I accompany you?"

Besin smiled broadly. "Of course! I would love the company! I must do more research, myself. Special Enforcer Shaw is correct that my theory about the Alurri is severely flawed at the moment. Particularly since the more I ruminate, the more I feel there is evidence solely in support of Ancient D'ria being in existence, but as a sentient language such an event does not require that the Alurri were resurrected in addition. I don't believe Ancient D'ria is responsible for those deaths, per se, but at the same time I feel it must be connected. I should like to study this further."

Corrin smiled. "Good. I should like to hear more about this language, as

well. I know very little."

Besin slumped in disappointment. "If you had read my book, *Aftermath of a Cata—*"

"Nobody's read your damn book, you damn nerd!" Vikenti burst out. "Get out of here, for Irridia's sake! I can't handle this anymore."

Janelle chuckled and dusted off her pants. "I'll lead you out. No one can pass through the morgue unaccompanied unless they're an Enforcer."

"Thank you," Corrin said politely.

"Vika, Keir. Will you be here when I get back?"

"I might return to my desk." Keiran played with her braid, brushing the tips of her hair across her lips. "I need to double check something."

"I'll be here," Vikenti said decisively, and sat down to prove his point.

"Right. Keir, want to come with us, then?"

Keiran nodded and gathered some paperwork. Besin grabbed his bag and Corrin was already ahead of them both, trailing directly behind Janelle as they left the room. The doorway shimmered briefly with protective magic as they passed through and, being used to it, Vikenti ignored the splash of color in his peripheral vision. There had been a time when he had felt wonder at the beauty of magic laid bare before his eyes, back when seirene was new to him. Now he hardly saw the beauty in the color of nature, let alone any seiyunne.

As if she were a Seer or possibly an Enthraller, Janelle seemed to be in line with his mood. He overheard her speaking softly to the group as the door began to close.

"Don't judge Vikenti too harshly. He used to be friendlier, before Children's Day."

The door shut on any other words she may have said, and he was thankful for it. Left alone in a room of bodies that seemed suspended in the moments before their own death, he felt more at home here than he had among the truly living.



### 3

"You sure that's it?"

Hunter's eyes remained trained on the building. "Yes."

Cypress hummed doubtfully and snapped off a piece of jerky. The building across the street was massively disappointing. Fucking Watchdogs acted like they were better than everyone else, snapping people up left and right for bullshit reasons, and here was their headquarters, looking like shit. No windows, one story, right on a busy ass street. People passed the place by like it was a library, no idea how deep that thing ran into the ground.

Nothing about it was impressive other than how much it sucked.

The apartment they'd broken into for this view of their mark was pretty shitty. Even with the window closed, he could hear things filtering through the glass. The drone of humanity wasting their time talking about shit no one cared about, hoping someone listening would think their life mattered.

News flash: it didn't.

Or maybe they talked so much to distract themselves from how hot Iridian was. The already obnoxious humid summer felt ten times worse inside the ultimate Magetown, leaking its way even into their closed room. His sweaty skin stuck to every surface, from his clothing to the floor. He kept smacking the back of his neck thinking a bug was on him when it was just his sweat rolling down instead.

"Stop doing that."

Cypress made a face at his twin. "Doing what?"

"Being such a child."

"How the fuck am I being—"

"I can hear your angry chewing from here, and every time you smack yourself..." Hunter trailed off, faintly glowing eyes closing. He turned away from the window and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Cypress felt maybe a little bit guilty at that, considering his brother was using Enhanced Senses.

He huffed out a breath instead and pushed himself to a stand. He quickly learned pacing the room did nothing to affect his impatience, though. Whoever normally lived in this tiny ass apartment didn't bother to own much or was too poor to buy much. Must not be a Provenier, because they tended to create whatever in yennre they wanted in their homes. And Conjurers weren't much better; they just grabbed shit from elsewhere in the world and popped it into their living space, assuming they weren't shit at permanence.

Privileged dicks.

Hunter, as a Provenier, might not agree with that assessment.

Cypress glanced back and saw that Hunter had pulled his prototype viewer closer. Little more than a handful of moon stones on a giant mineral block, it was the first thing Hunter had invented. It wasn't nearly as good as the latest version, but it was easiest to set up and Hunter was convinced they had to go low tech on this heist to avoid detection. In the flat top of the block which functioned like a screen, a faint green circle pulsed and stuttered over Irridian Enforcer Headquarters across the street. The circle was supposed to stay solid and even, not jump around like a kid with worms.

"What's with that?" Cypress asked.

Hunter's lips thinned. "Interference."

Cypress perked up.

Hunter narrowed his eyes; as always, hearing his brother's unspoken words. "I can fix it."

"Can you?" Cypress didn't bother keeping the smugness from his tone. It was always a good day when he could rub something in Hunter's face. "I think we're gonna have to use the other one."

"The upgraded version is unreliable in Irridian. That's why we're trying the prototype. With the level of magic saturating the air here, its usual weakness should become a strength."

"Yeah, yeah, you said that shit already but clearly it ain't working. We're

definitely gonna have to use the upgrade on go day."

"The whole point we're here is to make *that* version work better. It doesn't make sense to use an unreliable viewer on one of our most dangerous heists, especially when we're stealing a component to make it more reliable. It's counterintuitive and stupid."

*And I don't like it*, were the words that hung petulantly in the air. Hunter always got his panties in a twist when things didn't go his way. Cypress thought it was fun to watch.

"Plan all you fucking want," Cypress said casually, words slightly muffled around another giant bite of jerky, "but whatever you think's most logical don't have a say in reality. You want that shit to work properly? Too bad. It ain't working. If we can't even get the fucking *building* to show on it right, no way you can track me inside."

"I can fix it," Hunter said more firmly.

He picked up the stone and quickly made some movements across the surface with his left fingertips. His right hand and arm was, of course, covered by both an elbow-length black glove and a detached sleeve which was connected to his bicep with a complicated set of straps. Hunter had once told Cypress that the screen responded best to the warmth of bare fingertips, which was why he only used his left hand on it.

Cypress made it a point to not think about Hunter's right arm, because every time he did he had to deal with way too many emotions that made him feel all sorts of things he hated feeling and made him want to do all sorts of things he couldn't do.

Even staying quiet apparently wasn't enough.

Without looking up, Hunter said flatly, "Stop it."

"I didn't—"

"Bullshit you weren't doing anything. You know I don't like it when you give me that look."

Cypress made a face at him. "Excuse me for giving a fuck about my brother."

"We aren't having this argument again," Hunter said evenly and otherwise ignored him.

Cypress didn't bother answering, because it never went anywhere different no matter how many times they had this conversation.

After a few more seconds of Hunter tinkering and Cypress finishing his jerky, Hunter swore vehemently and set the stone on the floor. He stared narrow-eyed and hard at Cypress, who slowly smiled and started toward

his knapsacks in the corner.

"You shouldn't be so happy about this," Hunter said. "It means more danger for you."

"That's my normal state of being, so who cares? At least I get to crash some fucker's black-market deal now."

"We might have enough left to—"

"Bullshit we do. You're the one that wants me to have your tracker on when I go in the Dog Pound, if I have to go in. *You're* the one that already said we're too low on the filaments."

"Right." Hunter neither looked, nor sounded, happy.

"And *you're* the one who said we can't use anything else."

"We can't. Mote faerie cocoons are the only way to get the filaments I need as a proper safeguard."

"So," Cypress gave him a shit-eating grin over his shoulder, "here's where I get to say: *told* you we'd need the cocoons. They're doing the deal at Road's End, right? Did you hear yet if there'll be selaria too?"

"No one's even supposed to know about the transport itself, so no, I haven't heard verification either way; only mixed messages. We're lucky we know where and when it is, in the first place."

Cypress crouched by the knapsack and pulled it open, rummaging around for the right set of jars. "Well, if I see any, I'll get it. Never hurts to have more."

Hunter was quiet. Then: "Will you be fine on your own?"

Cypress scoffed. "'Course I will. Will *you* be fine here on *your* own?"

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "Of course I will. How long will it take you to get ready?"

"Not long." Cypress held one of the jars up to the light streaming through the window. He scowled. "Running outta black."

"Maybe that would change if you didn't show such blatant favoritism," Hunter said mildly. He sent a pointed look to Cypress' spiky hair, currently jet black.

"Look who's talking, Red."

"I told you not to call me that."

"You prefer Strawberries and Cream?"

Hunter glared. "My hair isn't like strawberries or cream, and you know it."

Cypress hummed. "Do I?"

Hunter looked ready to throw something at Cypress.

Cypress grinned evilly. "The stupidest things set you off."

"Maybe I learned that bad habit from you."

"Maybe I'll kick your ass," Cypress mocked, straightening his back and affecting what he felt was a suitably Hunter-like expression of not-quite-neutral distaste.

"Brilliant retort," Hunter murmured, to which Cypress gave him a rude gesture. "And that was even better. Very mature."

"I try." Cypress jerked open one jar, peering inside with a slight crinkling of his nose. "Damn. Running low on blond, too, and these seals're failing. Everything's gonna dry out."

"Then reinforce them." Hunter set the viewer aside and turned back to the building. "You have the capability."

"Yeah, good idea," Cypress said with a sneer. "I'll just make some hardcore spells over here, right by the Dog Pound. No one'll notice."

Hunter sighed. "Do me a favor. When you're out on the street, call the Enforcers by their proper name. They aren't 'Dogs,' or 'Watchdogs,' or any other derogatory slang you love to use. Nor is their Headquarters the 'Dog Pound,' or any variation on that. Last thing we need is you drawing attention to yourself by angering them. Alright?"

"Shame." Cypress dipped his hand into the jar and pulled out a strip of seaweed covered in dark, glimmering slime. "Thought I'd walk right in there, say, 'Hey, ya asshole Dogs, I'm an Unconscionable and there's a renegade Provenier up there, 'cross the street fourth floor, and we're watching you. Don't do anything stupid or you'll regret it!'"

He scrunched the seaweed up in one fist, some of the slime oozing between his fingers before he plopped it on his head and started working it through his hair. "But you showed me the error of my ways, brother dear. Definitely won't endanger the mission now. Good thing you reminded me that we're criminals and shouldn't draw attention to ourselves; I might have forgotten otherwise."

Hunter rolled his eyes. "I prefer your rude gestures to your sarcasm. It's more attractive, somehow."

"Everything about me's attractive," Cypress said with a scoff.

Cypress pulled a dull mirror out of his knapsack and studied his reflection to ensure he had full coverage in his hair. At the moment, his hair was sticky with seaweed and was blotted brown as if he had rolled in dirt. The silver hoop in his right eyebrow glinted faintly, as did the silver snake earring that wove in and out of the length of his left ear. He loved

that earring; he'd even gotten an enchantment put on it ages ago that made its eyes blink and tongue flick, as if it were alive.

While waiting for his hair to set, he carefully took off his shirt and pulled on a new one; a peasant shirt that was dirty, had holes, and on which he'd written in black ink: *I'll get you while you're reading this.*

He grinned proudly at his reflection. This was sure to piss off at least one person along the way. That would definitely make his day.

"I don't know how you blend in so well when you always try to stand out so much," Hunter commented.

Cypress's grin turned smug. "I'm just that talented."

Hunter scoffed but didn't answer, and Cypress finished dressing. He put the seaweed back in the jar, rinsed his hands in a basin in the corner, and turned his attention to the rest of his change of clothing: a respectable set of linen pants, brown leather boots, and a pale blue tunic that turned his eyes a shade closer to grey. He left the tunic open so people could be scandalized by the text. He really hoped he ran across a sheltered, impressionable young kid or a cranky old biddy. They always had the best reactions.

Shoving all his old, dirty clothing in one bag, Cypress crawled over to the basin of water and tipped his head downward so that if the slime sloughed off early, it would only go into water. He'd learned the lesson the hard way that it would stain anything else to yennre and back.

He had to wait for the proper time limit before he washed out the concoction, or his hair color would be all manners of fucked up. He always got bored at this part, though, so it wasn't long into silently counting before he spoke.

"Anything interesting in Let's-Call-Them-Enforcer Land?"

He heard the rustle of a shrug. "Maybe. The same man entered HQ twice, but I never saw him leave. I assume there are several exits, but I'm getting increasingly convinced there's one that isn't within the building itself. Maybe an underground tunnel connected to another building nearby."

"Couldn't he just be a Conjuror?"

Hunter shook his head. "I got the list of HQ-approved Conjurers and saw Illusions of their images. He isn't one of them."

Cypress huffed. "If that's true, we gotta find and stake out the other exit too. Might be better off trying to get in that way."

"Right."

"Maybe they'll be dumbfucks enough that they'll store what we need there instead of at Dogs Central."

Hunter shrugged lightly. "I doubt it, but maybe. This section of Irridian's probably the oldest standing area in the world, with buildings remodeled more than anywhere else. If they were to hide something anywhere, it could be around here even if it's not in their headquarters itself."

"That'd be nice. I'd rather get the shit from a stakeout than have to go in like the backup plan."

"Me too. But it's looking increasingly likely the backup plan will be our only plan."

Cypress grunted in annoyance. "Do you think it's a trap?"

"I don't know."

"Cause I keep wondering why the Mystic let us in."

"I do too."

Cypress lapsed into moody silence at that; there wasn't much else that could be said. They were screwed either way: infiltrate on the free-for-all public bitch session the Enforcers held monthly and have it turn out to be a trap, or leave Irridian without getting what they needed.

It wasn't a choice. They had to go in.

Nyten's protection wouldn't last much longer.

A quiet groan and shift of weight grabbed Cypress' attention. He peered through the trail of his slowly lightening hair and saw his brother drop against the wall with a strained look. Hunter was around Cypress' same light olive complexion, although a bit darker than Cypress. But right now, he had paled.

"Release the fucking spell, you idiot!" Cypress snapped.

"I can't see the entrance properly without—"

"I don't give a flying fuck! You've been using Enhanced Senses all day. No one can leave it on as long as you have. I'll kick your fucking ass if you hurt yourself in front of me."

"But—"

"I swear to fucking Arrin, Hunter, I will force you to do it in two seconds if you don't stop on your own. And then we really *will* have fucked up our plans."

Hunter scowled weakly but nonetheless obeyed. There was no sound to mark the release of the spell but there was the very faintest pulse to the air that any Mage would be able to feel. The glow of unnatural green left Hunter's eyes, leaving the darker leaf green of his natural irises.

Like all Mages, Cypress had used and stopped Enhanced Senses enough to know what Hunter was experiencing: The scene on the street below him would have fallen out of focus with nauseating abruptness and for a moment his mind would reel as it tried to make sense of his environment. Although Hunter had most likely primarily enhanced his sight, all the other senses always came along for the ride. The human mind and body were too interconnected to enhance one sense and not the others.

For that reason, to Hunter the wall against his arms would feel muted and dull; the murmured conversation from the passersby below would have faded into obscurity; and even the bitter scent of the weeds Cypress sealed in the jars would have dissipated.

When they were younger, Cypress had tried to push the limits more than once for far too long. The result had been blindness for a week, and his sense of taste still wasn't quite as sensitive as it used to be.

Only morons pushed it too far. He was willing to concede that he could be a bit of an idiot, but his twin was usually smarter.

Just went to show how off-balance they both were. The internal countdown to Nyten's protection fading was louder than any words they could ever say. Hunter usually acted like he wasn't worried about things nearly as much as Cypress was, even though he had more reason than anyone else to fear a reprisal, but it seemed that even Hunter was finally starting to wear down and show some of his fear that Anastasia would return.

Anger rushed through Cypress at the very thought of it. He gritted his teeth and breathed deeply, counting for an entirely different reason this time. Otherwise, it was too easy to think about how much he wanted to hurt everyone around him, everyone on the fucking planet if he could; except Nyten, the shadow casters, and Hunter.

Never would he ever harm Hunter.

"I'm fine." Hunter's voice was a little reedy but mostly annoyed.

It only fueled the anger in Cypress the way it always did when Hunter shrugged off Cypress' concern. A longstanding feud that had no end.

Cypress scowled at him but couldn't get a good enough glare going with his awkward head angle. Hunter's stupidity had made him lose count somewhere along the way. He figured he must have had the mix on long enough.

Better have, because if he didn't have something productive to do he was going to blow some shit up in 2.5 seconds.



He dunked his head entirely in the tub of water and scrubbed at the slime. It came out in stringy globs that clung to his fingers and slipped off his hair. Inky black seeped into the water, staining the edges of the porcelain base and, Cypress knew, his hands and face. Cypress sat up and blindly pulled another tub closer, this one filled with water tinged faintly green. Putting his head and hands in there, he couldn't see it but knew that the grey-brown sloughed off him. When he sat up again and dried off his face and hair, the inky residue was gone.

Next, he removed his piercings, which he placed very carefully in a small pouch that he made sure to properly store. Then he grabbed another jar near him and palmed it open, scooping out a bit of goo that was weaker than the slime from before. Sliding that through his hair with his fingers, he shaped it until his hair fell in a boring, indistinct way around his face. When he eyed himself in the mirror, the light fell on his hair and showed a mundane brown where once had been black.

"Whaddya think?"

"Looks good. I don't see any dark spots."

Cypress nodded and unceremoniously shoved the items back into their specific bags. "Dogs're always looking for Illusions but they never think of dye. It's fucking crazy."

"They probably think it isn't necessary, since they can track magical signatures. Doesn't matter how a person looks outwardly if they always show the same inward print."

"Not if I don't use *my* magic," Cypress said with a grin.

Reaching over, he pulled their portable, paired sylphs closer; Lirin and Rilin, generally perfectly happy to spend their time curled up lazing about in the padded, climate-controlled box Hunter and Cypress used for them. Technically the sylphs could be used by anyone, but Lirin always got this grumpy look on her face when she was awoken and Cypress enjoyed that. He liked any creature that was perfectly willing to tell the world to fuck off, even if that creature had no voice. So he always took Lirin with him and left the demurer Rilin for his more respectable brother.

The sylphs looked, as always, like tiny little humans with exaggerated features. At the opening of the box, Rilin remained asleep, but Lirin lifted her head with the expected grouchy stare. Like Rilin but unlike most sylphs, Lirin's coloring was lavender with swirls of periwinkle along her skin and clothing. Her hair was a short shock of violet that had first given him the idea to dye his own hair.

She rubbed her eyes when her small home was jostled. As he reached into the box, he saw her tiny eyebrows quirk, as if she considered shoving him away. But in the end, she allowed him to pick her up, careful as he always was not to hurt the delicate creature. When he pulled open his vest, she crawled into the protected inner pocket without any attitude or hesitation.

She was too small for him to feel her against his chest, but he had wondered at times if his heartbeat felt thunderous to her. And if so, did she hate it or was it somehow comforting?

He would never know, and mostly he didn't care. He shut the box on Rilin, letting her return to darkness so she could fall back asleep.

Standing up, he threw on a nondescript brown cloak. It billowed impressively.

"I'm off. Gonna walk the block, check some shit out, then go to Road's End. I'll Lirin you if anything comes up; you do the same."

Hunter nodded and returned his attention to the street. "Watch the man in the red tunic with black lines up the back. Black hair, mid-thirties. He just showed up for the third time and I still haven't seen where he left. Might be circling the block."

Cypress shrugged easily, unconcerned. "Probably trying to out the moles in the area but I'll watch for him. Bet those ain't real Charlatans, either. I'll check the wares."

"I'll monitor."

Hunter enhanced his eyesight, lending the glow back to his eyes. Cypress narrowed his eyes at his brother but didn't say anything, since he knew Hunter wouldn't be stupid enough to push so far again in one day. He likely would drop the spell not long after Cypress left.

Cypress thought his brother was zoning out and wouldn't say more, but when he started to open the door a sharp syllable held him captive.

"Cy."

Cypress turned to meet an intent gaze. "Aww. Is baby brother worried?"

Hunter snorted. "Hardly. Lirin. Don't forget, she hasn't been in the sun properly or in a forest for a few weeks. She'll be weak, even if Rilin won't be."

"My, Hunter. I've never used a sylph before. Thank you for telling me. I never would have known."

"Sarcasm," Hunter warned.

"Patronizing," Cypress said, sing-song, and left the room while waving a

rude gesture.

As he jogged down the stairs, he went over the plan in his mind. He'd have to check the area first, of course, like he told Hunter. But he'd have to take the long route to Road's End just in case a Dog tracked him without him knowing. He also couldn't get out of his mind that something felt a bit off about all this; the fact that the Mystic let them into the city was incredibly odd, same as the fact that the Dogs hadn't noticed them, or...

He didn't know what, exactly, was causing the prickle of apprehension at the base of his neck. All he knew was it was there and wouldn't go away.

Then again, seeing Hunter in pain might have done it.

Bursting into the intense heat, he couldn't have been more thankful for the distraction. Fuck thinking about anything but this moment, this day. That was all that mattered in life. There were no guarantees any of them had a future, especially him, and the past was the past. Think about anything too long and he'd be even more homicidal than usual.

Cypress patted his pocket gently, double-checking for Lirin's sleeping body. It was a paranoid gesture that he couldn't help, even though he'd just placed her there. He felt her curled up in a little ball as normal, with her moving her tiny head in sleepy acknowledgment of his presence. He thought about bringing her out to his shoulder to give her some warmth from the sun, but he didn't dare do so this close to IEHQ.

It was pretty normal for Mages to have a sylph with them, but he'd heard rumors that the Dogs could track sylph connections as accurately as Mage signatures. Whether or not that was true, he wasn't about to risk it. Once Hunter and he had their shit, they needed to get the fuck out of Irridian before any of those bastards realized what Cypress was.

He had to wait for a carriage to pass, taking its sweet ass time as the kid driving it hadn't figure out self-motivators yet. The open carriage kept jerking and rolling in fits and bursts, nearly running over a stray cat that darted across the road and right after that, almost hitting the Charlatan kid who ran after it. The Charlatan woman jumped up from the blanket she'd spread on the ground to sell her wares and came yelling and screaming up on the carriage.

"Watch where you're going, you piece of shit!" She slammed her hand on the edge of the carriage, making the driver jump guiltily and look terrified. The older girl helping him drive leaned over the side of the cart, her voice too low for Cypress to hear the words across the busy street but apology all over her tone. The Charlatan was having none of it. "I don't give

a flying fuck what your brother is doing; you almost hit my kid! Look at lev!"

The little Charlatan kid sat back on the ground and cried great big tears, wailing so loud it had to have reached Hunter's ears. Leh rocked back and forth, holding lev's knee like it was hurt, even though Cypress knew for a fact the carriage hadn't touched the kid.

He knew, because he'd done the same grift when he was young. While the driver and his sister were distracted, terrified about hurting the kid, and while the Charlatan "mom" screamed outrage at their audacity, a third Charlatan who blended into the background came jogging past. She had been staying away from the other Charlatans, acting unrelated, dressed like any other Irridianite. As she passed the back of the open carriage, her hand darted in and out so fast it would have been missed by anyone who didn't know what to look for. In seconds, she had their money pouches and probably some other goods, and she was already jogging across the street.

She swung past Cypress and for a second their eyes met. They didn't have to say words; she knew he knew. She quirked an eyebrow slightly as if to ask if he would report her, and he simply smirked his approval. She flashed a smile and was gone into the crowd as if she had never existed. The Charlatan "mother" kicked the wheels of the carriage for good measure, threw a few rude gestures their way, and ended it all on a drawn-out reaming in her native language. Then she pulled the Charlatan kid back with her onto their blanket and tended to lev while the driver and sister got out of there as fast as they could before she attacked again.

No Enforcers had bothered to come out of the building in the interaction, which made Cypress wonder if they didn't care or if they were simply going straight for the woman with the stolen goods rather than causing a scene in front of their HQ.

Either way, Cypress kind of hated that he had seen all that. He'd had a second of nostalgia; a memory of belonging. It reminded him of old times; the scams he'd pulled, the seamless teamwork. But now that the Charlatans' grift was done, he was reminded all over again of how alone he and his brother were. Of how fucked everything had become since those carefree days.

It was like the darkness in his mind was waiting to pounce on any weakness. The second he had that thought, the second he tried looking away from the Charlatan "mom," a voice came unbidden from his memory:

*—I won't help a soul sucker live—*

He darted across the street without waiting for the next carriage to pass. It swerved to avoid him but he didn't care. He knew he shouldn't do this, he knew in front of the Dogs he needed to lay low, but his fucking mind was as charged with rotted thoughts as the air was humidity.

He felt a buzzing in his fingertips and down to his toes; a need for something deep inside he couldn't fulfill, couldn't name, couldn't ignore but wanted to so fucking bad. He became way too aware he was an Unconscionable standing outside IEHQ. Standing in fucking Irridian, where everyone was a threat.

What had previously been oblivious civilians around him now felt like Watchdogs with every step; monitoring his every move, his every expression, every hair on his fucking head.

*They know*, his paranoia told him. *They know and Hunter will be hurt again.*

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

He fucking hated every fucking person in existence. He loathed them for being born how they were born. For thinking themselves better than others. For the fucking genocide of his people and the fact that no matter where he went in this world, he would never be safe.

Fuck them and fuck the Dogs and fuck the Mystic and fuck *fucking* Irridian.

His hands shook at his sides; the rage built in him when he wasn't looking again, a predator rising at the glimpse of vulnerability. Filling him with the fury and hatred of every Defiler killed before him; with every time he was nearly killed as well.

None of these people deserved to live.

His feet must have led him blindly across the street, because he realized he was in the alley near the HQ and didn't remember getting there. He fought with everything he had against the urge to slam his fist into the wall; to destroy *something* to get rid of this anger and *fuck*, it was happening again.

It was happening more frequently lately.

Why couldn't he control the anger anymore? Why couldn't he withhold his violent need for destruction?

This wasn't right. Something was wrong.

He was used to anger when thinking about how fucked he and his kind were, but the sudden rise and fall of rage was happening too suddenly, too

often, too dramatically, since he came to Irridian.

He dropped his back against the wall, curled forward as casually as he could, and breathed. Great, harsh gasps. In. Out.

Breathe.

*Breathe.*

*Fucking breathe or you'll give it all away.*

He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on the environment around him. The sweltering heat and the building hot as forged iron at his back. The crunch of the dirt beneath his boots as he shifted his weight. The stagnant pulse of a weak breeze, bringing more heat and no relief. The distant conversations.

The knowledge that Hunter was probably watching him, ready to step in or stop everything if he thought Cypress couldn't handle it.

Cypress drew in a reedy breath; still thin and caught in his throat. He felt like he was suffocating but he knew he wasn't. This pressure inside him, the pounding of his head and the raging of his heartbeat—a staccato *badum badum badum* crescendoing without his say—these were all pieces of him that Nyten had told him to control. All bits she said would overcome him if he let it.

She said he was stronger than that.

She'd said that.

No one else had ever believed in him, but *she* had. She and Hunter. Hunter and her. He had to control it for them. They were the only people who mattered in this souls-forsaken world.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Lirin shifted in his pocket; the gentlest of movements from a fragile creature who had never done him harm.

Cypress gasped and with it he finally felt the air hit his lungs. He felt like he was rising above the darkness, that blanket of hatred that turned everything dark and fearful around him. He drew in breath like he'd been drowning, and maybe he had been. Maybe that's what all this was; his power dragging him down lower and lower until there was nothing left of the person he had once been.

Maybe that was why the genocide had happened. Maybe all the other Defilers had failed, exactly the way he knew he would too someday.

Maybe the whole world was right to fear his kind, because the truth was sometimes he was afraid of himself.

He dragged his lungs back into his control; steady breaths in and out that filled his chest and stilled the rumbling in his heart; the buzzing lightness of his brain.

He hadn't had an attack quite that bad that in ages. What was wrong with him? Was it only the tension, or was it this city—so full of the magic he could sense but only steal?

He hoped Hunter hadn't witnessed it; he didn't want to start all over again with the passing stares and the silence in place of words they would never say.

Straightening, he opened his eyes slowly. The day felt abnormally bright now, as if he had enhanced his senses beyond anything before. Even in the shadows of this hot alley, it felt like he was staring into the sun.

He drew in another breath; this time deep and calm. The rage that had overpowered him was gone now, as if it had never existed. As turbulent as a violent summer storm; destroying lives and livelihood one moment, eerily silent the next.

Cypress pushed himself away from the wall and surreptitiously checked to see if anyone had witnessed his breakdown. There was no one around and he wasn't in direct view of IEHQ.

Lucky.

He started to walk around a pile of rags but was stopped by a faint vibration of something magical stirring beneath them. He paused, looking down suspiciously. It didn't feel like a typical Mage.

"Whaddya want?" a man's gravelly voice said from under the cloth.

Cypress jumped, startled, and was immediately annoyed with himself for the reaction.

A pair of bleary blue eyes appeared a moment later, encased in dark brown, scabbed skin and half-hidden by grey hair. "I gotta shaar-leese som'ere." The man exaggerated his words until the colloquial abbreviation for Charlatan License was almost incomprehensible. With great effort he managed to push his bony body up.

Another Charlatan. No wonder he didn't feel like a normal Mage. Cypress should have known.

"Shut up. I ain't no Dog."

"Eh?" The man pushed himself up the wall, the pile of rags falling from his chest to pool in his lap. His clothes were tattered and looked as though they had been passed down a few generations before making it to his hands. "Whatcha doin' here, then?"

"None of your damn business. The fuck do you care?"

The man shrugged slowly and rubbed at his face with one grimy palm. He looked around, as if trying to remember where he was. "Just a curious neighbor."

Cypress snorted and studied the end of the alleyway to ensure no Enforcers were in the immediate vicinity. He'd leave as soon as he was sure the coast was clear.

"You ain't my neighbor," he said.

"Not now," the man said, turning ice blue eyes on Cypress. "But I will be."

That same prickling apprehension crawled up Cypress' spine. It made him resent that damn old man, throwing him off with bullshit right after he had gotten himself back under control.

"Yeah? And what're you, a Seer?"

"You ever met one, boy?"

Cypress smirked mockingly. "What're you talking 'bout? Just met one now, didn't I?"

The man smiled, and Cypress could see he was missing several teeth. The few that remained were dirty and nowhere near the color they should be.

"You're a smart one," the man said happily, rubbing at greying whiskers poking out of his chin. "You're meeting a real interesting one right now."

"I'd go with 'bat shit crazy' before 'interesting.' Now how about you go predict me a future that don't involve you?" Cypress turned his attention to the end of the alley again. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"Nothing to worry about," the man said amiably and settled back against the wall. "You already missed them."

Cypress shot a suspicious look at the man. "What?"

"Them Enforcers ain't nowhere around right now. You should go now. Wait too long, and you're stuck again."

"What makes you think I give a shit about Enforcers?"

The man shrugged languidly and didn't bother to respond. Cypress' tension ratcheted up sevenfold. Was this man a Dog in disguise? Or was he an actual Charlatan?

But he didn't feel like an Enforcer. He didn't feel like a normal Mage at all.

No way he was a Seer, though. No Seer in their right mind would be inside Irridian in the first place, let alone sprawled out in the open not far



from IEHQ.

In their right mind. This guy could be crazy. When it came to Charlatans and Seers both, insane as a rodworm was always an option.

And when it came down to it, people would say no Unconscionable in their right mind would be in this alley either, and look what dumbfuck was currently standing there doing just that.

He didn't have time to stand around talking to random strangers, especially ones who were potentially out of their mind.

Unaware of Cypress' decision to ignore him, the man spoke up.

"What got you all worked up in a lather, anyhow? Seemed ready to break down, earlier. You got rodworm in your brain?"

"Shut up or I'll kill you."

The man laughed loudly, merrily, and pat Cypress on the knee. "I like you, boy. You just call on Old Jack when you need him, yeah?"

Cypress leveled the man with a disgusted look. "Yeah, and when would I need some idiot like you?"

"Oh, you'll need me," Old Jack said with a sage smile. "There's no question about that."

"Yeah right." Cypress pushed away from the wall and dusted his pant legs off, glaring down at Old Jack. "You tell anyone 'bout my... moment, and I'll hunt you down."

"Why wouldja get all upset like that in public if you didn't want no one seeing it?"

Cypress made a disgusted noise from deep in his throat and turned his back on the man. "Just don't, or you'll find I'm not usually this nice."

"Yes, yes," Old Jack said, but he was grinning widely. "I won't tell if you won't tell."

"Why would I tell about a freak out I just told *you* not to tell about?"

Old Jack shrugged, the smile remaining but turning more enigmatic. "I meant about the Seer, but your 'moment' works too."

"The Seer? Don't ya mean you?" Though Cypress' tone was twisted with mocking, there was a note of bewilderment as well.

Old Jack only smiled, and after several seconds of silence Cypress shook his head. "Whatever."

He strode away, giving Old Jack one last warning glare over his shoulder. He thought he heard Old Jack say something but didn't bother listening to what it was.

\* \* \*

Cypress crouched in the shadows of the warehouse's ceiling, resting expertly on a ledge that was barely half the length of his feet. One hand was splayed against the wall behind him, palm open. The special gloves he wore caught against the smooth stone, holding him securely while his other arm dangled between his knees.

He had switched his clothing out again from one of many knapsacks he had hidden around the city. After Old Jack, he had felt too paranoid to continue in the same outfit. This time it was all black with no cloak to catch on anything, although his fitted black tunic held a hood that sheltered his face.

The plan to steal and run had been foiled by these idiots turning a black-market transport into a fucking flea market. They had set their shit up on tables in the alleyway and kept the crates of items in the abandoned warehouse right behind where Cypress had eventually migrated and now crouched. And even stupider, people actually showed up to buy shit.

Granted, the wares they put out on the tables all looked legit, and this sort of thing was weirdly common in Irridian, Cypress had come to find in his wanderings. Seemed plenty of people had extra shit laying around their houses they didn't want to keep or throw, so they sold it to other people stupid enough to buy it. A dead ass alley on the edge of town was as normal a place for those sorts of sales as some high-end neighborhood over by the Mystic's Palace. In Irridian, seemed everyone wanted a deal, and sometimes the spellscripts they could get from some random ass person was a quarter the price but just as useful as the ones they got in the bookstores or spell shops. Cypress was used to seeing Charlatans setting up shop with wares like that, but not everyday citizens.

In retrospect, maybe *that* was why the Dogs hadn't cared about the lady and kid in front of HQ. Whether Charlatans or the nice old biddy down the street, they were both selling their shit for cheap and it was perfectly legal. Except, in the case tonight at Road's End, everything was a front for selling black market contraband instead; from spellscripts that claimed to be innocuous but probably contained some pretty dark shit, to even more dangerous and disturbing stuff Cypress had seen peeking out of the crates.

A Dog passing by the alley may not think twice about that chipped teacup, but they'd probably think there was something pretty fucking wrong with a Seer's eyes bobbing around a jar, or the mummified arm of what they claimed was an Entropist.

All of that meant there were a lot more people than Cypress had anticipated. He'd thought he'd be dealing with maybe four guys but turned out it was closer to ten sellers and a rotation of random people swinging by. Not too many for him to handle, but still too many to be an easy snatch and go. If he wasn't what he was maybe he could have gotten away with it, but as it stood he wasn't going to risk it.

He kept an eye out for anything else he may want to steal, since he was stuck watching this stupid market. Nothing stood out to him, but that was only because he and Hunter had a great stash from all their rerun scams. Anyone else would've had plenty to choose from. After the third hour of being nearly bored to death he'd thought about buying the cocoons so he could leave, but he wanted to know if they had selaria. And no way in yenrre was he paying the amount they'd probably charge for that. Plus, he sensed there was a Cursed Dog or two down there. He wasn't going near that shit unless he had to; he never knew if those crazy fuckers would still be able to ID him for what he was, or if they'd be too far gone to care.

So, he'd had to wait outside the warehouse until night fell, which wasn't nearly as dark here in Irridian as it was in the countryside. Magelights kept an unnatural glow even past sundown, but this high up inside the warehouse he had found some shadows to serve as the cloak he'd left behind.

The number of people slowly dwindled, not that there had ever been some huge group in the start. They moved their shit from selling from tables in the alley to solely being inside the warehouse. And that was when he'd relocated too.

Even far into the night he couldn't tell if these guys had selaria, but they definitely had some mote faerie cocoons. Those things were always shipped in very specific containers to keep them from breaking in transit and to contain their magical energy, and in one of the open crates he could see the box nestled right down in there. They had plenty of it so he wasn't worried it would all be sold, and if it was he figured he'd just stalk the buyer until they were somewhere secluded and get it from them instead. Probably make it easier. But no one had bought what he actually needed them to buy; they'd been buying and trading everything else instead.

It wasn't a surprise, really. Hunter had invented the tracking patch, after all, so they were the only ones using it. Most people didn't need the filaments like they did.

The number of buyers had finally dwindled significantly. Cypress

guessed the dealers would be packing up in the next couple of hours. With all the sellers in one place now, this gave Cypress more time to really focus on the weak links and watch their behavior to see if he could sneak down and grab the shit after all or if they'd always be milling around the crates like they had so far. He waited and watched, cautious and careful.

He spent time identifying as best he could the vibrations of the various seiyunne he felt, without giving himself away in the process. Cursed Dogs at the door and far wall, one young, one older. Some Magelings crawling around— scruffy beard, red tunic, green cloak, those three. Empath in the corner conserving his energy. Two Proveniers; scarred eye and grey-streaked hair. Entrhraller as the main man breaking open the crates and coordinating the sales. The strangest part was he felt something fucked up but couldn't quite place it. A Cursed Healer and something else, he thought, but he didn't see them. Maybe they already left before he got inside, maybe not. There'd been a woman involved earlier, dark hair to her shoulders, but he didn't think it was her. She was fucked up. Provenier, but not. Possibly Spiritualist? She was something, he just didn't know what and didn't care. She was gone a long time now, so she no longer had to factor into his plans.

For all that his silence and stillness made him practically disappear, he still didn't detect the presence until it appeared at his right.

Bright green eyes glowed faintly in the gloom next to him, all other features lost in the darkness aside from a shock of black hair and dark clothing. The person watched the black-market dealers far below them.

"Idiot!" he hissed. "Release that!"

The glowing green eyes rolled and pulsed to the normal faint glint of eyes cast in shadow. White teeth flashed in a grin and the stranger settled more comfortably on the ledge. Cypress knew without any sense of arrogance that it was impressive that he was able to balance so well on the ledge, but the newcomer was so casual about it that it made him look awkward and off-balance.

He was irritated all over again.

"Irridia's tits, who are you?" He kept his growl quiet and low and flicked his attention between the stranger and the targets. The people down below didn't appear to have noticed anything.

Yet.

A woman's voice answered in a rough lilt, "You can call me JD. And you are?"

His eyes narrowed to slits. "Anonymous."

"Cute." She settled herself more comfortably against the wall, one leg nearly at a ninety-degree angle to balance her weight.

"Thanks," he said. "Now get the fuck outta my way."

"Excuse me, Mr. Congeniality, but I believe I was here first."

That would explain the subtle sense of being watched when he first arrived. He had assumed it was someone with the black-market dealers and had taken more time than usual to find a spot and settle in. But even then, he'd felt off. Apparently he should have trusted his instincts.

This day was going to shit real fast.

"I don't care if you were born here. This is *my* mark."

"Well, I wasn't. But I *have* been here since well before you. So, *you* leave."

Cypress clenched his free fist. "You."

She bared her teeth. "No, you."

"No, *you!*"

"You!"

Their hissed-whisper fight hadn't risen to a level of endangering them, but it might have continued in that form if Cypress hadn't seen something that made his throat close tight.

His stupid *fucking* twin walked into the warehouse and stopped near one of the dealers.

Cypress' heart made a funny, worried leap.

What was Hunter doing here? What the *fuck* was he thinking?

He was supposed to stay back at the apartment. It was *safe* in the apartment for Hunter. This was the exact fucking opposite of—

"Who's that?" the woman asked interestedly.

"Shh!" Cypress waved an angry hand for her to shut the fuck up and dug one of his charged listening stones from his pocket. He'd only brought two and they only worked for a certain amount of time, so he hadn't wanted to use them up until he was about to move in for the steal. But he had to know what Hunter was saying in case he needed to interfere. He'd created the listening stones similar to the same way he made his bombs, allowing him to activate a spell without having to use his magic. A swirl of his thumb pad in the right design on the bottom of the stone and it was primed; he put it up to his ear and used a magnet behind his earlobe to connect it where he normally would have worn his earring. The stone stayed up like a small earring, held on by the magnetic force, which itself activated the spell

without him having to use Enhanced Senses.

The sounds from below leapt to his ear as if he were standing there next to his brother. Hunter's footsteps were a quiet scratch against the worn concrete floor while he wandered between the three tables left standing. The dealers watched him closely, the same way they had others; always ready to defend against Enforcers or Dogs in disguise.

Because of the range of the listening stone, Cypress heard everything from the floor, including people nowhere near his brother. While Hunter was walking around, not yet interacting with anyone, Cypress quickly took note of what the others were saying. The younger Cursed Dog and Empath by the main door said nothing; just watched their surroundings suspiciously. Grey Streaks the Provenier circled the room watching everyone, slowly arching back toward the entrance. The older Cursed Dog idly made his way toward the tables from the back of the room. There were only two customers in the place aside from Hunter; some couple who were trying to negotiate a better deal with the seller on a set of poison-tipped knives. That seller was the scarred eye Provenier, and the Mageling with the green cloak came over to monitor the deal. The Entraller was digging through the packing rags in one of the crates in the corner when the Mageling in the red tunic came over by him.

"I thought you said he was coming," Red Tunic muttered.

"That's what I was told." The Entraller threw a bunch of rags out to the floor, sounding irritated. "His money must've fallen through."

"That was supposed to be our big score. What was the point of risking Irridian if we could've stayed by Degrena?"

"He said they would know him too well down there. He said this was safer."

"Bullshit it's safer. The flea market cover worked on the Mystic to get in, but now we don't know the Dogs as well. What if one of them comes in here disguised?"

"That's why we have Jessen. Right?" The Entraller looked over at the older Cursed Dog as he finally made it to them and stopped.

"Didn't you hear?" The two Mages looked confused at Jessen's question. He raised his eyebrows and hooked his thumbs on his pockets. "He's dead."

"What?" the Entraller hissed.

"Who got him?" Red Tunic asked, almost overlapping their voices.

"No one knows," Jessen said with a shrug. "Ariwyn Division found him yesterday. I heard there was something odd about it all."

"Odd how?"

Hunter stopped near the table closest to the cocoon crate, and Cypress focused on him completely. That dealer was the last Mageling, his scruffy auburn beard nearly covering the fluctuations of his mouth.

"What're you here for?" Scruffy Beard asked, leaning forward with his elbows on the edge of the table.

Hunter perused the trinkets, his gloved fingertips passing over the top of a metal tin. "I'm interested in mote faerie cocoons."

What the fuck was Hunter doing? Asking outright only made the price go up; he should've bought something inexpensive and offered to take the cocoons off the dude's hands for a deal. And didn't he want any selaria? He couldn't ask for that shit the same way he could cocoons. Why were they wasting money on the cocoons anyway when they could just steal it for free from some other schmuck stupid enough to buy?

Everything Hunter was doing was a rookie mistake. And Cypress took great pride in not being a fucking rookie.

Scruffy Beard ticked up an eyebrow. "There's an unusual need."

"Do you have any?"

Scruffy Beard tapped a finger against the table, watching Hunter thoughtfully. There wasn't anything wrong with wanting mote faerie cocoons, it was just sort of weird to ask for it specifically instead of buying it with other shit. Way to draw attention to himself for stupid fucking reasons, even if it wasn't likely to result in anything bad.

"What are you doing?" the woman whispered in Cypress' ear. He started, having almost forgotten she was here.

"Shut the fuck up," he hissed vehemently, pushing her lightly on the shoulder to get her to back the fuck off.

"You're acting like you can hear them, but you aren't using ES." She seemed intrigued, peering down. "What's your secret?"

"I told you to shut up—"

"I have some," Scruffy Beard was saying idly down below.

"Does it have something to do with that stone—"

"Lady, I will fucking murder you if you don't shut the fuck up already," Cypress growled, gripping the end of the ledge to keep in his anger and stop him from attacking her.

"I can't go that high," Hunter was saying. "I can do forty."

"Fifty."

Fucking great. Cypress had clearly missed part of their conversation.

How was he supposed to protect his brother is this crazy fucking chick wouldn't leave him alone?

"Forty-five and we have a deal."

Forty-fucking-five! Hunter better have stolen the entire cache of selaria for *that* price. What the fuck was he—

Hunter reached out to shake on it, but Jessen stopped him with a grip on his right elbow. Seeing anyone touching Hunter at all, especially gripping the cloth-covered arm, shot a flash of hot rage through Cypress. He sucked in a breath, thinking logically he had to quell this sudden anger but feeling emotionally like right now he didn't care, he had to pay attention to his brother instead.

Hunter was less perturbed than Cypress; he only looked over questioningly. From this high, Cypress didn't have as good a view of their expressions as he wanted. He could tell Jessen was looking Hunter over, though, focusing mostly on his right eye where a scar arced down his cheek.

"I know you," Jessen said slowly.

Cypress went on alert. He shifted his weight forward.

"I doubt it," Hunter said calmly, "seeing as *I* don't know *you*."

"No," Jessen said thoughtfully. "I feel like I've seen you before. You look different, but... I swear I remember you. You have a brother, right? I remember a kid like you getting a scar—"

Ice rushed through Cypress' veins.

"No."

Cypress didn't even realize he had whispered it aloud; a mix of emotions he couldn't decipher. Hunter quirked an eyebrow, seeming calm even as Cypress knew his twin enough to see the alarm in the way he shifted his weight backward, in the mild tone of his voice:

"You're thinking of someone else. I'm an only child, and I got this scar from falling out of a tree when I was younger." He raised an eyebrow at Scruffy Beard. "What sort of security are you people using here? This one doesn't seem right in the head."

"What's going on?" It was the Entraller, closing in fast. Cypress glanced quickly around and saw the only two customers had left; the younger Cursed Dog was closing and locking the doors, and the rest of the dealers were moving toward Hunter.

Cypress' heartbeat sped. He quickly reached into his pockets, pulling out the bombs.



"It's been so long..." Jessen rubbed his forehead with his free hand. "My memories from before are a little hazy, but I swear he was one of Claude's kids."

"Claude's?"

The Enthraler's surprise was overrun by a rush of alarm and worry crashing through Cypress. He ripped the listening stone off his ear, not caring if it might clatter, barely noticing the woman catch it instead. He was too focused on Hunter and the nightmare unfolding below.

Cypress adjusted his hold on his bombs; a handful of small spheres that were so dark they seemed to suck in the light. He blindly twirled them in his hand until one was between his fingers and the other two were in his palm. Though they had hit each other in the process, not even a whisper of sound escaped.

"What are you—?" the woman asked but he moved before she could finish.

Cypress threw one sphere straight into the air ahead of him, then threw the other two out at different angles.

He jumped off the ledge next.

He heard the woman draw in a sharp, stifled breath; probably thinking he was about to die. He stopped caring about her at all, focusing the entirety of his energy on the people below.

Falling silently through the air, his dark hood flapping above his head, Cypress spread his arms straight to his sides, toward the two spheres. He was right on target; nearly straight over the first sphere he had thrown out.

A pulse of seitai hit the air and was gone so quickly that even Cypress could have missed it if he weren't responsible. At the same time, the Magelights hovering in the room flashed and disappeared.

The silky weight of seilaye ran through Cypress' veins; comforting and welcoming in a way he never felt otherwise.

One of the spheres at Cypress' side disappeared. Eyes briefly glowed green in flashes from below, like lightning bugs appearing and disappearing in the gloom. They didn't yet know to look up.

"What the fuck—?" Jessen asked, looking around.

It was too late.

A pulse of seitai flashed through the room.

The Mages Cypress had marked as Proveniers and Magelings snapped their eyes up to him just as the sphere beneath him erupted. A giant gossamer spider web shot out, its edges snapping to the walls and catching

just in time for him to fall on it. His hood settled gracefully over his face as he crouched, watching the Proveniers and Magelings as they drew seitai around them.

"It's the kid!" Jessen shouted, stumbling back as he pointed up. "Defi—"

Hunter slit his throat with a dagger he created from thin air. Jessen clutched at his bleeding neck, eyes going wide. He gurgled in a breath and stumbled behind one of the crates where he collapsed. A puddle of blood formed quickly beneath him.

The other Mages froze one second in shock before shooting into motion.

"You motherfucker!" The younger Cursed Dog lashed out at Hunter, gripping him with an Enforcer hold and throwing him back against a stack of crates. Hunter hit so hard the air audibly rushed out of him, and the crates fell over Jessen's body. "Kill that fucker! I got this one."

Cypress watched from his perch, unstable anger not rising so quickly now that he had seilaye soothing his soul. Hunter glanced up with a look that said he was fine before he was yanked off his feet and shot toward the Cursed Dog holding up a bared blade.

The individual Mage signatures erupted around the other Mages like brightly colored cocoons that typically only another similar seiyunne user or Enforcer could see.

Idiots.

Seilaye moved within him; a secondary heartbeat, another life. Another soul. It rose and fell, stretching its proverbial arms as it waited, ravenous, for the Mages to make their mistake.

Flashes of seikelle and seitai burned beneath him as the others drew on their own magic. The seiyunne in the air was so powerful that it raised the hair on Cypress' skin.

It happened in quick succession, but to Cypress it felt like time slowed.

Seilaye always did that to him; made him feel every moment with deeper senses than he could ever achieve in a paltry spell.

The last sphere clattered to the floor just as the first Mageling shot a wave of seitai at Cypress. Furious shouts erupted around the room, echoing in the dark, and a few more spells were unleashed while Cypress stayed perfectly still.

He felt the magic reach toward him, and excitement crashed through his veins. His lips peeled back in a soul-sucking smile, and he let go of that dark beast inside him.

Seilaye violently rent the air, ripping through all the seiyunne present

and sucking it in, like a maelstrom slicing through lumber and limbs. The impact of magic being stolen was so savage that it compressed the air. The Mages below screamed in shock and crumpled to the floor.

Everyone except Hunter, whose magic wasn't stolen and who knew what to expect, and Cypress, who was barely repressing laughter.

Hunter caught himself with his hands against the Cursed Dog's shoulders, using the momentum to flip up over the man and land behind him. As the Dog fell to his knees, Hunter snapped his neck.

The spells that had nearly reached Cypress wavered out of control and shot off to the side. The seiyunne that had been buzzing in the air was gone so suddenly that it was jarring; as if it had never existed.

But it did exist.

It existed in Cypress' control now, where it belonged.

Those pathetic creatures fell down, rolling to the side in sheer terror. They bleated like sheep out to pasture, like livestock being slaughtered, and Cypress reveled in the sound. The feeling of their powers coursing through his veins, sparking power at his fingertips, brought him so intimately back into the fold of the universe that he felt like a god.

This was the disconnect his own power forced upon him every day of his life: the torture of being born a Mage with the knowledge of how fulfilling it was to be connected to Ariwyn, to feel his seiyunne bringing him in contact with the earth beneath him, with the ley lines beneath that— that knowledge and comfort and feeling of completion—

Denied to him as a Defiler, who could only steal the magic of others.

They saw that magic as their souls, and he understood why. It felt like he was missing half his soul every day he lived, being constantly stuck on the other side of a chasm from that most sincere of connections.

He understood, and so he basked in the glory of their frightened faces, of their helpless shouts and the twitching of their limbs. They got their souls every day of their lives; let them feel for a moment how it was to live as a Defiler.

Cypress rose up, the power of his seiyunne bombs filling him with more than he could ever have pulled on his own. He felt like a giant, like a dragon, like the ruler of the world.

When he shook this time, it was with elation.

And just a hint of repressed mania.

"Why are you doing this?" Scruffy Beard managed to hiss out. "If you want money..."

"Whatever we want, we'll be sure to take," Hunter said as he stopped at Scruffy Beard's side. "You should have taken my deal and not let Jessen talk. Then we all could have avoided this."

Calmly, Cypress walked to a large hole in the spiderweb and dropped straight through it to land with a light thud on a crate and roll out the impact. Most of the Mages were too weak without their power, unaccustomed to the violation of their magic being ripped from them. The Enthraler managed to strangle out a hoarse yell, managed to run at Cypress. Cypress jumped lightly out of the way and pivoted with a kick that sent the man sprawling.

Cypress walked through the room, crashing his fist and elbow and heel into the heads and necks and throats of the Mages. Not caring if he killed or incapacitated. Not caring what happened, with this power vibrating through his every blood cell and bringing to life his every nerve.

*This was what it felt to be alive.*

He stepped over Jessen's body and passed the last Provenier, Scarred Eye, who was rolling around on the floor. Cypress scooped up the last sphere and pocketed it as he casually kicked the man in the face. The crack of bone breaking was pleasant to Cypress' ears, as was the sight of blood smearing the toe of his boot.

Hunter passed Cypress to start digging in one of the crates. Cypress heard a noise and looked up to see the woman from above tentatively watching from the web. Her fingers curled around the strands.

With the extra life inside him, the extra power, Cypress could see the look of shock on her face. The faintest trembling of her fingertips.

He should kill her after this.

He should kill all of them.

None of them could know what he was, or who they once had been. If anyone knew, they would hunt him down and slaughter him like everyone else.

If they knew, they would hurt Hunter.

The rage that usually overcame him at that thought was missing with the seduction of this power. Instead, he felt only a higher understanding of the world. A cool, comforting embrace in his mind.

He looked at the men around him; the ones who still breathed. He systematically walked to each of them, crushing their skulls.

Hunter moved on to the next crate, the one that held the cocoons. He threw the packing rags out of the way while he searched for their spoils.

Cypress only half paid attention to his brother as he finished off the livestock.

Didn't they know? It was kill or be killed in this world, and Cypress would never again be the victim.

Red Tunic appeared at Hunter's side from wherever he'd been hiding, hand raised to strike him. Neither Cypress nor Hunter spared him a glance. Hunter shot a knife from beneath his cloak and it caught the man against the throat. Red Tunic staggered back, shocked, and had no chance to react before a second blunt weapon, this one from Cypress across the room, hit him in the back of the head with a meaty thunk. He crumpled to the floor.

Cypress finished off the last man with a boot to his forehead and a violent strike to his throat that made the man's entire body jerk. When Cypress stood, he was decorated with the blood of his enemies. It splattered across his form beautifully and he took a moment to admire it before looking up and meeting his twin's unmoved eyes.

Cypress approached his brother as Hunter held up the cocoon's box. Success.

Hunter quickly padded the box in some of the packing rags and then secreted it into a bag he had tied at his waist for this purpose.

Cypress moved around the fallen Mages and crates, collecting anything that looked interesting or worth any amount of money on the black market, and placed them about his body in pouches and holders scattered beneath his clothing.

He felt the presence of a fucked up Mageling and turned, seeing it was the woman. He hadn't bothered to identify her seiyunne before but now it felt obvious there was something wrong with her.

"Who are you?" Hunter asked.

"A friend of your friend, who calls himself anonymous." She tried to sound casual but it sounded shaky.

Cypress stepped toward her.

"No..." Hunter shot a wary glance at Cypress and stepped between them. "There are a very small number of people who could have hidden their presence as thoroughly as you did, and only one I can think of who could match your description and who is known to be in Irridian."

"Oh?" Intrigue pushed away some of her fear.

"You're Jade, aren't you?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Come now. Everyone knows that no one knows what Jade looks like."

"I know enough."

"How did you come to be so well-informed, pray tell?"

Hunter ignored her question. "What are you doing here?"

She shrugged. "I could ask the same of you, but seems our goals were aligned in one way. We all needed something that someone else has." She walked a wide berth around Cypress, keeping Hunter between them. Cypress wasn't fooled by the act. He saw the way she still trembled; the way she avoided looking at him.

He stepped toward her again. Hunter shifted with the movement, staying between them.

Stepping over bodies and pools of blood, she made her way to the man who Cypress had earlier marked as an Entraller and the leader. Kicking his body over, she produced a blade from beneath her cloak and slammed it into his back to the left of his right shoulder blade.

Cypress paused, positively reevaluating her trustworthiness based on her ruthless lack of hesitation.

Muscles bulging on her arms, she jerked the blade down and around, until she had cut a small hole that oozed blood. Cypress watched curiously as she pulled on a long glove, then reached her fingers into the depression and dug around with eyes moving around blank space and her lips pursed in concentration. She appeared to be searching for something based on feel alone.

A grim smile flashed across her lips as she pulled her bloody hand back with something clutched in her fingers. She pulled the glove down and around whatever she had retrieved from the man's body and secreted the item away so quickly that Cypress could not follow where she put it.

She stood and dusted her hands off, turning her attention to the twins. She hesitated, her gaze unable to stay on Cypress and settling on Hunter. "You know, now that I see you up close... you two look alike. Are you actually brothers?"

*Brothers.*

*Claude's kids.*

Maybe she'd heard what was said, even from up there.

She couldn't be trusted.

No one could live, once they knew.

He could feel the seiyunne he'd stolen sifting out of his reach; pulled as relentlessly from his grasp as gravity would sand between his fingers. With the users dead, the seiyunne was trying to return to Ariwyn, to the

surroundings, to the ley lines and the natural order of the world.

Cypress didn't want to let it.

He wanted to hold it forever, keeping that flame in his chest and that feeling in his soul. He didn't want to be empty again. Didn't want to have to feel that pain that never let him truly rest, that made him furious and hateful toward everything. Everyone.

Even seilaye would leave him as well, once this was all over.

In Cypress' silence, Hunter had answered something to the woman he thought was Jade, so probably was. Cypress didn't care about their conversation. Already his life force, his seiyunne, was trying to leave him. Soon, he would be vacant again.

Soon, he would feel that gaping, bloody wound that he called his soul.

While she was distracted, Cypress pulled a small green-tinted glass bottle from a pouch. He uncorked the top and stepped behind her. Before she could turn, he snapped seilaye out like a whip.

It shot through her; wrapped its claws around her power—seitai, for her—and yanked it back into his grasp. He felt the warmth of her signature, of her life force, even as Jade sucked in a strangled, keening breath. She tried to stay standing but it was too painful for Mages to have their magic stolen so violently, and like the lambs before her she, too, fell to her knees. Listed forward to land on her hands.

Cypress stared down at her while he siphoned her seitai into the bottle. It glowed from the inside; a pulsing, pleasant warmth that captured her signature as best he could. He pressed the cork back into the top and returned the bottle to its safe place.

She clawed at her throat, her chest. Her body knew something was missing but her mind couldn't comprehend.

They always acted this way. So pathetic.

Sometimes Cypress wondered how Mages had lived so long in this world, fancying themselves as gods when all it took to make them weaker than anything was to remove their magic.

Sometimes, he wished the whole world would burn again, and that this time the second Rending wouldn't split the magic into five seiyunne but rather destroy it entirely. So that none of this had to exist anymore. So that he never again had to watch such a pitiful scene.

She had grass green eyes, he noticed for the first time when she looked up at him. Fury, terror, pain, confusion... the emotions were all there in the trembling of her flesh and bone.

He could kill her easily right now. It wouldn't even matter if he did.

"Why?" she managed, the word stretched thin through a hoarse throat.

"Why not."

He stepped forward, his hand rising with the plan to strike her throat and break through the skin to her vulnerable, beating jugular vein.

Hunter stepped between them, his expression set and hands raised.

"Cy," he said calmly. Intently. "Don't."

"Why." Cypress couldn't bring intonation into his voice anymore.

Emotions felt far away from him, as if they had never existed.

"You collected her signature to test the tracking later, right? We'll need her alive to do that."

Cypress stared blankly at Hunter, and then shifted his gaze down at the bleating lamb on the floor. It had lost its humanity the moment he realized how easy it would be to kill.

"It knows what I am."

"She won't tell anyone. Will you, Jade?" The last was directed at the lamb in a firm voice.

Cypress saw the lamb shake its head but he didn't believe it. The lambs always agreed at this point. They always made promises they never kept. They lied.

They lied, because they wanted to kill him.

Cypress started to step around Hunter, but Hunter moved with him. Stayed as a calm interception. Cypress tried again, the other direction, and Hunter was there once more.

Staying between Cypress and the liar.

"You have to move. I need to kill it."

"You don't, Cy. Let go of seilaye."

"No. I need it."

"You don't. It changes you."

"It brings me alive," Cypress said firmly, and Hunter shook his head.

After a moment, Hunter's eyebrows knitted together and his eyes screwed up faintly. There was an odd trembling of his lips.

Cypress didn't understand that expression.

He stepped to the side and Hunter was there again, this time gripping Cypress' shoulders. His eyes bore into Cypress with such intensity that he couldn't look away.

"Let go," Hunter said steadily. "Let it go right now."

"If I let go, I'll lose this feeling."



"I know."

"I have to have it."

"You don't need it, Cypress. Cypress. Look at me."

Cypress thought he had been looking at Hunter, but he realized at the words that he was peering again at that slab of meat on the floor. Huddled and watching him warily. Why was it still alive? It was time for the eyes to go blank, like all the other pieces of meat in the room.

"Cypress."

Cypress dragged his gaze back up to Hunter, and saw the same expression from before, only now seeming more intense. Becoming a determined glare.

"Cypress, I won't let you kill her. You'll have to take my magic first."

Cypress felt something deep within him recoil at the thought. Nausea clenched his stomach and rushed up his throat.

He stepped back.

"No."

"You'll have to. I won't get out of your way."

"No," Cypress said more loudly. "I won't."

"Then let go of the seilaye."

"I can't. I—" His gaze was sliding around less steadily now. He found it difficult to focus. "Hunter... Hunter, I can't."

"You have to. Listen to me; it's starting to hurt you."

Cypress shook his head and stumbled back another step. Something wasn't right but he didn't know what. "No, it isn't. It protects me. Hunter. Hunter, please. You have to move."

Hunter stepped forward with him, staying within arms' reach even when Cypress fell back further. Nearly tripped over a body. He caught himself, barely, but in that shot of adrenaline he felt the distant pains resurfacing.

It started with the faint pounding of his head; a light tap, first, but it grew. It built into a deafening noise and behind it all, he felt his heartbeat. It hammered in his chest, vibrating his ribs and rushing blood like magma through his veins. His fingertips trembled, became shaking hands, and then his entire body was quaking and he could hardly stay upright.

He fell forward, curling in on himself, gasping. Fire felt like it ate him from the inside out. He felt hands catch his shoulders. Something cold and hard was against his knees. Somewhere else, he felt his body convulse.

Was it his body? Was any of this real?

What was this inferno inside him, that blazed away everything that had

been there before?

All he could hear was a voice saying urgently, "Release it. Let it go. Now, Cypress, *now.*"

He didn't know what he was supposed to release, but as the pain grew beyond measure, from the very core of him he rejected everything. He tried to shove the hands away, tried to throw everything away from him. He wanted to retreat so the pain would leave him, even if that meant death.

Anything was better than this. Anything was safer.

Something inside him cracked. With it came a great gush of cold air rushing into his lungs. He gasped desperately, as if he had never drawn breath before. As a drowning man would choke and cry over crisp, cool air.

There was a darkness inside him that slid away; that demon of a magic that felt simultaneously violating and comforting. He hated feeling it go as much as he hated the idea of it staying. He wanted it gone as much as he wanted it back.

Even with it receding he couldn't breathe.

This wasn't right. Something was very wrong.

Darkness dragged him down, deeper and deeper until only a sliver of light shuddered on the boundary of his vision.

He turned around in this scorching dream and thought he saw something massive rising above him. It glowed umber on the edges, a faint distinction from the pitch black. He could barely make out three parallel, vertical lines and an arch that connected them at the top. It seemed so far above him that he wasn't even certain it existed.

He knew something important was there, but it was beyond him to understand what. The light flickered in the distance and broke into tiny dots that scattered around him.

At that movement, he heard it. A voice, so faint he almost missed it. He couldn't understand what it said, couldn't even be certain he truly heard it, but he was drawn to it anyway. He tried to reach it and felt like the darkness was catching at him; dragging him into currents he couldn't quite escape.

But the voice didn't stop so he didn't stop trying to reach it.

As the voice grew clearer, the lights grew brighter. Soon, they eclipsed the darkness and those lines disappeared entirely. Words were beginning to form, beginning to have meaning, until finally the voice connected with a name in Cypress' mind.

Da—

Cypress heaved in air like his life depended on it, and maybe it did. He realized his back was arched; he was lying on a bloody floor in an abandoned warehouse. His entire body burned and ached. He couldn't breathe properly. Something heavy was on him.

He flailed around, trying to gain some context of understanding by searching for a physical hold. He caught onto shoulders and a hard back. He gripped it with all his might until the world came fully back into focus and life made sense again.

He realized he was clinging to his twin like a lifeline, and that Hunter's hands were like vice grips on his arms. Cypress' eyes rolled around wildly, his breath still coming in fits and gulps.

"Sweet Irridia's merciful light," Hunter breathed. "What the fuck was *that?*"

Hunter sounded shaken.

Hunter never sounded shaken. He almost never swore.

Cypress felt simultaneously alarmed, afraid, and utterly uncertain. He felt like Ariwyn had been tipped on its side and nothing was right.

He struggled against the weight of his brother, the weight of his own body, until Hunter realized his intentions and helped him sit up. Cypress sat there, surrounded by corpses of people he only vaguely remembered killing; his legs sprawled in front of him and his mind still reeling from overload.

He realized Hunter was still holding his arms tightly—painfully, really—and on the other side of Hunter there was Jade. She stared, the whites of her eyes visible all around her irises, her face paled. She trembled, ceding Cypress a look he knew all too well: horror and wariness and a fair amount of fear.

He felt weary all of a sudden, and didn't know why. All he knew was at that moment, he wanted to sleep and not wake up for a week.

"Cy!" Hunter shook Cypress roughly.

Cypress pushed his hands away. "What?" he asked, voice weak but irritated. "I'm awake. Fuck's sake. Don't need to kill me in the process of checking."

Unmistakable relief crossed Hunter's features. Funny, since Cypress' attitude usually had the opposite effect.

Cypress struggled to stand and was annoyed at Hunter's hands being there to support him. He wanted to push him away but, truthfully, he

wavered quite a bit and would have tipped over if Hunter hadn't taken some of his weight.

That knowledge only made Cypress angrier.

He hated being weak more than almost anything else in the world. And his list of things he hated in this world was exceedingly long.

"I'm serious, Cy. What in yennre happened? I've never seen it be so bad."

Cypress peered around the room, trying to ignore the disquiet that settled, heavily, in his gut. Hunter shook him again when he didn't answer.

"I don't know," Cypress snapped, pushing him away. He stumbled but caught his balance, and refused to let his brother get close enough to support him again. "I just—I don't fucking know."

Hunter watched him in outright worry, and that was another oddity that made everything feel so fucking wrong. Cypress didn't like this turn at all.

Jade struggled to her feet and Cypress avoided looking at her. He couldn't yet parse his feelings about any of this, so he didn't want to have to deal with her presence and what he might have done.

"No one can know about him, or us," Hunter told her. Deadly serious. "You understand? If you tell anyone, he really will kill you next time. And I won't stop him."

"I get it," Jade said shakily. She sounded haunted, but Cypress didn't look at her to see if her expression matched. He didn't want to see her face at all.

"I know you won't go to the Enforcers about him. If you do, if they come for him and get him before he gets you, I'll tell them about you. We'll be able to track you, now. I'll tell them exactly where you are and make sure they take you down. Understood?"

"I get it," Jade said again, this time more steadily.

Cypress chanced a glance at her, and saw she was regaining her composure much more quickly than most. It was probably because she could access seitai again, ever since Cypress had released his hold on her magic.

Before either of them could say more, Cypress felt a vibration of magic approaching.

"Damn it. Someone's coming. We gotta go."

Jade was instantly on alert. She darted away into the shadows, where she was swallowed by the darkness. Hunter cursed quietly and grabbed Cypress around the shoulders.

"Which direction?" Hunter hissed, and Cypress jerked his chin toward

where he felt it steadily approaching.

Together, they stumbled quickly to the exit. They made it outside into the dead-end alleyway in back, but before Hunter could help him to the road Cypress gripped his arm. The presences were drawing closer, headed at an angle that would pass the alleyway's entrance. With a growl, Hunter manhandled Cypress with him up onto a low wall, and then used that as leverage to push them up onto the roof of the building next door.

They made it up there just in time to duck down, letting the night overtake their silhouettes as two people approached. Cypress breathed as shallowly as he could, hoping their presence wouldn't be detected. He was too weak and off-kilter to properly use his magic, and Hunter would be compromised if he had to be their sole offense and defense.

Low voices echoed ahead of the interlopers. They were women and sounded fairly young, maybe a little older than Hunter and Cypress' twenty-one years. One of them was taller, lither than the other. She moved with the easy grace of a fighter and wore the green and blue cloak of an Enforcer. Her face was completely hidden by the lowered hood.

Cypress wanted to swear. Just his fucking luck a Dog would be here right now.

He exchanged a heavy glance with Hunter. This could go to shit so fast...

The other woman was shorter and much curvier. Her hair was long and loose; a rich reddish-orange that went down her back. She wore no designation in her clothing, but she felt like an Entraller to Cypress. Strangest of all was the fact that even from this far away, even in the shadows of the night, Cypress could easily see her eye color. Her eyes flashed in the light and glowed in the dark like an animal's. They were a color he had never seen before in a person: mostly red, with shades of gold, orange and brown within, standing out against her warm complexion.

Her eyes disturbed him; set him on edge in a way he didn't understand.

"Where are we going?" the red-eyed girl asked, beleaguered. When the taller girl didn't answer, she continued: "Sloane! Where are we?"

"I'm telling you, Fawkes. I felt something."

Fawkes sighed. "You've been saying that for the past two neighborhoods. When can we take a break?"

"I have to figure out what that was. It'll drive me nuts."

"Shouldn't we have called the Enforcers?"

"I *am* an Enforcer."

"You're off duty."

"I was born an Enforcer. I'm never off duty."

Fawkes rolled her eyes and grabbed Sloane's arm, winding her own around it. "Fine, but if we don't find anything on this block then you have to agree to a break. I didn't know we'd be doing all this walking tonight. My feet hurt."

"Like you can talk." Sloane gestured curtly to Fawkes' feet. "Half the time you like to be barefoot. I still don't know how you haven't stepped on something and gotten yourself hurt or killed. Do you even *know* the sort of stuff people drop in this city?"

"I'm wearing shoes today!"

"Like *those* are any better."

"They're my favorite!"

"You need to bring them to the cobbler, though. The sole is completely worn through."

"They're the shoes Grey gave me before—"

"I know, I know. You've told me this a million times. But when you walk on these shitty back streets, the rocks cut right into your feet. You should invest in solid boots, like me."

"Well, *someone* told me all we were doing tonight was having a late dinner at RoseMaker's Inn."

"How was I supposed to know I'd feel something so strange before we left?"

Fawkes sighed heavily. "I'm the one who should have known this would happen. We can't go anywhere together without something weird happening."

Cypress was getting a headache having to listen to them babble about stupid shit. He wished they would walk past and move on. He was starting to get a cramp in his leg, and his head was beginning to pound again. He didn't know how much longer he could stay perfectly still.

Just his fucking luck; the second he thought that the red-eyed girl slowed to a crawl.

Sloane stopped at the entrance to the alley and turned toward Fawkes. Finally, she pushed the hood off her face and Cypress could see her skin was a shade deeper than Fawkes, she had light grey eyes, and short dark brown hair that was cropped and spiked up at the front. She frowned at Fawkes, who had clenched her fists at her stomach.

"What's your problem?" Sloane asked. "You're acting weirdly timid. It's making me nervous."

"I don't know." Fawkes took a step forward and peered cautiously around the edge of the alley, where Cypress and Hunter had first fled. "I just..." She trailed off and darted her glinting red gaze all around. "I feel odd."

"Odd how?"

"Something feels... very dark," Fawkes worried at her lip. "Malevolent. Evil."

Sloane was quiet a second before saying lowly, "I feel it too."

"You do?"

"Yes." Sloane's eyes narrowed and she skimmed their surroundings. "It feels... familiar."

"Familiar?" Fawkes asked in surprise. "How?"

"I don't know. None of this makes sense." Sloane scowled and scrubbed at her right shoulder. "I just know that it does."

Fawkes shifted her weight. "I don't like this, Sloane. It's scaring me. I want to go."

Sloane hesitated, looking between Fawkes and their surroundings. She sighed and ran a hand back through her hair, shoving the front up even higher.

"We can't. I don't want to unnerve you, but I think this is what I felt." She pointed at the warehouse. "I can see the signatures seeping underneath the door. I need to check inside, see what it is. You know why."

"I do."

"Okay. So, why don't you wait out here for me to—"

"No," Fawkes said resolutely. "If you're going in, I'm going in."

"Fawkes, you aren't an Enforcer."

"Exactly. That's why I have to go with you."

"No, you don't. I know we use you as a consultant sometimes, but if it's unsafe—"

"If something is in there but it doesn't violate seirene's order, you won't be able to stop it. And if you try, you'll be hurt. I won't let you become Cursed. I'll take over before then."

"That's why I know how to physically fight. And anyway, it's even more dangerous for you to Entha—"

"Sloane, shut up and take me in there." Fawkes peered flatly at Sloane. "You have to look into this, so I'm going in either way. The only question is whether the Enforcer goes in first, or the Enchanter."

Sloane glowered at Fawkes, her hands flexing into fists and relaxing at

her sides. She turned a hard stare onto the door. "I don't feel any living energy inside, so it's probably nothing."

"Probably."

"So, you really don't have to come with me."

"I don't care."

Sloane growled and stepped forward. She gripped the doorknob with one hand and spread her other arm out behind her, simultaneously shielding and holding back Fawkes. "If anything bad happens, you don't get involved. Got it? You go get Vikenti instead."

"I'll do what I have to."

"Sweet Iridia, you're damn stubborn sometimes," Sloane grumbled under her breath.

"No worse than you."

Sloane let out a loud, beleaguered sigh but she didn't protest further. She turned the doorknob and opened the door. As the two of them stepped into the warehouse, Hunter and Cypress didn't wait to see what their reaction would be to the massacre inside. The second the women were out of sight, the brothers fled into the darkness the way they had for so much of their lives.



## 4

Mesuai's Concise: Dictionary for Healing for The Curious, Illustrated, Third Edition, lay open before Besin; but in an unexpected turn of events, he was having a hard time concentrating on it. Such a fascinating example of an unTalented who challenged boundaries and translated the unknown, a Healer's magic, to something understandable not only for unTalented, but other Mages as well... and yet his mind wandered, relentlessly, to other topics.

"What do you hope to find in that one?"

Besin looked up at Jana as she stopped next to him. Her short hair rolled in waves and her brown eyes smiled along with her lips. She never dressed the same way twice, and today her style was earth tones and supple leather boots with layered necklaces that clinked as she leaned forward. Her hand was out, palm up, and he knew without words what she needed. He pulled a charging stone from a pocket and dropped it into her hand.

"Upstairs?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Southeast corner, e-trelia room. What do you suppose it is?"

Besin tapped a fingertip to his lips, his gaze straying to the corner where there was nothing to see in this particular room, but in other rooms along this corner the Magelights had burned through their rerun energy much faster than the rest. He imagined the one upstairs looked much the same as it had recently: flickering subtly, flits of light that went in patterns Besin hadn't yet discerned. It was possible there was no pattern to be found, but

he always first sought for meaning before conceding there was none.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "but I find it odd that it's on the entirety of that corner of the library, on all floors, growing stronger the lower one goes."

"All the way to the sub-basement?"

She had to ask that, because as an unTalented she couldn't breach the lowest levels of the library. There the most delicate of books were kept, protected by so many layers of magic that even most Mages couldn't descend. The Head Librarian's key gave Besin access to all, so he was the only one who could know. Even if she had been able, although she looked young for her age, she still had grown old enough in unTalented years that it would have risked her health to try to breach those barriers.

"Yes."

"Hmm," Jana said, and Besin had to nod.

"Hmm indeed. Are the unTalented up there now?" At Jana's nod, Besin asked worriedly, "Are they okay? Should I go up and—"

He had his hands on the table, bracing himself to stand, but Jana pushed him lightly down by the shoulder.

"They're fine." She smiled, a soft lull of her lips. "They can see well enough with the light that's left. I told them I'd be back to fix it by the end of the night, if they're still there. I would have gone right back, but..."

She turned to look over her shoulder, at the stacks of books waiting for her to place them on the rolling carts, where they would then need to be replaced properly on shelves sprawled all across the massive library. Besin looked that way as well, and saw Corrin pulling three new books from a bookcase in the distance, levs arms carefully balancing the load. One of the books nearly tumbled—not Corrin's fault; it was one of the books so charged with innate energy it was known to jump from the hands of any interested party—and Corrin caught it against a bookshelf. Not a hint of sound made it to Besin's and Jana's ears.

The rooms in Irridian Main Branch Library were formed in such a way as to hush conversations from traveling, and that was especially the case in this private back room. The walls weren't filled with bookshelves; they *were* bookshelves, built in so that every part of the room was usable. The ceiling was high, and while other rooms were open to the sky (of course with protection against the elements), or had windows or Illusions that told a story over and over, or were simple or ornate ceilings with Magelights hovering below, or had canopies of trees and plants, or more bookshelves

stacked atop each other—here, in this room, what hovered above them was the quiet peace of living lanterns, bioluminescent insects crawling around the bioluminescent moss coating the ceiling. The moss was smuggled all the way from Ameset; a rare commodity since the start of the war.

Known as Mourning Moss, it naturally regulated moisture levels, protecting the particularly delicate books of the ancient and archaic wing of the library, but it also was known to overtake entire areas of forest and kill the plants it touched. Mourning Moss was called this for that reason and would eat through the bookshelves and books if given the chance. The bugs known as Living Lanterns loved to eat it, and so they too were imported to this ceiling where they kept the moss from spreading down the walls to the wooden shelves or books. They were a perfect symbiotic relationship which protected the books while providing light to any humans inside.

It meant the Magelights weren't necessary in this room or any other room similarly designed, and so Besin sometimes forgot while in here that he had yet to solve the riddle of the flickering Magelights. A fact which irked him.

As if reading his mind, Jana turned back to him.

"Would you like me to look into it?"

He considered that, then sighed and dropped his chin into his curled palm. He flipped a page of Mesuai's Concise. "Thank you, but there is no need for you to overwork yourself on that account. I can investigate further after this current mystery is solved."

Jana nodded, but her gaze didn't move. Besin skimmed the information on the page and flipped to a new one. He realized she remained and glanced up.

She raised her eyebrows. "And?" she prompted.

Besin stared at her. "'And'...?"

Jana tapped Mesuai's Concise. Her finger landed on an explanation of siphon wands; more specifically an entire page devoted to graphs and tables detailing the grades, variety, uses, and sizes as per the Healer's needs.

"And what are you hoping to find in here for your... what did you say? Bodies?"

Besin frowned at the pages. "I was trying to recall if there was specific terminology used within the Healing field in different time periods for the

various types of ailments that might have been misidentified as a result of what was actually a reaction to Ancient D'ria. But I can't recall which theme..."

"There is." Corrin set the books gently on the table, which took no small feat of strength. They were very heavy, as both Besin and Jana knew firsthand. Corrin leaned forward, levs golden waves sliding in the way of levs dual-colored eyes. A quick flick of Corrin's fingers along the edges of Mesuai's Concise, and there it was: the answer to Besin's question, laid forth in black and white.

"Oh," he said, first startled, then intrigued.

His shoulders slumped as he read further.

"Right." Corrin sat down and pulled one of the books closer. "I'm sorry but I don't think it will help you."

Besin sighed and flipped the dictionary closed.

Jana looked between them. "What's wrong? Why won't it?"

"The variance is too inconsistent," Besin said. "There seems to be no true connection to the demographics or even time period, rather something more akin to a dialect. Therefore, it will do little to distinguish between anecdotal evidence I might find elsewhere, and it also will not help me verify a specific time range, which will then make it more difficult to find verifiable evidence for the anecdotes."

Corrin pulled a lock of hair behind levs ear, levs gaze already darting smoothly across the text laid out before lev. "Don't be discouraged. There will be other evidence."

"I know." Besin rested his chin on his folded arms and looked up at Jana.

She looked back at him, eyebrows shifting upward. She had a bemused look on her face, and he knew exactly what it meant. He grumbled under his breath.

"What?" she asked, amused.

Besin sat up straight and leaned back in the chair. "I said, I'm frustrated. All my plans have been stymied this week. And now, the greatest and most interesting mystery of all arises, and I promise quite confidently that I can prove some aspect of my theory— yet with all these books," he gestured around himself, "with all this knowledge, I still have nothing."

"You're not giving yourself enough time." Jana patted his shoulder.

"You'll get there. You always do."

"I know, and I do enjoy the journey. But I enjoy it most when my academic integrity is not challenged along the way, and for this particular

case I feel as though the investigators will speed ahead into other avenues if I'm not quick enough. Or doubt the validity of my theories."

Corrin smiled slightly and looked up. Leh didn't say anything, but in that glance Besin felt a kindred spirit, and felt a little better.

Jana tapped Besin's shoulder. "What else did you promise? Is it something where I can help?"

Besin almost told her no but then paused, considering. "I thought I could solve part of Ven and Enria's issue but it went nowhere. I talked to him before I was involved in this investigation, when at the time I felt confident I would have some small lead for him soon, and he was excited. He's coming by later and I feel terrible having nothing for him. Unless..."

He looked at her hopefully and she squeezed his shoulder. "Got it. I'll get him some reference materials."

"Just ones that might help. I had been thinking of gathering the most recent books we got on the Wildlands, although I don't know how much they will differ from what they've already read. But he may want to see them, regardless. Also, did you see the shipment from Bairgiss?"

Jana nodded. "I started sorting through them already. But we got a lot. I'm only about a third the way through."

"Charlatans left those books behind when they didn't want to carry them through the mountains to Teduria. I've been told they'd been gathering them for years, and they come from all over the world. Somewhere in there is allegedly a book regarding various unusual forms of communication. Since sylphs have failed them so far, I thought perhaps..."

"Got it. I'll look." Jana stepped back, her hand curled around the stone to keep it safe. "When will he be here?"

In other words, *how much time do I have to do this impossible task?*

"I wasn't given a time, but it may be soon."

She read the apology in his words and tone and nodded. "No problem. I'll be back when I have something. Or if he gets here before I return..."

"I'll call for you."

She nodded and turned, already briskly walking to the door.

He called out, "Thank you, Jana!" but wasn't sure if she heard him, silenced as this room made words.

He returned his attention to the current dilemma with a newfound sense of mild relief. It had been plaguing him, not knowing what he was going to say to the Wilds when next one of them showed. He hated to give someone hope accidentally, if only to later tear it away.

Pushing Mesuai's Concise out of his immediate field, he now dragged two other massive tomes closer, and then readjusted his notebook and quill so he could continue to take notes. He was deep into a fascination of the intricacies of an ancient Spiritualist fisherman describing the ailments of a river child mesmerized by the waves when Corrin spoke.

"You wrote this book?"

Besin blinked and looked up. "I'm sorry, what?"

Corrin pointed to the copy of *Aftermath of a Cataclysm* he was well into reading. He hadn't even realized he had picked that up at some point.

"This book. You wrote it?"

"Oh! Yes. Indeed, I did."

"It's very good." Corrin's gaze darted across the text. "I enjoy historical texts that are written accessibly. I've studied and written my fair share of academic papers but I find it's nice to vary the style now and then."

Besin perked up. "I feel the same way! My target audience for that book was the general populace, as it's a collection of unrelated legends dating back to the early days following The Rending, or The Burning, however you prefer to call it. Although I doubt the validity of a number of them, it was nonetheless fascinating collecting the stories from across the cultures and continents. My only regret is that there was nothing to be done about Ameset or Lija en-estra."

"That is to be expected, unfortunately." Corrin rested his chin on his palm and flipped to the next page. "The fact that you were able to collect anything at all from the other continents is impressive."

"It did take me quite some time to compile it all."

"How did you gather anything from Esteren Isles? I wasn't aware we'd had contact for centuries."

"Ahh," Besin said regretfully, "those are particularly unverified, I'm afraid. I had to rely on a set of documents that had made their way into the hands of a collector in Xarinn."

"Xarinn?" Corrin's eyebrows rose. "You were on Vedula Li?"

"Sadly, not yet. I've wanted to visit for years but there hasn't been time since I became Head Librarian."

"Then may I ask, how did you acquire the documents from Xarinn?"

"That was my sister's doing. She's Head Mage of the Empath Traveling Division."

"Is that so?" Corrin asked. "I haven't had much contact with them."

Besin smiled. "If you're interested in the ETD, I could ask her to contact

you."

Corrin perked up, Besin was sure of it. "Thank you, I would appreciate that." A slight reverence of Corrin's fingertips sliding across the page. "Did she find the documents on one of her journeys?"

"Yes, she was in Xarinn searching for new Mages. She said that she couldn't find any Mages on that trip, but a Charlatan selling wares on the street took a liking to one of her necklaces. It wasn't expensive but the stone on the pendant was of an especially clear quality; a green that fractured the sunlight when turned to the sky. She saw that he had very old papers written in a language she had never seen before, so she traded the necklace for the papers. She guessed that it would be something I would find interesting, even though she didn't know what the papers were."

"That was very kind of her to take such a chance on something when she didn't know the value."

Besin smiled warmly. "It's one of the many reasons I love my sister."

Corrin returned a fainter version of the smile. "And? What were these papers?"

"Excerpts from very old books; some appeared to be from one or two diaries, and another was a set of pages torn from what I can only imagine was some sort of historical text. It took me some time to identify which language it was, as I hadn't seen it before. Upon identification I had to learn the language in order to translate it. I couldn't fully understand what it said for a year, at which point I learned that much of it was fascinatingly banal but the historical texts did contain pieces of legends."

"Interesting. I would like to see it sometime."

"Oh, I can show you. Remind me when we take our next break. I've tried to show others but very few are interested, even Carina."

"Interest in the archaic is dying as time passes." Corrin sighed softly and ran his fingertips along the corners of *Aftermath's* cover. "It sounds as though you have a good relationship with your family. Is it just you and your sister, then?"

"Oh, no. Carina and I are two of five siblings, and as for my parents... Hmm." Besin glanced down at the book in front of him. Mesuai had a similarly interesting family history, although her issues were entirely different than his own. Being an unTalented writing about Mage powers would do that, especially the centuries ago when she lived. "My family isn't an unusual story but it's a bit of a long one." Besin tapped his lips with the soft feather end of the quill and tilted his head with a wan smile. "I

suppose the same could be said of a few pieces of my life."

Corrin stared down at the book, a smile on levs lips that looked more mournful than anything. "I wish I could say the same."

"You don't have a long story?"

Corrin didn't move for a long moment.

"You don't have to say anything if you prefer not to."

"It isn't that I prefer not to say anything," Corrin said carefully, "as much as it is that I don't know what to say."

"What do you mean?"

Corrin ran levs fingers down a wavy lock of hair, straightening it and letting it bounce back. Levs eyes roamed the library, perhaps searching for an answer or simply a distraction.

The answer was a long time coming, and Besin waited patiently, quietly.

"I don't... exactly know my own pas—"

"*There* you are," Vikenti said loudly, banging open the main door into the room. "Both of you. I've been looking for you for fucking ever."

Corrin startled and looked over levs shoulder at the Enforcer, who was making such a racket that Besin was obliged to shush him in a stage-whisper.

Vikenti rolled his eyes. "No one else is even around."

"Even so," Besin said importantly while straightening, "any place that holds any number of books—"

"Yeah, yeah." Vikenti dropped into a chair next to Corrin and dragged a load of books and papers near him. Besin squawked and Corrin slammed levs hand down on a set of notes before they could dislodge.

"Special Enforcer Shaw!" Besin spluttered, scandalized.

"What's all this?" Vikenti asked keenly. "Have any clues yet?"

"You're disrupting the order of the notes," Corrin said.

"Hmm." Vikenti peered down at the papers and flipped through a few of them. "So, you're still on the Alurri-and-D'ria kick, huh?"

"Yes, and—"

"I don't see anything new here." Vikenti sighed heavily and shoved the papers away. He leaned back in his chair with a loud groan. "This is taking forever."

"Why are you so impatient?" Corrin asked. "Research takes time."

"Yeah but while you two are holed away for days 'researching'—"

"It's barely been two days," Besin put in.

"—there could be other people out there being targeted as we speak."



"Why don't you do your own brand of research during this time, then?"

Vikenti glowered at Corrin. "I don't know what in yenne you think I've been doing, but that's exactly it. I've been all over Halania this past day; gotten hardly any sleep. Talked to everyone and their fucking brother, and—" Vikenti kicked his feet up on a chair opposite him at the table. "No new leads. Which means your crazy theories about poison and some dead language are all we have to run with so far."

Corrin made a soft thoughtful noise in levs throat. "Are you assigned this alone, or is Keiran also helping?"

"She's helping too, but she's a tech. She doesn't talk to people; she deals with evidence. She said the signature was familiar to her but she had to be sure what it was. Said she'd notify me when she was positive."

"How long does that usually take?" Besin started taking notes again. "I must say, I've always been fascinated by the descriptions of an Enforcer's power. You can see everyone's magic in color and form, correct? That is what identifies a signature?"

Vikenti shrugged. "More or less. Everyone has a different combination; different colors, style, feeling. That sort of thing. Same with spells, if you get right down to it, but the signature left behind of one person doing a spell will differ from another person doing that same spell, because their personal energy affects the pattern it creates."

"I thought Enforcers had eidetic memory?" Corrin absently played with the end of levs bookmark.

"Pretty much."

"So, how is it that Keiran can't identify the signature immediately if she has seen it before?"

"That's the thing." Vikenti rubbed the back of his neck and yawned widely, speaking almost unintelligibly in the process. "She's usually dead on right away. The fact that she wants to triple check before saying anything..."

"Means something bad?" Corrin ventured.

The deadly serious look Vikenti aimed levs way confirmed it.

"Hence, your impatience," Corrin said.

Vikenti nodded grimly.

"Well, we're still searching," Besin said.

"Hurry it up, then. We may not have a lot of time."

"Perhaps you should help, then," Corrin said. "It could only aid us in our search."

Vikenti glowered at lev, then heaved a great sigh and slumped against the table. "Fine. What do you want me to read? I have some time before I'll be forced to take a rest."

Besin wordlessly pushed a book he hadn't yet studied toward Vikenti, who sighed even more loudly but dutifully opened it and began to skim.

"How old is this shit?" he asked after a second, flipping the book closed and frowning at the cover. "This seems as old as *The Rending*."

Besin chuckled lowly. "I wish it was that old. I have so few examples from that era that I must covet them closely."

"Ah," Vikenti said. "And I'm too uncouth to touch those, no doubt."

Besin spluttered. "Special Enforcer Shaw, I mean no such—"

Was that the faintest smirk on Vikenti's lips? Besin exchanged a glance with Corrin, now feeling thoroughly uncertain.

Vikenti leaned back abruptly and pulled a sylph from his chest pocket. She was already in motion, her hair lifting into the air, eyes wide and mouth open. She knelt in his palm, all shades of blue losing itself to green. Her eyes and hair were the vivid blue of deep sea.

Besin was intrigued; he rarely got to see an IEHQ sylph so close. They came from a specific colony in one of the e-trelia, although details on location were sparse, and they were known for having higher capabilities than other sylphs. Which was why he was a bit surprised when the voice came through warbled.

"Vika?"

"What's wrong with you?" Vikenti demanded irritably.

"What?"

He brought the sylph closer to his mouth but did not raise his voice out of consideration for her. "I said. What's wrong with you? Why do you sound like shit?"

"Oh."

More muffled background noises; a scratching sound, a rush of white noise. Corrin and Besin exchanged looks. Corrin, like Besin, seemed far too intrigued by this oddity to be able to focus on research for this moment. The woman's voice continued through the sylph but it was so garbled, Besin was having a hard time understanding the words, let alone identifying the voice. The words ebbed and flowed, like a piece of debris caught on the surface of a stormy sea; rising up into clear view, and crashing beneath the waves, silent and lost, only to reappear in a different direction broken apart.

"...er brou... ds. I wanted to get... dence... ari..." A long break this time with no discernible words, and then: "—oane?"

"What in Irridia's name are you even saying? I can't understand a damn word of this. Are you in the fucking woods?"

Besin couldn't fully understand the word that followed, but the tone of it was clear: yes.

Vikenti glared at the sylph, holding her carefully to protect her even as he jerked back in his chair in aggravation. "Get out of the souls-damned woods if you're going to sylph me! I *told* you they're not working right. You're in Selin, aren't you?"

"...es."

"Well, whatever you're trying to tell me isn't working. Tell me when you get back. For fuck's sake. When did you even leave HQ?" He held up his free hand immediately, eyes sliding shut. "Forget it. Forget it!" He said more forcefully over her attempted response. "I don't want to hear your answers right now. Just tell me when you're back. For fuck's sake."

He touched the sylph's head lightly, running through her chaotic-water hair to draw her attention. She looked up at him. "It's okay," he told the sylph. "You can drop her for now."

The sylph closed her mouth, and her hair and clothing fell back to gentle waves. She fell forward. Her tiny elbows shivered under her weight, but she seemed determined to stay upright.

Vikenti sighed. "Idiot. Just go to sleep. You already worked hard enough."

The sylph eyed him and he made a face at her.

"Don't give me that attitude. I told you to sleep. It takes too much energy to try to stay connected to morons like her. I *told her* not to sylph me from the fucking woods." The sylph still seemed unconvinced so he rolled his eyes. "I swear to Irridia, I get the one damn sylph on the planet who doesn't want to sleep her life away. Ys'iin."

The last was said in the stern tone of a parent warning his child of impending punishment and was accompanied by a complementary expression.

The sylph, Ys'iin apparently, made a face at him. She even stuck out her tongue.

Besin was fascinated. He had never seen a sylph show such personality! They were all quite unique, of course; all their own people—but typically they were not so resistant to rest, nor so blatantly argumentative. He

flipped to a new page of his notebook and jotted down notes while not turning his eyes from the scene.

"What's your problem?" Vikenti demanded. "It's not leaves, or you'd..."

She stared hard at him, and Vikenti stared back.

At length he threw up his free hand. "Fine. *Fine!* I'll have you connect with him later. Are you happy now? Irridia's *ghost*, who knew you'd care so much about this shit. You act like it's been days." She raised her eyebrows at him and he said loudly, "It hasn't been days! It has *not*. It's been..." He stopped, looked away as if mentally calculating, and then paused. A long second stretched thinner by his glower at the wall. "Go to sleep, Ys'iin."

She smirked at him and laid down. Her knowing little look didn't leave, even as he gently and carefully returned her to his protected breast pocket where she could sleep in peace.

He glared at Corrin and Besin, whose twin gazes hadn't moved from him.

Besin couldn't contain himself. "What was—?"

"None of your damn business." Vikenti yanked a book closer and flipped several pages ahead. "Shut up. I'm trying to read."

Once again, Besin and Corrin looked at each other. Corrin's eyebrows shifted the slightest bit upward.

Perhaps to give some kindness to Vikenti, Corrin spoke. "I forgot to ask before; is there a term or time period we should pay special attention to in our reading, in regards to your Alurri theory?"

"Ah, yes!" Ys'iin was all but forgotten in Besin's excitement over the new topic. He beamed at Corrin and set the book down he'd been holding, keeping it open to the right page. "Thank you for asking. There is indeed."

Vikenti rolled his eyes so hard it almost became a verbal response. He continued skimming his book.

"For this, I need to take a step back to establish we are all using the same terminology and thinking in the same terms," Besin continued.

"Forgive me for the repetition of information you already know but my experience is that the specific details of historical knowledge that Mages have seems to vary based on their schooling and where they were raised."

Corrin nodded at Besin to keep going.

"Sounds grand," Vikenti said dryly.

Besin was undeterred. He was used to people acting uninterested in these topics at first, until he got into them. Sometimes they realized only then how wrong they had been; how fascinating it all was.

"First, we must go to the beginning. The Rending, or The Burning,

however you learned it, is, of course, when it's said that some sort of catastrophic event occurred which caused Irridia to release such powerful magic as to break the world, and even split magic itself into what is currently, commonly thought of as the five seiyunne. As you know, seiyunne itself is only sensed and used by Mages, and each seiyunne is accessible only by certain Mage sects, which is how Mages are categorized."

"Thanks for the toddler lesson," Vikenti muttered and flipped a page. "Want to explain how our world is named Ariwyn and we're currently on the Haliania continent while you're at it, or is that a bit too obvious?"

Besin ignored him, instead leaning toward his interested audience of one: Corrin.

"The etymology of the names of the seiyunne is most fascinating. Did you know the literal translations can be a beautiful addition to their meaning, that itself then lends a sometimes-tragic shadow on the Mages who connect with it? For example, 'sei' references Irridia, the first Mage, and 'seiyunne' translates to 'Irridia's life force'—"

"Stop," Vikenti said loudly. "Stop."

Besin looked, startled, at him.

"Listen. You two nerds want to geek out on language? Do it on your own time. We don't have time to sit here going through every literal meaning and varied translation of every damn magic right now. Cut to the important part. Okay?"

Besin's mouth worked, his urge to keep going incredibly difficult to rein back in. But he saw in Corrin an interest in the topic, and remembered he had to show lev the papers Carina had brought back anyway, and so perhaps it *was* better to save this discussion for another time. When the two of them could talk without interruption or judgment. Even so...

"Another time," Corrin said quietly, and Besin sighed.

"Very well. Then I will overview: as you are aware, there are five commonly known seiyunne which connect with the different Mage sects. Seitai, the most common; primarily used to create or transport energies already present in the world. Proveniers, Illusionists or Magelings, and Conjurers use it."

"Right, right. Seirene is us," Vikenti said, flicking a hand between Corrin and him. "Threefold the damage to its user if misused. Enforcers and Healers. What's your point?"

"Please bear with me a moment longer," Besin said, holding up a finger.

"Seikelle is the energy of the mind and soul. Empaths, Spiritualists, and Enthralers or Enchanters use that. And then there is seilaye, the seiyunne of the Unconscionables, a term which has fluctuated over time to include or exclude one sect: the Necromancers. Whether Necromancers are included in Unconscionables or not, they do use seilaye. The term 'Unconscionables' always includes three other sects, however: Defilers, Entropists, and Alurri. It is known for its destructive capabilities and so those who use it are feared. Although, at the moment, they are all thought to be extinct."

"What does seilaye translate to?" Corrin asked.

"I have seen it be referenced both as regret and redemption, and it translates, aptly so I believe, to 'Irridia's tears.'"

"Should've meant Irridia's mistake," Vikenti muttered.

"That seems harsh," Corrin commented. "Not all of the Mages in those sects are likely to have been as evil as they have been depicted to be in the centuries since their demise."

"Oh, I'm sure they weren't all evil," Vikenti agreed easily. "In fact, I'm sure none of them were. The idea of absolute good and evil is unrealistic." Vikenti flipped his book closed and leaned on the cover, quirked an eyebrow at Corrin. "But Necromancers and Defilers? Even if you had one that tried to be good, their powers themselves are too destructive. They're a fucking menace to society. Or were, at any rate."

Corrin studied Vikenti but ultimately didn't respond.

"What?" Vikenti demanded.

Corrin shook his head. "I don't feel I have enough detailed information on this topic to have formed an opinion beyond what I have said, so I cannot refute or agree with your statement."

"Really?" Vikenti tipped up an eyebrow. "Not even Necromancers, huh? They're the most visceral anti-thesis to your sect I know. Most Healers can't handle even thinking about them."

Corrin's lips pinched; his gaze tipped down to the table.

Vikenti's lips twisted in vindication.

Corrin's fingers twitched into fists and then released. "I admit," he said slowly, with slight strain, "that Necromancers are... difficult for me to comprehend. I use my magic to help others; to heal them. The stories we heard of what Necromancers used to do..."

"See? It's easy to feel neutral on a topic when you think it's long gone or not immediately affecting you. But imagine a Necromancer walking into

the room right now, imagine watching them doing their thing to someone you'd want to heal. You'd feel differently. Same way our ancestors did back then."

Corrin didn't have an answer to that.

Vikenti shrugged and kicked one leg out to the side as he leaned at an angle. "Still. Doesn't mean our ancestors did everything right. The Purge is one thing I can't quite get my seirene mind around. It makes you wonder; were our ancestors in the right, or were they being unconscionable, themselves?"

Besin got a small thrill out of Vikenti being pulled into the debate, and for a moment he wanted to go down this new rabbit hole. But he knew he would lose his erstwhile student before its end.

"That is an entire conversation in and of itself that I doubt you wish me to explore, because it's tangential to what I'm trying to relay now." Besin looked questioningly at Vikenti, who nodded and waved a lazy hand for him to continue the original topic. He was slightly disappointed to realize he was correct in assuming Vikenti did not want to explore this further.

"At the last," Besin continued, "we have seidan, which is a rare combination of seiyunne and rendan—rendan being, of course, the energy Seers use for their clairvoyant abilities. Mages primarily know seidan as the seiyunne of the Mystic, and it is that touch of rendan in seidan which affords the Mystic the ability to know who should and should not be allowed in Irridian. Seidan is not solely used by the Mystic, however."

Vikenti snorted loudly. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist."

"I find the translations to be interesting," Corrin said before the others could get sidetracked, "but if you mentioned the ideal keywords or phrases to monitor in our research, I missed it."

"Ha!" Vikenti smirked and pointed at Besin. "And the translation of *that* is 'what the fuck's the point of your impromptu first year history lesson?'"

"But I had a point! I had to establish our shared understanding so that you would understand why a phrase you may not have heard would be good to search for. Aside from anything referencing the Alurri or Ancient D'ria by name, I recommend you also alert me if you see the term 'seinoh' referenced anywhere."

"Seinoh?" Corrin asked.

Vikenti eyed Besin. "...Don't try to tell me this is some mythical sixth seiyunne."

"It's an unverified sixth seiyunne—"

Vikenti shoved his book away. "Ridiculous."

"What is seinoh alleged to be?" Corrin asked, clearly fascinated. "Are you proposing there are unknown Mage sects in the past that used this seiyyunne?"

"No, of course not." Besin waved his hand as if to physically dismiss such a possibility, scrunching his features up at the absurdity. "But there are some who think it's possible that the Alurri were not, in fact, users of seilaye but were, instead, users of seinoh. Similarly, it's possible Ancient D'ria siphons some of its power from that seiyyunne, so it's theoretically possible that is at least partially responsible for how it interacts more uniquely than other languages. I have also read that some believe the Gatekeepers of Irridian should be classified under seinoh instead of their natural Mage sects."

"Hmm." Corrin absently played with the end of a lock of hair. "Intriguing. I suppose the Gatekeeper theory could have some merit, as after the Gatekeepers have developed their powers for their respective gates, it seems that their natural Mage abilities are less relevant. Their lives are devoted solely to the operation of that gate."

"Precisely."

"So," Vikenti said mildly, "your current list of keywords by now is, what? Arrindell the mythical sentient city, Ancient D'ria the extinct sentient language, Alurri the massacred Mages, seinoh the alleged sixth seiyyunne, and... what? Oh, right. Judging by your seidan comment earlier, should I also be looking for 'Incarnation?'"

The last line dripped with sarcasm.

Besin was bewildered. "No, I have no reason to believe an Incarnation currently exists, let alone is involved. Do you?"

Vikenti growled under his breath. Corrin smiled faintly and returned to reading.

"Forget it," Vikenti muttered.

"So, as I was saying, if you see seinoh—"

The door slammed open.

"What do you have for me, Besin?" came the hopeful voice, followed immediately by a gasp.

Besin looked over in time to see Ven stop in place, light grey eyes wide and centered on Vikenti. At Ven's appearance, Vikenti's back went whip tight and he shot up.

"Irridia, no," Vikenti growled. "I'm not about to—"



"I had no idea I would be graced with my favorite Special Enforcer." Ven surged forward, too fast it seemed, because he nearly fell against Vikenti's back when Vikenti tried to step away.

With the difference in their ages, of Vikenti at forty-seven and Ven at thirty-six, they could have passed for an annoyed uncle pushing off his nephew. Besin was startled to see Ven in this light; from the many interactions they'd had before, Besin's impression of Ven was one of someone who was much more reserved. What could cause an introvert to push himself so fully into an extrovert out of nowhere?

"It's been so long since I've seen you; did you miss me?" Ven reached for Vikenti's arm to steady himself but at the last second redirected it to a chair instead. "I've kept the lights on at my home, in case you ever take me up on my offer for an interview. No need to be afraid of—"

Vikenti's olive complexion flushed a deep red. "I never said I was afraid of the dark! Fuck's sake, you leeching vermin, why you ever had to publish such a bald-faced lie—"

"Come now, no need to be embarrassed. Lots of people fear the dark."

"Like I said, I *never said*—"

"What else ails you, S.E.? I can devote all my time to fixing it for you."

Ven touched Vikenti's arm. Vikenti shoved Ven off him roughly. The younger man stumbled and fell against the table. Besin and Corrin let out twin harrumphs at the papers shifting.

"Find someone else to interview!" Vikenti burst out angrily. "I don't see why I have to be designated to your sorry ass when we have a public info Enforcer for a reason—"

"Yes, yes, but he's not nearly as fun."

"Listen. I'm not interested in your bullshit when you misquote me anyway—"

"Did you hear that, everyone?" Ven looked around the room. "Special Enforcer Shaw just told a reporter from the Seiyunne Circle that he enjoys our time together and wishes to have more sessions, so he can fully explain his point of view without any distractions or misinterpretations."

Vikenti was nearly crimson now. "I said nothing of the sort!"

Ven grinned and pulled a quill out of a bag, along with a scrap of paper. "Tell me, Special Enforcer Shaw: what is it that plagues you at night? I've been thinking of writing an exposé on what it's like to be an Enforcer in the Special Crimes Unit of IEHQ. Not many are assigned such an illustrious post—"

"This is why I fucking hate reporters—"

"Could you lower your voices?" Corrin asked politely. "I'm finding it difficult to concentrate."

"Fine. I'll leave." Vikenti started to walk away but Ven stepped into his path to cut him off.

"What are you doing in the library anyway, Special Enforcer Shaw? Are you following up on a lead for the mysterious bodies I hear have been popping up lately?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Vikenti pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. I heard there are three bodies floating around the morgue right now and no one knows how they died. What I'm hearing is you're the one assigned the case. So? Anything you want to say to the adoring public?"

"I have nothing to say about any of this. Goodbye."

Vikenti tried to walk away again and once more Ven stepped into his path.

"Get out of my spirits-damned way," Vikenti hissed.

"No," Ven said with a smile. "Not until you give me something."

"There's nothing to fucking give! For fuck's sake, leave me the fuck alone!"

"Ohh? Then you won't mind me looking at what these two are studying so diligently over here..."

Ven started to peer around Corrin's shoulder. Vikenti stepped in his way even as Corrin pulled the books from Ven's reaching hand.

"Please don't disturb my notes," Corrin said.

"Get the fuck away from them," Vikenti growled.

"One of you has to give me something. I'll get right in here if you don't..."

Ven tried to sit on the edge of the table but slipped. He fell forward and would have crushed against Vikenti's chest where Ys'iin was sleeping. The pockets were protected but not enough for a full human body to slam into it without any possibility of harming the sylph. Vikenti shoved Ven away before he could hit him, so hard that Ven fell backwards. Vikenti noticed in time that Ven would crack his head, and snapped his hand out with a startled, "Shit!"

An Enforcer hold wrapped around Ven, snapping his arms and legs tight and pausing him in midair. Vikenti swung his hand upward and Ven was

pulled back up to a standing position. As soon as Ven was steady, Vikenti released the hold and immediately pushed brusque but gentle hands all over Ven's head and neck to make sure he wasn't hurt.

"Are you okay?" Vikenti asked intently. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you so hard."

Ven's bronze skin turned pink at the attention. He stood very still and nodded dumbly.

Vikenti released a frustrated sigh and stepped back. "Stop fucking with me, kid! I almost hurt you there. Now let me go; I have places to be."

"You didn't—" Ven stumbled on his words and feet when he went to move forward. Vikenti automatically shot a hand out, catching him and righting him again.

"Didn't what?" Vikenti asked impatiently.

"H... Hurt me. You didn't hurt me."

Vikenti scowled. "Came damn fucking close. And as much as you piss me off, that's the last thing I want to do. You do your part by harassing me less and I'll do my part to be more careful. Now leave me alone."

He stalked out of the room and swung the door shut behind him. Ven ran a slightly trembling hand along the back of his head where Vikenti had touched his hair. His cheeks flushed. He noticed Besin's gaze and started.

"Uh," he said sheepishly.

Besin pointed at the door. "I'm fascinated."

He didn't have to explain what he meant; Besin had never seen such a complete flip in someone's personality before. Ven's flush deepened. He scrubbed at the back of his neck and looked away.

"Forget about that. Uh. Sorry..." Ven said, this time looking at Corrin expectantly.

"Corrin," leh provided without looking up from levs book.

"I apologize, Corrin. That was rude of me."

Corrin lifted a shoulder in forgiveness without ceasing to read.

"But," Besin said, bewildered, "why were you...?"

"Never mind about that. Just forget you saw anything." Ven wouldn't meet Besin's eyes. "I came here because you said you would have something for me?"

"Ahh. Yes, well. What I'd hoped to find, I couldn't. But Jana—"

This room, which was typically so private, seemed to be the most public space in the library today. Once more, the door opened, and once more a visitor arrived. Except this time, the door that opened was on the opposite

side of the room; a lesser used entrance from the back of the library.

Corrin sighed heavily and hunkered down more firmly over levs book, plugging levs ears with levs fingers.

"Where's Vikenti?" the young woman demanded. She wore an Enforcer uniform, in greens and blues. Her short dark hair was spiky, and her grey eyes were fierce as they swept the library.

Ven's eyes widened. "I didn't expect to see her so soon," he said under his breath.

"Isn't that—?" Besin started, but she was already stalking over to them, and Ven was already sliding around the table to intercept her.

"Enforcer Sloane!" He lifted his paper and quill in front of him. "Tell me, do you have anything to say about the bodies?"

She stopped short and stared at him. "How in the world did you already hear about that?"

"Come now," Ven said smoothly, stopping at her side. "It's all over the Circle. Three mysterious bodies—"

"Three?" Sloane cut in, her eyebrows raising. "Are you that terrible at counting? There had to be at least eight dead."

"Eight?" Ven straightened, his gaze like a Cloud Bounder's honing in on her.

"Well, I mean. It could have been more I guess? They were mostly killed with one or two moves but I saw so much blood, it makes me wonder if there were more. And considering how strong you'd have to be..."

"What are you..." Ven stared at her, then looked at his paper as he jotted notes. "Can you tell me more about the locations where they were found? Was this Byrraine again, or...?"

"Byrraine?" Sloane gave him a look like he was an idiot. "What are you talking about? They were in the old toy factory."

"Toy factory...?"

Sloane made a face. "Warehouse, whatever. You know. True Life Toys? Road's End?" When Ven only stared at her with a fluctuating expression, her eyes narrowed and she stepped back. She crossed her arms. "Wait a minute. You should know the location and the number if you know about them. What are you talking about, if not that?"

"I'm talking about the bodies in the morgue that I heard aren't decomposing. What are *you* talking about?"

"What the fuck—" Sloane threw up her hands. "How does no one ever tell me any of this? How do you find out before I do on things like this?"

"I have good sources. What about what you mentioned? There are more bodies?"

"Yeah, but that's just a normal massacre. I found it last night. It was probably—"

"Have they cleared the scene yet?" Ven asked urgently.

"Uh. I don't know. I reported it last night, so—"

She didn't get the chance to finish. Ven was already rushing away from her, pulling a sylph from his breast pocket and urgently telling her to connect with the Circle. As Ven ran to the door, Besin overheard him saying quickly to the sylph, "Ghieta. Ghieta! Get someone over to Road's End right away. We missed something big last night. An Enforcer source says there was a massacre—"

The door shut behind him, cutting off what else he may have said.

Besin turned to look at Sloane, who peered at the door. Slowly, she turned to look at him.

He knew who she was, of course. One couldn't live in Irridian for any length of time without hearing about the infamous Sloane. Murderer, some called her. Monster, others. A curse, a bane, a danger. Child of death. The sole tragic survivor.

She could be seen around town, and she had come to the library occasionally as did every other student at some point in time. He didn't meet most of them; only knew of their presence later in passing, from conversations overheard while he rushed about his business. But he had never stood so near her, looked so closely into her eyes, or had reason to converse with her directly.

She glared at him; fire and anger in her eyes. She stepped back, her chin tipping upward.

"Where's Special Enforcer Shaw?" she asked.

"He left already, soon before you arrived. If you'd like, I could..."

"I don't need anything," she said curtly. She started toward the main door, the one she had not arrived in but the one everyone else had been using. Before she reached it, Jana walked in with her arms filled with books. She nearly ran into Sloane, the books at the top of her stack tipping over.

"Oh!" Jana said, startled.

Sloane caught the books before they hit the floor and crowded them against her chest.

"Oh my. Thank you, dear. Would you mind...?" Jana tilted her chin

toward the table Corrin still sat at, the table by which Besin stood. Sloane glowered at the two of them but softened her gaze slightly upon returning to Jana.

"Of course."

Sloane followed Jana over to the table, while Jana glanced around.

"Where's Ven? Aila said she saw him come in...?"

"He left already." Besin pulled the uppermost books from Jana's stack when she came closer, and carefully set them on the table. She was able to place the rest herself, balanced precariously. Sloane was close behind her but had to wait for the two of them to get out of her way to reach the table as well.

"Oh no. I'm sorry I was too late. I got distracted when I found something interesting."

"Oh?" Besin asked.

Sloane shifted her weight impatiently, trying to get around the two of them without shoving them out of the way. Besin hardly noticed, and Jana certainly did not, turned away from the Enforcer as she was.

"It's quite fascinating. Do you know much about transference?"

"Transference?" Corrin dropped her hands from her ears and perked up at that.

Jana nodded easily at the Healer. "Yes, I was searching for ancient communication methods, prior to the usage of sylphs, and I ran across a reference to an entire book on ancient transference methods and spells instead. Of course, I don't understand most of it, but I thought it might be interesting for one of you?"

Corrin held her hands out immediately, her eyes alighting. "May I?"

"Of course."

Jana started to dig through the books on the table. "I can't quite find..."

"Is it one of these?" Sloane tilted her body for Jana to see.

"Oh! I'm so sorry. I didn't realize I was in your way."

"It's fine," Sloane said in a tone that relayed it was not.

Jana pulled the books from Sloane's hands. "I'm so sorry."

Sloane looked away. "Did anyone hear where Vikenti was going?"

"I wasn't here, I'm sorry," Jana said.

"He didn't say," Besin said.

"Fascinating," Corrin said.

"What is?"

Corrin glanced up at Besin and pointed at a listing in the table of

contents. "There appears to be an entire section in this on transference of intangible magical constructs."

"Intangible magical constructs? Such as a spell?"

"Perhaps," Corrin said thoughtfully, "but I believe it may be more amorphous than that. Perhaps transference of something that previously could not be transferred between people? I'll have to see..."

Sloane had started to walk away but she stopped short at that. She whipped back around and surged back to them. Corrin jumped slightly when Sloane slammed her hands on the edge of the table. Leh stopped with levs fingers midway through flipping to the correct section of the book, eyes slightly wide on Sloane's face.

"A signature," Sloane said urgently. "Could that work? Could you transfer that?"

Jana and Besin exchanged a curious look.

"Isn't there a way for Enforcers to share signatures when searching for criminals already?" Besin asked blankly.

"No," Sloane said impatiently without looking away from Corrin. "I mean, yes, sort of, but not really. There's a way to share it if we have enough of— Just, never mind. You don't need to know that." She leaned in closer, more intently, to Corrin. "What I need to know is if there's a way to transfer something from one person's understanding directly to another's, if it's something that an Entraller can't do. Something like an impression of a signature. Is that what that thing can tell you?"

"I don't know yet, but potentially. I would need to read..."

"Then do so. Immediately," Sloane said, followed by an intense, "Please."

Corrin stared at Sloane, then looked at Besin and Jana. They both looked back, equally as confused. But Besin was now very curious as to the reason for Sloane's sudden interest, and it seemed Corrin was as well.

Corrin turned back to the book, flipped to the appropriate section, and began to read.

Sloane settled herself uneasily into the chair Vikenti had vacated, her fingers intertwined with her knuckles flexing between red and white, and her jaw setting on any words that may have escaped. She watched Corrin intently, monitoring every minor fluctuation of levs expression. Corrin, it seemed, was undeterred by such a keen observer.

Jana, after a moment, returned to the books she had brought and began to organize them by topic on the end of the table least cluttered by their

notes. Besin soon helped her, trying to figure out which books would be best to lend to Ven first, or whether he himself should skim them before passing them along to ensure they had any relevance to the Wilds' search in the first place.

After some time in this tense and guarded silence, Corrin paused with fingers to page. "Hmm."

Sloane leaned into the table so hard it rocked. "Hmm, what?"

"Hmm." Corrin's lips moved slightly to one side and then the other. Leh looked up. "It does seem possible, but—"

Sloane jumped up. "What do you need for it?"

Corrin frowned. "I don't know that it would be prudent to—"

*"What do you need?"*

The intensity of Sloane's question was underlain, Besin was beginning to realize, with a frantic sort of desperation. A dark hope. He had seen that look in others before, when they came to the library searching for the last chance in a string of regrets. He had never been able to turn anyone away with such blatant failures cluttering their past and cutting holes in their heart.

Corrin, it seemed, was the same.

Leh hesitated, and then looked down at the page. "I can write a list."

"Good. I'll get it, whatever it is."

"It may take you some time. This includes items which are very rare—"

"I'll help."

Sloane looked at Jana in surprise. Jana smiled firmly at her. "I'll help," she repeated. "I know where to look. If I get a copy of the list..."

"I can write two."

"I'll write the other," Besin said, pulling a chair next to Corrin. "It will go faster."

Sloane looked between them, her eyes sparking a touch brighter before sliding away. She crossed her arms at her stomach and stepped back.

"Okay. Okay, well... I need to get someone here, too, so I'll just... While you..."

She waved a hand at them, as if that finished her thought for her, and walked to the corner of the room. Only then did she pull out a sylph and begin talking. The light of the moss and Lanterns glowed in warm waves over her features as she half turned away from them, even though she was so far away they couldn't hear her words anyway.

"Do you think this will work?" Jana asked Corrin quietly.



Corrin could only shake levs head.

Besin sighed, saddened in advance for the only outcome this was likely to have.

It took them some time to transcribe the information, as it was spread across the entirety of a section of the book in bits and pieces. It seemed that whoever had written this tome hadn't even thought of using the theory in this way, but as Besin had learned of Corrin right away, one of Corrin's specialties was transference, and with levs fascination for all things archaic and arcane, leh could also interpret the ancient information into modern equivalents. If anyone could do this, it was Corrin.

Jana left at one point to gather the supplies and returned shortly thereafter. Besin and Corrin, in the meantime, moved to a different table which was far less cluttered and would suit their needs much better. They were more directly under the center of the moss and Lanterns mass, lending more movement of soft light and color across their endeavors. Once everything was arranged, and Jana had helped with supplies they hadn't thought to collect, Jana had to leave to return to work. And Sloane returned from where she had left, briefly, to retrieve what she said was the most important element.

Besin and Corrin finalized preparations in the meantime, falling into an easy quiet between them as scholarly comrades. Some time passed, and then they were once again not alone.

When Keiran walked into the room with Sloane close behind, Besin felt a sudden understanding that hit him hard in his stomach. It must have shown on his face, because Keiran slid a grim gaze away from him.

Besin turned back to Corrin and felt absolutely awful.

Corrin looked at him questioningly, not understanding the gravity of his expression.

He didn't have a chance to warn lev what this was about.

Sloane came up beside them, one hand gripping Keiran's elbow tightly. Keiran wouldn't look at any of them. Her expression was stony, her eyes decidedly dry.

Besin felt like his heart was going to burst.

Why hadn't he thought to question Sloane further on her intentions? How could he have been so oblivious? It should have been obvious what she wished, if only he had taken contextual clues into account.

This was bound to fail, and when it did, it would break Keiran's heart along with it.

"Perhaps we shouldn't..." Besin started, but Sloane was already talking over him.

"I brought her. I brought Keiran," Sloane told Corrin intently. "She's here so she can do it."

Corrin looked between their faces, the only one without the necessary information to understand the meaning of their moods. And yet, the most important one to know.

"Your wish is to transfer a portion of a signature to you?" Corrin asked, to verify.

Sloane nodded curtly. Keiran curled her arms at her stomach as best she could and hunched forward. Besin felt like he was watching a horror play, unable to interfere with the actors even while knowing the direction this would lead.

Corrin's fingertips tapped lightly on the book splayed before lev. "I feel it is necessary for all involved to be voluntary in such an attempt, particularly because the likelihood of success is—"

"It'll work," Sloane urged. She tugged Keiran closer to Corrin. "And Keiran's fine with it. I already asked her. You can do it, right? You're not suddenly changing your mind?"

There was such desperation, dark and clinging and clogging, in those words that none of them had the heart to tell her no. Corrin chewed lev's inner lower lip, just an indent of soft skin at lev's teeth, and then a release. With a soft sigh, Corrin nodded and looked to the materials.

"Very well. Because this is so old, this is written more as a spellscript than a typical modern spell. As a result, we will need to use these props, and you will need to repeat some phrases exactly as I say. If I were to write this spell today I wouldn't have made those parts necessary, but they were included back then as formation of intent for all parties to be in sync, and as this is an experiment I don't know if those pieces can be left out without compromising—"

"We'll do it," Sloane said. "Whatever you need. Whatever you say. We'll do it. So, can we start?"

Corrin's expression fluctuated on Sloane, but ultimately returned to neutral. Lev nodded and gestured for Besin to step back. He moved away from the three of them, who sat at the table and began the spell.

It was much closer to a ritual than a spell. As the world's foremost expert on ancient times, Besin recognized the elements that were pulled from different parts of the world, different cultures, different mindsets on

how magic worked. Back when magic first existed, and later after it split, those who suddenly had extraordinary powers struggled to understand them in a manner that made sense to minds long used to the mundane. UnTalented, essentially, suddenly graced with seiyunne.

They wrote their spells, back then, the way they wrote their culture. Words spoken aloud, shared gestures, shared drinks, a musical note to the droning voices repeating the same phrases over and over. Symbols and words and letters spread out around them just so, in just such a format, at just such an angle, so as to tap into what they thought of as an alien and unknowable power.

What they had failed to understand then, what they wouldn't learn for decades if not centuries, was that the power of a Mage or a Seer, the power of a Talented, came from the very earth itself. The magic running in the leylines around this world, bringing light and life to Ariwyn the globe over. It was as knowable as the blood in their veins, as it was the blood of the veins of the world. It wasn't alien; there was nothing closer to home than this magic that gave them powers beyond other humans. They had to learn, over time, to not see it as something separate that they had to coax under their control, but rather that it was something natural that automatically flowed through them, and rather than control they needed to learn only how to shape and redirect.

This ritual, this spell, was from the days when everything they knew of magic was backwards, was counterintuitive and counterproductive. They feared themselves and their powers, back then. They didn't understand.

So, it seemed impossible for this to work. Seiyunne had shifted ever so slightly in the ensuing years, as the Mages came to understand it better, as they gained a more mutually beneficial relationship. If in modern times with their modern understanding and modern spellwork they couldn't do this, if their current spellscripts failed to transfer a portion of a signature from one Enforcer to another, how could the ancient Mages who hardly knew to call themselves Mages figure out how to do it instead?

Corrin and the women had closed their eyes in the start of the ritual, their legs crossed, their hands out at their sides, palms up except where Keiran and Sloane held one hand each palm to palm. Besin watched and listened and was, himself, transported briefly to another time, another realm, in his imagination. The scent of the flowers burning in a Death's Gate shell in front of Corrin's right knee was a pleasant and understated backdrop to this fascinating scene. Besin felt his eyes droop the longer they

continued; felt his heart rate slow, and his breathing even.

He was entranced without intending it, and nearly asleep when he noticed the faint flash of light.

The spark jolted him back to the present. His eyes snapped open and he sat up straight, looking between the three of them to try to get another glimpse.

But it was gone, whatever it had been.

He scrubbed at his eyes and resisted the urge to yawn. Had he even seen what he thought he saw? Could he even explain, if anyone were to ask?

Just a flash of light, that was all. Slightly golden. Somewhere between the two women, maybe at their palms? No, it seemed closer to Sloane.

But then, the burning flower was nearer to Sloane than Keiran, so was that all he had seen? A spark of oxygen hitting the depth of ash, bringing it briefly, beautifully, back to life?

He rubbed at his eyes again, and still nothing had changed.

They stayed in their circle for some time longer, until slowly Corrin opened levs eyes, and slowed levs chant. Leh looked at the two of them, levs eyes centering primarily on Sloane. Recognizing the shift in tone, Sloane and Keiran opened their eyes as well.

Their gazes turned, magnetically, to one another.

"Well?" Keiran asked breathlessly.

Sloane looked down at her hand and pulled it gently from Keiran's. She flexed her fingers and studied her palm as if it held all the answers to life. The signature would not be there, they all knew, but equally they understood that she was using it as a focal point while she looked inward.

They all saw as her expression darkened, as the hope drew the light from her eyes. She slumped forward and looked away.

'Nothing,' she didn't need to say, because they all knew.

Keiran released a shaky breath. Even in the soft light of this room, Besin could see her shoulders trembling beneath the weight of this all. She tried to hold it in, but it wouldn't be silence completely.

"I'm sorry," Keiran said, a faint surge of emotion withheld in her voice. She stood up, turned from them with a stiff back, and walked swiftly from the room without another word.

"No," Sloane said quietly to herself. *"I am."*

<<<To be continued>>>

## GLOSSARY

**Incarnations (book one of Wildwood Rising) glossary.** This is not a comprehensive list by any means but compiles some of the most referenced terminology in the beginning of the book.

Although there is common terminology, some terms and names are affected by the group using them or where the term was learned. Some Mage sects and historical events are known by more than one name colloquially and are interchangeable in everyday conversation.

### TERMINOLOGY

*Listed alphabetically*

- **Ancient D’ria** - an ancient sentient language, which was once a language connected to the Alurri - a Mage sect since massacred into extinction. Ancient D’ria disappeared around the time of the death of the Alurri as well. The language contains inherent magical properties which can kill unsuspecting victims. It cannot be seen except by people who can read it, but its powers affect everyone regardless of their knowledge. Learning how to read Ancient D’ria, let alone compose any words in it, is a dead art.
- **Ariwyn Division** - Because Irridian is the Mage capitol of the world, and is arguably the oldest city in the world, Irridianites hold hierarchy over everyone else in Magedom across the world. Whether a huge and established Mage city like Degrena, or a minor Mage living alone in an unTalented town, or anywhere else in between, local law holds weight until Ariwyn Division gets involved. Ariwyn Division is the term for staff from Irridian who take over control of investigations or otherwise are dispatched anywhere in the world in the name of Irridian. Although primarily used for Enforcers, it can be used for any Irridian staff to include other Mage sects or those working on behalf of Seiyunne Council. Locals are not allowed to question or interfere with Ariwyn Division involvement, as Irridian holds the higher hierarchy over them.
- **Charlatan(s)** - a term for people, usually in a group, who rove the world and often sell wares or otherwise bring some sort of entertainment with them. They’re known as Charlatans due to a stereotype of them committing scams on the local populace. They primarily target unTalented towns, as they are less able to identify the difference between real Mages and tricks of the eye. Because they are known to roam, they are not typically known to have any hometown, but rather live out of their wagons. Charlatans can be any combination of people, to include unTalented, Mages, or other. The term references their lifestyle more than their demographics.
- **e-trelia** - Term for Ariwyn’s four massive ancient forests. They differ from normal forests in their inherent magical qualities. Sylphs come primarily from e-trelia. The term e-trelia is both singular and plural.
- **IEHQ** - Irridian Enforcers Headquarters. Irridian has multiple Enforcer wards (often colloquially referred to as ‘W’, for example, 8W for 8th Ward), which are geographic sections of the city watched over by the Enforcers assigned that ward. IEHQ is not a ward, but rather is technically the headquarters of all Enforcers in Magedom regardless of where the Enforcer lives or operates. Ariwyn Division is housed in IEHQ, as are speciality units such as the Special Crimes Unit, the morgue,

## Incarnations *by Ais*

and more. IEHQ operates separately from the Irridian wards, but in certain cases overrules their authority, or the authority of other Enforcer divisions worldwide. IEHQ is also the public face of Enforcers in Irridian during monthly public sessions during which citizens with complaints, comments, requests, or other concerns are allowed into the public section to meet with IEHQ staff to resolve issues or otherwise address questions or concerns. IEHQ is one of the oldest buildings in the world, if not the oldest, and due to its usage as both a public space and headquarters for private information and enforcement, it contains some of the most advanced magical and physical security systems in the world.

- **Irridia** - her name is often invoked in Mage curses, phrases, and other terminology. Known as the world's first Mage, she lived thousands of years ago.
- **Magedom** - the terminology used for areas where Mages or their items exist or hold power. Mages are largely concentrated in Halania continent but live in other locations as well. Anywhere that houses Mage artifacts, cities, knowledge, or people, is considered Magedom by the Mages, and therefore they believe they hold some control over it. It is not a geographic location but rather an amorphous term based on movement of people, items, and magical accessibility. All Mages are considered part of Magedom regardless of where they live, and they are expected to follow the rules of Magedom regardless of local law. Magetown is a subset of Magedom; a term used for the two cities in the world which are Mage strongholds: Irridian (capital) and Degrena.
- **S. E.** - Special Enforcer. A title denoting the position an Enforcer holds. A Special Enforcer is above low-level Enforcers but below higher level Enforcers, and is often an investigator of some sort.
- **Seiyunne** - the term for the magic used by Mages. See magic section.
- **Seiyunne Council** - not much is known of the intricacies of the Council's meetings outside of its doors, but the Council itself is well known. It is said to represent each of the Mage sects and makes decisions for Irridian and Magedom as a whole. There is a hierarchy within the Council for weight of one's words at the table, and a hierarchy that the Council as a whole is part of within Magedom (the leader of all Magedom and Irridian is the Mystic, and the Seiyunne Council is below them). To achieve a seat on the Council, even at its lowest hierarchy, is very difficult. Certain positions hold customary seats on the Council which are rarely used in practice. For example, technically the Head Librarian of Irridian Main Branch Library is afforded a seat at the Council, but they are rarely informed of any details such as time, location, or content of meetings, and were they to appear at a meeting their input would be given considerably less weight than those directly assigned the seats or those who meet a higher hierarchy. Like Ariwyn Division, Seiyunne Council holds a higher place in the hierarchy than others even within Irridian. If they make a decree that affects any other aspect of Magedom, even within Irridian, that decree must be met regardless of local laws or policy.
- **Sylphs** - small fairy-like creatures, all female, who have no voices of their own. However, they have the unique ability to connect with other sylphs and basically function as cell phones for the humans of the world.
- **Talented** - Mages and Seers. Humans with abilities that give them the ability to see or do things beyond other humans.

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- **The Great Purge / the Massacre(s)** - nearly 2000 years before the start of Incarnations the book, all Alurri, Defilers, and Entropists were killed in a genocide known as the Great Purge and/or the Massacre or Massacres. Their numbers remained low or extinct ever since. Necromancers/Resurrectors are sometimes included in this list in history books and are also thought to be all but extinct.
- **The Rendering / The Burning** - The event known as the time thousands of years ago when they say Irridia broke the world apart, leading to the formation of continents and splitting magic into its five seiyunne. The location where she allegedly stood when this occurred is in Vedura Li, known as Elania el-ari
- **Unconscionables** - Three, sometimes listed as four, Mage sects who were thought to be too dangerous to live and were massacred in the Great Purge: Alurri, Defilers, Entropists, and sometimes to include or exclude Necromancers/Resurrectors.
- **unTalented** - Normal human beings with no special powers. They are looked down on by Talented as being less than them. They do not call themselves unTalented on their own, however the term is synonymous with them throughout the world by the Talented. Sometimes shortened colloquially to uT. Term is both singular and plural but, by preference, some people add an 's' at the end to emphasize when referencing the people, such as "unTalented in unTalented towns."
- **Wilders / Wildlanders** - a group of people who inhabit Vedura Li, particularly the Wildlands. They are humanoid but not exactly human. Most Talented think of them as lesser even than unTalented as a result.

## MAGIC

- **Seiyunne** - the energy used by human Mages for their powers. There are 5 known types which are listed below, along with the Mage sect who uses them. Each seiyunne translates to a meaning based on the old language. All start with 'sei' which references Irridia, the first Mage, and arguably the creator of the current magic system.
  - **Seitai** - the most common seiyunne, with the largest number of users
    - **Proveniers** - create something tangible from nothing
    - **Illusionists/Magelings** - create illusions
    - **Conjurers** - transport people or things
  - **Seirene** - if misused, threefold the energy damages the user.
    - **Enforcers** - enforce the laws/cops
    - **Healers** - heal people
    - **Cursed** - term for Enforcers or Healers who misuse their power and are irreparably damaged by it
  - **Seikelle**
    - **Empaths** - feel what others feel, also can feel/reflect magic by identifying what type of Mage people are, and enhancing another's magic powers
    - **Spiritualists** - connected to nature/plants
    - **Enthrallers/Enchanters** - get into another person's mind and can affect their thoughts
  - **Seilaye** - seiyunne of the Unconscionables
    - **Defilers** - thought to be extinct. They steal the magic of any other Mage and use it for their own, briefly.

## Incarnations *by Ais*

- **Entropists** - extinct. They return any tangible thing to nothing. Great Purge/Massacre victims.
- **Alurri** - extinct. Ancient Mages, not much known; sirens who enchanted others
- **Necromancers/Resurrectors** - thought to be extinct. Reanimate and shape dead tissue
- **Seidan** - seiyunne and rendan mixed
  - **Mystic** - ruler of Irridian (unspoken rule they also essentially rule all of Magedom); has slight foresight from rendan and determines who is and is not allowed into Irridian
  - **Incarnation** - mythical, what Irridia was. A Mage who can use all seiyunne
- **Unassigned**
  - **Gatekeepers of Irridian** - They guard the gates of Irridian and are paired twins. Their magic is tied into the gates once they become Gatekeepers and they are a very small group, so they are often left off seiyunne and sect lists in Mage textbooks and are simply mentioned by name.
- **Rendan** - the energy used by human Seers for their powers. There are several Seer sects as well, who all use rendan.

## GEOGRAPHY

### \*\*CONTINENTS

There are five main continents and two lesser/island continents on the world named Ariwyn, where Incarnations is set.

- **West continents**
  - **Ferania** - largely uninhabitable by human standards
  - **Halania** - the prime arable continent for humans, it is mainly populated by Mages and unTalented. Irridian and Degrena are on Halania.
  - **Arenija el-nari** - largely filled with an e-trelia and a mountain range, this continent has some human inhabitants but is largely populated by non-humans, especially magical creatures
- **Central continent**
  - **Vedura Li** - home of the Wilders and the location where Irridia allegedly stood when she broke the world. Also home of a controversial assassination in the past. Directly between the feuding continents, Talented tend to avoid Vedura Li.
- **East continent**
  - **Ameset** - the Seers' continent.
- **Island continents**
  - **Lija en-estra** - thought to be largely uninhabited. Humans don't venture to Lija en-estra, but magical creatures might still live there.
  - **Esteren Isles** - thought to be uninhabited, as it is entirely mountains and volcanic islands. Humans don't visit.



## Incarnations *by Ais*

### \*\*CITIES

- **Magetowns**
  - **Irridian** - the magic capital of the world, home of the Mystic. Arguably the oldest city in the world.
  - **Degrena**
- **Seer stronghold: Sa'desain**
- **Many other cities are referenced**
- **Arrindell** - a mythical sentient city that most believe does not exist. It's said to hold history's greatest concentration of magic, and moves around the world. Named after Arrin, who some believe was Irridia's sister. It's largely thought only conspiracy theorists believe in Arrin or Arrindell. It is known by other names, including City of Mist, City of the Dead, All Fools Resting Place, and Fool's Rest.

### \*\*E-TRELIA

- **Sa'enr e-trelia** - in Ferania. Known as the forest that time forgot.
- **Se fae enaria e-trelia** - in Arenija el-nari. Known as blood of the fae forest, or forest of no return.
- **Sa caria e-trelia** - in Vedura Li. Known as the wailing woods, suicide forest, or forest of despair.
- **Sa lienr e-trelia** - in Ameset, surrounding the Seer's stronghold Sa'desain. Known as the timeless forest.

### CHARACTERS

- **Besin** - Provenier. Head Librarian of Irridian Main Branch Library, and supervisor of all branch libraries in Magedom.
- **Corrin** - Healer and specialist in ancient/arcane and fluid transference. Agender.
  - Corrin uses the standard Ariwyn agender pronouns: leh/lev/levs/levself to replace he or she/him or her/his or hers/himself or herself
- **Cypress** - Defiler. Twin of Hunter. Not much is known about him.
- **Enria** - Provenier. Representative on Seiyunne Council, cousin of Ven.
- **Fawkes** - Enchanter/Enthraller. Friend of Sloane's.
- **Harper** - Conjuror assigned to Irridian Enforcer Headquarters.
- **Hunter** - Provenier. Twin of Cypress. Cypress calls him a 'renegade Provenier.'
- **Jade** - Illusionist/Mageling. Not much known other than she is an infamous thief.
- **Keiran** - crime scene tech with IEHQ, primarily in Special Crimes Unit (Enforcer)
- **Sloane** - magical cop (Enforcer in Irridian) - also sole survivor of Children's Day
- **Ven** - Empath. Journalist with Irridian's primary news source: Seiyunne Circle. Cousin of Enria.
- **Vikenti** - magical cop assigned the Special Crimes Unit (Special Enforcer with IEHQ)

*This glossary will likely expand as the book progresses, to include more information that is learned by characters later. If you have questions about any of this or would like to know more information on the world, you can contact me at my site ([aisylum.com](http://aisylum.com)), my patreon ([patreon.com/ais](http://patreon.com/ais)), and/or tumblr ([ais-n](http://ais-n)). Thank you for reading! <3*