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GILDED SERPENT



DANIELLE L. JENSEN



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and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
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GILDED SERPENT

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For H.L.



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GILDED SERPENT



1

TERIANA

It was pouring rain.

Monstrous droplets that stung as they struck, like having pebbles thrown against one's face over and over again. A deluge that turned the streets of Aracam to streams, waterfalls pouring from the rooftops. Blackened skies flickered with lightning, the resultant thunder deafening Teriana's ears.

Yet for all the storm's ferocity, the Arinoquians had still come out in the thousands, in the *tens of thousands*, to witness the execution of Urcon.

A platform was set up at the center of the god circle, the great stone towers dedicated to each of the seven gods seeming to watch as the space filled with people. Men. Women. Children. Their faces were twisted with hate and fury and anticipation, their words indistinguishable, but the collective volume rivaled the thunder as they called for the blood of a tyrant.

Motion caught Teriana's eye, and she glanced past Marcus to see Titus cross his arms, his helmet doing little to hide his disapproval of the scene. Not for the first time, she was struck by how much the young commander of the Forty-First resembled his father, Lucius Cassius. And not just in his features.

"If they riot, we'll have more casualties than we did taking the rutting city," Titus muttered. "Every blasted person in Arinoquia is here."

"To bear witness is to strike the blow. It's the closest thing to revenge these people have," Marcus answered, his voice still raspy from his injured throat.

It had been only two days since he and Teriana had stood together on the hill overlooking Aracam. Since he'd committed to whatever it was that was between them: a fragile relationship built on affection and lust and something deeper she wouldn't put a name to. Two days since she'd abandoned reason and committed to the same.

Water sluiced down Marcus's face, but his eyes remained fixed on the crowd, mouth an unsmiling line, the slight flexing of the muscles in his jaw the only sign of emotion. A scrape marred one of his cheeks,

and his throat was ringed with dark bruises in the shape of fingers. Injuries that he'd gained coming to her aid when she'd been kidnapped and held prisoner in a failed gambit to defeat the Cel legions.

As though sensing her scrutiny, Marcus turned his head, grey-blue eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made Teriana feel as though they stood utterly alone, despite being surrounded by fifty men of the Thirty-Seventh. The corner of his mouth tilted up for a heartbeat, and warmth flooded her chest, then his attention moved back to the crowd.

Her own skin prickled, and Teriana looked to her left, finding Felix's gaze on her. The second-in-command's bland expression did nothing to hide his anger and hurt at having his place at Marcus's side usurped. Given he was potentially the one who'd paid Urcon's men to get rid of her, standing elbow to elbow with him was unnerving at best. *Was it you?* she silently asked. *Are you the traitor?*

Or are you merely the scapegoat?

The crowd surged, pulling Teriana from her thoughts. A thin corridor formed, leading toward the platform, and several armed Arinoquians appeared, dragging a figure between them.

Urcon.

For more than a decade, he'd lorded over his people with a heavy fist, extorting their wealth, stealing their children for his armies, slaughtering any who stood against him, and enforcing his dominance with terrifying brutality. He was a monster. A villain of the first order.

But it was hard to remember that as she took in the ancient man the warriors were half-carrying, his legs were unable to bear his weight.

They'd stripped him, his naked body scrawny and feeble and showing signs of gout. A few wisps of white were plastered against his skull, and his sunken eyes were wild with fear and confusion. He tripped over his own feet, only the grip of his captors keeping him from falling.

He's a murderer, she reminded herself, remembering the people from Imperatrix Ereni's town that Urcon's men had left slaughtered on the path as a warning for Marcus. Remembering how their blood had coated her bandaged feet, sticky and stinking of copper. Remembering the testimonies of the victims of Urcon's men, who'd committed atrocities in his name. Remembering that it had been this feeble old man who'd employed *Ashok*, one of the corrupted, to exercise his control of Arinoquia and its people.

Yet for all the reminders brought back her terror, they still jarred with what she was seeing with her own two eyes. *Who would follow this man?*

Then the Arinoquians started to throw pebbles.

Teriana flinched as the first struck and Urcon cried out, blood running from a wound on his temple. Another pebble opened a thin line of red across his shoulder. Another a lesion across his thigh. Swiftly she lost count, the air filling with flashes of grey as the people he'd tyrannized for so long rained their hate down upon him.

"They're going to kill him before Ereni has a chance to swing that axe," Titus said. "What a mess this is. We should have handled the execution."

"He's their kill," Marcus answered, and Teriana wondered whether he'd made that decision because he knew Ereni had been displeased about him taking the honor of executing Urcon's men in Galinha. Whether it was a political choice meant to earn the Arinoquians' favor. Or whether it was another reason entirely.

The warriors dragged Urcon onto the platform, where Ereni and the other imperators waited, and the barrage of stones ceased. The old man was bleeding and sobbing, and he remained prone in front of the leaders of the clans.

"The gods have borne witness to your crimes, Urcon!" Ereni inclined her head to each of the towers. "And unless one of them sees fit to stay my hand, let them bear witness to your punishment!"

Everyone in the crowd lifted their hands to make the sign of the Six against their chests, and though she was typically careful never to do so around the Cel, Teriana did the same.

Ereni hefted an axe, the blade wet and glinting from the rain, and the crowd screamed for blood. Her mouth moved, but it was impossible to hear her over the noise of the crowd.

"What did she say?" Titus asked, and Teriana curbed the urge to tell him to be quiet.

"She told him to get up." Marcus's tone was flat. "For Arinoquians, it's a matter of honor to face one's execution bravely in order to earn the favor of the gods. She's giving him the opportunity to regain face before he dies. An opportunity to save himself from being taken by the Seventh god to the underworld."

How do you know that? Teriana wondered. *Who told you?*

Do you believe it?

Titus spit on the ground. "Pagan nonsense. Bastard deserves to die on his knees."

“Titus,” Marcus said, “shut up.”

At any other time, Teriana would’ve smirked, but it was all she could do to keep her stomach contents in check as Ereni again shouted at Urcon to get to his feet. Instead, the ancient tyrant attempted to crawl to the edge of the platform, trying to flee his execution.

Expression tightening, Ereni barked an order at her warriors, who grabbed hold of Urcon’s ankles and dragged him back to the center of the platform. He managed to extricate himself from their grip, curling into a ball like a frightened child. The warriors forced his body straight, trying to get him into a position where Ereni could swing, but Urcon writhed and twisted.

This isn’t right.

Next to her, Marcus rocked slightly on his heels, and when she glanced at him, his jaw was tense, his brow furrowed. *Stop this, she willed him. Stop it, before it’s too late.*

The crowd was losing its momentum, the noise diminishing as more warriors dragged an execution block onto the platform, tying Urcon to it so that his arms were splayed out. Ereni said something to the other imperators, who all nodded. Then her gaze flicked in Marcus’s direction.

He didn’t so much as twitch.

The axe blade gleamed as Ereni swung it through the air, slicing through the falling rain, time seeming to slow to a crawl as it descended. But instead of striking true, it embedded in the base of Urcon’s skull. The old man screamed in agony.

Grimacing, Ereni jerked the blade free and swung again, but this time hit Urcon’s shoulders, the axe sinking deep in the muscle. The old man howled, and Teriana gagged, covering her mouth.

“I’m not watching this,” Felix growled, turning, but Marcus reached past Teriana, catching his second-in-command’s arm.

“We helped make this happen. So we *will* watch.”

Ereni swung the axe a third time, the blade sending droplets of blood flying over the crowd, which was no longer cheering.

This time her aim was true, and the weapon severed Urcon’s head from his neck. She reached down and picked it up, holding it high. Blood poured down, glistening crimson droplets joining the rain on the platform, Urcon’s eyes dull and sightless. “The tyrant is dead!”

The crowd repeated Ereni’s words over and over. Teriana wondered whether Urcon was being dragged down to the underworld with their screams in his ears. And whether he deserved it.

“The tyrant may be dead,” Marcus echoed the crowd’s refrain.
“We shall see about the tyranny.”

“Why do you say that?” Teriana murmured under her breath.

“Because,” he said, turning away from the bloody scene. “This particular tyrant wasn’t working alone.”

2

KILLIAN

Despite the cold, the smell of corpse was heavy in the air. The sickly sweetness of rotting flesh mixed with opened bowel, and there was something about it that told Killian it was human, not beast.

Sliding off the side of his horse, he dropped the reins and moved forward on foot, easing over the embankment toward a thicket of dead bushes. The wind howled, tearing at his cloak as he drew closer, heart beating faster and faster until he swore it would tear from his chest.

Please don't let it be her.

Please let it be her.

The thoughts alternated back and forth, same as they always did, fear and grief warring with his desire for this search to be over. To have closure, even if his guilt would remain.

As he reached the thicket, his eyes picked out the familiar shape in the snow. A body facedown, legs splayed and cloak flipped up, concealing the head. A woman, judging from the skirts, which were stiff with dried blood. Small and slender.

Please don't let it be her.

Please let it be her.

Hand shaking, Killian reached down and rolled the body, cringing as the woman's frozen hair peeled away from the ground.

Not her.

"Malahi was wearing a red velvet dress that day."

He lurched upward at the voice from behind him, drawing his sword even as he whirled around. His blade came to rest against Bercola's throat.

The last time he'd seen her was on the battlefield at Alder's Ford, her holding the spear she intended to use to safeguard Malahi's plot to assassinate her own father, King Serrick. The spear that had ended up embedded in Killian's side, the wound nearly the death of him. "You should have stayed gone."

The giantess's throat moved as she swallowed, colorless eyes unreadable as she regarded him. "Probably. But I thought I owed you an explanation."

“There is no explanation good enough!” he snarled at her, watching droplets of blood roll down his blade. Not that she so much as flinched. “You betrayed me.”

Because it hadn’t been him that she’d intended to hit with that spear. It hadn’t even been Serrick.

It had been Lydia. And for that reason, no explanation was worthy of forgiveness.

“I know you think that,” she answered. “But I need you to know that I was only trying to protect you. And so was she.”

“Bullshit!” he shouted. “You were trying to cover Malahi’s tracks so that no one would discover she’d sent an assassin after her own father.”

“No.” Bercola started to shake her head but froze as his blade dug deeper. “Lydia is corrupted, Killian. Malahi saw her steal life the night of the ball. And if she did it once, she’ll do it again. And again. It would only be a matter of time until you had to kill her. And I knew doing so would kill *you*. Better that you hate me for the rest of your life than that.”

“She is not corrupted!” He screamed the words, his body shaking. “She’s a gods-damned healer, and you should be glad of it, because otherwise I’d be dead by *your* hand!”

She flinched.

“Lydia sacrificed her freedom to save my life. And she wouldn’t have had to if not for Malahi’s scheming. If not for her lies. If not for *you* enabling her.” Fury flooded through him, and because he knew if he didn’t, he’d kill her, Killian dropped his sword. “I trusted you.”

Silence.

“I won’t apologize,” Bercola finally said. “I swore to your father to keep you safe, and though he might be in the grave, my oath remains. You may refuse to see it, but there is a darkness in that girl, and it is born of fear. And fears never stay buried.”

“I neither need nor want your protection,” he said between his teeth. “Go, Bercola. Get out of my sight and out of Mudamora, because if I see you again, I *will* kill you for what you did.”

“She’s dangerous, Killian. And you and I are the only two living who know it.”

“We know nothing! This is all on Malahi’s word, and we both know she wouldn’t hesitate to lie if it served her ends.”

“I saw!” Bercola’s large hands clenched into fists. “She healed me afterward, and despite that I was near death, she gave up nothing of herself to make me whole. Because she was only giving up what she’d stolen!”

“The only thing she did wrong was not letting you die!”

Bercola closed her eyes, taking a measured breath. Then the giantess who had watched over him most of his life took one step back. And another.

“They say there is some of the Six in all of us,” she said when she reached the top of the slope. “But so is there some of the Seventh. Even in the Marked.”

“Go!” he screamed, reaching down to retrieve his sword. “This is your last chance, Bercola. That I’m giving you a chance at all is only because we were once friends.”

Her eyes glistened with tears, but the sight only hardened his heart.

“The days grow darker, Killian,” she said. “And I think it will be in the absence of light that we all see who we truly are.”

And without another word, she disappeared.

3

MARCUS

His head throbbed.

A dull, merciless ache had spread from his shoulders, up his neck, and across his skull to his temples, where it had then begun to squeeze. It was merciless. And it made it so very hard to think.

“Do you wish for me to send in men to quell the mob, sir?” Felix asked as they walked through the streets of Aracam.

Like Galinha, the buildings were made of stone, the entrances small, and the streets narrow. It smelled like rain, rock, and piss, and other than a few dogs rummaging through trash, the streets were empty. Not that it would last. “No. Let it burn itself out.”

“There will be casualties.”

“Some. But there will be more violence if they perceive us as standing in the way of their revenge. Give it an hour, then have patrols move into the city.” He turned his head back toward the towers of the god circle, not needing to push his imagination too hard to picture what was happening to Urcon’s corpse. “The people did not receive the satisfaction they hoped for in that execution, and many will look for release in other pursuits.”

“Because Ereni botched it.”

Marcus shook his head, for the reason was far deeper than that. “Regardless of the reasons, our men are to keep the peace, not add to the violence.”

Even though speaking made his injured throat ache, he continued to detail his orders, growing more specific by the second despite the way Felix’s jaw tightened, despite knowing that his *friend’s* ears would be turning red beneath his helmet the way they always did when he was angry.

Don’t act until you have proof, Teriana had made him promise. But the fact of the matter was that either Felix or Titus had stabbed him in the back, which meant Marcus could trust neither of them.

“Anything else, sir?” Felix’s voice was stilted. “Or may I go?”

“Go.” Not waiting to see if he listened, Marcus turned to Titus. “Start the men with clearing the debris where we blasted the wall. Then get them to work on rebuilding. Tomorrow, I want a call to

employ masons and other skilled laborers to take over the repairs of all structures damaged in the battle. Be clear they will be *paid*.”

“By whom?” Titus asked. “Our coffers grow thinner by the day.”

“The goodwill will be worth the expense. Once the work is underway, I want you to . . .” As with Felix, he delved down into the minutiae, part of him wanting one of them to disobey him in some way, thus allowing him to *act*.

But unlike Felix, Titus only nodded, saluting sharply before departing with his escort.

“I was about ready for you to give them instructions on how to wipe their own asses.”

At Teriana’s words, several of his men smirked, and Marcus gave them cold stares before turning to her. “A change of regime is a delicate time for any nation. Better that I be specific in my orders, that way if things go poorly, I’ll have no one to blame but myself.”

“How magnanimous of you.” She flipped the braids the wind had pushed into her face back over her shoulder, revealing the bruises on her cheeks. Her split lip. Her right hand was pressed against her ribs, and though he knew they were only bruised, he also knew from experience how each breath hurt, the pain escapable only in sleep.

Which was an escape he couldn’t afford to give her. “I’ve a job for you.”

“Oh?” She didn’t look surprised. “Do tell, Legatus.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm, but whereas once she’d have been mocking him, now her tone served to deceive everyone else. To hide a secret.

“I’ll explain once we’re in Urcon’s fortress.”

Under the watchful eye of Gibzen and his men, they made their way to the fortress at the center of Aracam. Like all of the buildings in the city, it did not exceed two stories, but what it lacked in height it made up for in sprawl. Surrounded by a solid stone wall with only one gate, it was a maze of buildings his men were still in the process of searching, but at the moment, there was only one structure that concerned him.

They ducked to enter the building, following Gibzen through the narrow corridors lit by smoking torches. It felt more like walking through a series of caves than a structure built by the hands of men. The ceiling was so low that Marcus had to stoop as they walked, and he idly wondered how Servius was managing.

Ahead, two of his men flanked a heavy door, which they opened at the sight of him, forced to press their backs against the walls in order to allow room to pass.

“I bloody well hate this place!” Servius shouted as they entered. “If you’ve any kindness in you, sir, don’t ask me to stand. It would mean risking what brains I have left to these cursed ceilings.”

“Consider yourself at ease while I give Teriana the tour.”

She said nothing, following him into the next chamber, which was heaped with gold and silver and gemstones. Chests of coins were stacked haphazardly against the wall, jewelry and silverware mixed in together with sculptures of ivory and bronze, the wealth beyond anything Marcus had ever seen, and there were six more chambers of it. All of it covered with dust. Stolen away and then forgotten.

Teriana cleared her throat. “You’d better not be asking me to swindle Ereni and the other Arinoquian imperators, Marcus. Because the answer is no.”

“I’m not.” Leading her deeper into the treasury, he stopped only once they were out of earshot, pushing the door to the chamber shut. Dust puffed in his face and he coughed, knowing that he’d be risking one of his attacks if he stayed in here much longer. But he wanted to be alone with her.

“What, then?” Her tone implied that she expected him to ask something of her that she didn’t want to give, and Marcus’s chest tightened. Would that ever stop? Could it?

“I need you to put a total on this wealth. And I need it within the next two days.” And then, because he didn’t want it to sound like an order he had no right to give her, he added, “Please.”

Teriana’s eyes widened, and she gave the room an appraising once-over. “Marcus—”

“It has to be done. We currently have seven armies sitting outside of Aracam—”

“Gods, no wonder you need me to do this. You can’t even count. There are *eight* armies outside Aracam.”

Despite himself, Marcus laughed, catching hold of her waist and pulling her against him. She slid her arms around his neck, and for a heartbeat, he forgot about his headache. Forgot about politics and traitors and blood. “My army doesn’t concern me. It’s the rest of them.”

Tangling his fingers in her wet braids, he rested his cheek against hers, staring at a pile of golden cups, tasting the dust in the air. “The clans united for the sake of ridding themselves of Urcon, but now that he’s dead, it’s only a matter of time before they start fighting among themselves. If that happens, I’ll either have to choose sides

or force my own authority down on their heads, neither of which is appealing.”

“Don’t fancy yourself the new ruler of Aracam?”

Grimacing, he shook his head, then leaned back against the wall so he could meet her gaze. “No. Nor am I interested in another battle on the heels of the one we just won. My men need a chance to breathe.”

And he needed a chance to carve out a life for them in this place while at the same time pretending he was still following the Senate’s—and Cassius’s—orders.

“The clans are expecting to receive a share of the plunder,” he continued. “I’d like to give it to them and have them on their way before they start trying to take what they feel they’re owed from the people living in this city.” He had other reasons, too. Pressing reasons, but they weren’t ones he dared to share.

“There’s nothing to take. Urcon and his men stripped this city clean as much as he did the rest of Arinoquia.”

Letting go of her, Marcus reached down to pick up a woven basket. A tin cup. A leather belt. Not treasure, but items that had had value to someone. “There is always something to take.”

A knock sounded on the door, and Servius’s voice echoed through. “The representatives from the clans are here.”

Time was of the essence, but Marcus still felt a flash of irritation at the interruption. Stolen moments, that was all they ever had. “Tell them to wait.”

“More secrets to tell me?” She tilted her head, midnight skin gleaming in the torchlight. Ocean waves rippled across her irises, the color a blue so dark and deep he imagined himself drowning in them. Bruised or not, she was more beautiful than anything in the room. More beautiful than anyone he’d ever seen.

And she’d chosen him.

Bending his head, he kissed her gently, mindful of her injuries. “You are the secret. *This*”—he kissed her again—“is the secret.”

Teriana rolled her eyes. “You really need to get some sleep. A secret is something everyone *doesn’t* know.” Reaching up, she touched his bruised throat. “*This*, everyone knows.”

She was probably right. She *was* right, only he didn’t want to admit it. “It’s one thing for my men to suspect. Quite another for me to shove it in their faces. I . . .” Marcus trailed off, struggling to find the words he wanted. This was untrodden territory for him, and he felt painfully ignorant—not a feeling he was used to. And certainly not

one he liked. “*This*,” he finally said, “can only happen behind closed doors.”

“We live in a tent.” She winked. “No doors.”

Groaning in frustration, he leaned back against the wall, rubbing at his temples. “You drive me to madness.”

“You like it.”

He did like it. He liked *her*. But his affection for her had already been used against him with near-catastrophic effectiveness.

Stomach hollow, he forced himself to meet her gaze. “Would you want your crew to know?”

The waves rolling across her irises surged, and for a foolish heart-beat, he thought she might say yes. Then she looked away. “No. It wouldn’t go over well.”

That was likely an understatement.

“As much as I might wish otherwise, my men talk. To one another. To civilians. To the sailors on my ships. And those are the sailors who supply your crew, so I think it’s in both our best interests to keep the rumors in check.”

Teriana nodded, but he noticed a slight quiver in her jaw, even these stolen moments dampened by circumstances. Reaching down into an open chest, he picked up a necklace that caught his eye, all sapphires and diamonds and gold. He fastened it around her neck, watching how the gems glittered across the delicate bones of her throat.

Teriana looked down, then unfastened the necklace and handed it back to him. “That gold is steeped in blood. Pretty as it is, wearing it would be bad luck.”

“I doubt there’s an ounce of gold on Reath that hasn’t known blood, one way or another.” He dropped the necklace back in the chest, knowing she was right but also that she deserved more than he was giving her. “But blood or no, I need all of this valued. You’ll have to stay here while it’s done, but you’ll be under constant guard. And Servius will be with you.”

Opening the door, he led her back in the direction of the entrance. He nodded at the seven Arinoquians, four men and three women, standing with Servius and Gibzen. Switching to their language, he said, “You’re here to ensure the inventory of Urcon’s wealth is taken honestly and without bias. All will be searched upon departure from this room, and the punishment for theft will be the loss of a finger. Is this understood?”

They nodded, and he said, “Good. Teriana will be my representative, and given her expertise, hers will be the final word. Agreed?”

Everyone nodded, but still he hesitated, searching his brain for a reason to remain. A reason not to leave her presence. But neither Teriana nor this task needed his involvement, whereas there were a hundred other matters that did. "I'll leave you to it," he said, then left without a backward glance.

4



LYDIA

The gates to Madaire stood open as they approached, soft flakes of snow drifting from the sky to add to the carpet of white. It should've been beautiful, but with the endless streams of black crisscrossing the land, the stench of rot thick on the air, it looked for all the world to Lydia like the flesh of one infected by the blight.

Or a blighter, as she'd learned they were called during their journey back from the battleground of Alder's Ford.

The soft thuds of the horses' hooves turned to sharp clacks as they rode under the open portcullises and onto the cobbles, not a single sentry remaining to guard the city. The door to a house opened and shut on the wind, the hinges creaking, and the shutters on the windows rattled with each gust. Where Madaire had once been thick with the scents of humanity—food and sweat and urine—now there was only rot, as though the city itself was a corpse laid out to decay.

And yet it was not entirely lifeless.

Lydia noted human tracks in the snow, far too many to be accounted for by a handful of individuals, and she turned to Quindor, who rode silently at her side. As Grand Master of Hegeria's temple, he had authority over all healers in Mudamora and the ear of the King. He'd have answers. "I thought Lady Calorian was able to evacuate the city." Her chest hitched at the mention of Killian's mother, her mind leaping to him as it so often had over the days since she'd turned her back on him at Alder's Ford.

Quindor's gaze flicked to the tracks, his jaw tightening. "There were a good many who refused to go, and there wasn't the manpower to force them. With the battle won, we anticipate more will return."

"Why would anyone in their right mind stay?" There was nothing to eat but vermin and what fish could be caught on the sea, and the majority of the wells in the city were foul.

"Hope. Stubbornness. Fear." His eyes moved to the shadows, and Lydia's went with them, catching sight of motion. Of something human in shape. Her chest tightened, especially when she realized it was following them.

"Blighter," Quindor said softly to the soldiers.

“Would you have me put it down, Grand Master?” one of the men replied. “Or do you wish it captured?”

Before Quindor could answer, *it* stepped out of the shadows.

“Spare a copper?” the child said, her voice high-pitched and sweet. “A crust of bread?”

Instinct had Lydia reaching for her saddlebags to retrieve the girl something to eat, but Quindor caught hold of her wrist. “*Look*,” he said. “Allow Hegeria’s mark to show you the truth.”

Lydia turned her head back to the child, seeing that the girl’s dark eyes were fixed on her. Her skin was pale, but her face bore none of the black veins of blight that marred the flesh of the infected who’d attacked the night of Malahi’s ball. Neither was she a mindless thing like those that had pursued them through the tunnels beneath the palace, intent on nothing but slaughter. There was intelligence in this girl’s eyes. Thought.

“Look,” Quindor repeated.

Lydia stared back into the eyes of the child, her skin turning to ice. All living creatures glowed with an ethereal mist of life that only those marked by Hegeria could see. Quindor and the soldiers, as well as the horses, radiated it, but the girl standing before them had no more life in her than the stones beneath her feet. A walking corpse.

“The blight is evolving,” Quindor said, then he nodded at the guard. “Put it down.”

“No!” Lydia protested, but the Grand Master grabbed the reins of her horse to keep her from intervening as the soldier pulled his sword.

The girl’s eyes widened with fear, and she turned and sprinted toward an alley. But the soldier’s horse was faster. A flash of a blade. A gush of blood.

A child’s head rolling across the snow.

“Burn it.” Quindor’s voice was toneless.

Another of the soldiers dismounted to pour oil over the corpse, including the head, and then touched his torch to it. Flames burst bright.

Nausea rose in Lydia’s stomach, her skin simultaneously hot and cold, but Quindor’s words tore her eyes from the sight.

“The war isn’t over,” he said. “It has only just begun. And this”—he gestured at the inferno—“is a battle Hegeria’s Marked must fight.” His gaze fixed on hers. “That’s why you are here.”

They dismounted in the middle of the city’s god circle, and several of the soldiers took the reins of the horses to bring them to the stables

at the palace, the only place secure enough to protect them from slaughter.

The doors to the temple opened as they approached, heavily armed soldiers in the company of two young healers inspecting their party before they were allowed to enter.

“Welcome back, Grand Master,” both of the young healers said, inclining their heads respectfully, and Quindor smiled affectionately at both as he led Lydia inside.

The last time she’d been here was to deliver Gwen into the temple’s care, and the scene was much changed. Instead of the foyer being filled with rows of cots, it was empty of everything except for soldiers, all of the men wearing coats marked with Hegeria’s half-moon. What windows the main level had once possessed had been bricked over. The temple was now a fortress.

“Do the blighters try to get inside?” she asked, heart beating a rapid staccato as she remembered the waves of them tumbling through the trapdoor into the palace tunnels, their endless pursuit.

“Not yet,” the young healer answered. “But Hegeria’s Marked alone see them for what they are, so it’s in their best interest to kill us. We think they’re waiting for an opportune moment.”

“Shush now,” Quindor said. “I’d hear a proper report, not inflated rumors. Come, Lydia. I’ll show you to your quarters and after you’ve had a chance to settle, we will discuss the matter of the infected.”

The blight is evolving. Quindor’s words echoed through her thoughts as she followed him to a curved staircase, leading her upward. They climbed to the fifth floor before turning down a hallway, which circled the tower.

“The dormitories,” he said, then led her past a dozen closed doors before stopping before one marked with a 37. “This will be your room. You are responsible for keeping it clean and for your own laundry. Attend me in my office in an hour so that we might discuss your role.”

“Yes, Grand Master,” she answered, but Quindor was already swiftly retreating up the corridor, so she went inside.

It was small—more cell than room, in her opinion, with a narrow cot against the wall, a rickety wardrobe against the other, as well as a wash table on which a basin filled with water sat. The grey stone of the floor was softened only by the presence of a threadbare carpet, but the blankets on the bed appeared soft and warm. A set of folded white garments sat on the blankets, and Lydia picked them up. A thick robe. A white cotton shift. A woven belt. And on the floor, three pairs of black boots of various sizes.

Lydia methodically stripped off her dirty clothing, leaving it in a pile. Goose bumps rose on her skin as she crossed the frigid floor to stand naked in front of the wash table. There was a mirror on the wall—nothing more than a polished piece of metal—and Lydia stared at her reflection. Her hair was tangled and filthy, her skin marked with dirt. And beneath the filth, her cheeks were hollow, her eyes shadowed and sunken from exhaustion and fear and grief. But what drew her eye was the half-moon that Quindor himself had tattooed onto her forehead during the journey back from Alder's Ford. This was the first time she'd seen it, and she traced a fingernail over the design, reminded, briefly, of how the Empire marked the men in its legions.

And thought of the legions pulled Teriana into the forefront of her mind. Her best friend, who was the prisoner of the young man who'd tried to murder Lydia on Lucius Cassius's orders. *Please watch over her*, she prayed to the Six. *Don't let him hurt her.*

Pouring water into the basin, she picked up the cloth and bar of soap sitting next to it and began to scrub her face, then her body, the water turning a murky brown. She discarded the dirty water into the chamber pot under the cot, then refilled the basin. Bending forward, she immersed her hair as best she could, pinching her eyes shut as she worked up a soapy lather and then pouring the rest of the pitcher of water over her head to rinse it. Reaching blindly for a towel, she wiped her face and wrapped her damp hair. And then she opened her eyes and reached for the basin.

The water wasn't the murky brown of dirt, but rather a deep shade of rust.

Blood.

Killian's blood.

Her breathing accelerated, turning into fast little gasps, the room swimming in and out of focus. She crouched down, pressing her hands to the floor for balance, shivering violently, her skin like ice.

"He's alive," she whispered. "You're alive. And both of you are set to the purposes for which you were destined."

But the truth did nothing to drive away the cold.

5



TERIANA

“This is going to take forever,” Servius muttered, wiping sweat from his brow, his brown eyes uncharacteristically shadowed. Whether it was from lack of sleep or other concerns, Teriana didn’t know. “We’ll need some sort of containers. Half these chests have gone to rot.”

No sooner had the words exited his lips, the bottom of the chest he was holding fell out, spilling coins everywhere. All of them gold and stamped with the scorpion of House Rowenes. “That’s odd,” she muttered.

Servius scooped up a handful, examining them with a practiced eye. “This is the most solid clink I’ve come across. Looks pure, too. Where’s it from?”

“Mudamora, on the Northern Continent.” She rubbed her thumb over a coin. The largest gold mines on Reath were on the Rowenes lands, which were near the border of Mudamora and Anukastre. “But they don’t trade with Arinoquia, so it’s odd to find so much of their coinage here.”

And all of it freshly minted, bearing no signs of wear. Which suggested an expensive purchase, and one only a High Lord—or even the King himself—could afford. Shrugging, she tossed it back in the pile and set to work.

It was dusty, laborious work, but there was also something soothing about it. This was what she’d trained most of her life to do—not to sail a ship, but to be a merchant who knew wares well enough to come out ahead in every bargain. If not for the circumstances, Teriana thought her mother would be proud.

At the thought of her mother, Teriana’s chest constricted painfully. Was Lydia’s father keeping her safe? She’d always believed Senator Valerius a kind and honorable individual, but she’d thought the same about Lydia. And she could not have been more wrong on that front. Part of her wondered if she’d ever have the opportunity to see Lydia again. What she would say to her, if given the chance. If Lydia even cared how much hurt she’d caused.

“Is there any news from my crew?” she asked Servius. “Do you know if they are well?”

The *Quincense* was apparently anchored next to a tiny island off the coast, with men from the Thirty-Seventh, as well as some from the Cel navy, keeping her crew under guard. Before she'd dispatched Bait north, he and Magnius had been running messages back and forth, but now she had no contact with them at all other than what the Cel deigned to tell her.

"Nothing new," Servius answered. "But we'll be sending supplies and some of the injured to join that outpost soon enough. I hear anything of note, I'll let you know."

She twisted a braid around one finger, grimacing at the state her hair was in without her aunt Yedda to put in fresh braids. She looked fuzzy and unkempt, but her appearance hadn't been a priority. What would her aunt say if she knew of all the things Teriana had done? If she learned about Teriana and Marcus? Would she, or any of the rest of the crew, understand?

Was it right to ask them to?

They worked through the day, only pausing when Servius's stomach let out a ferocious growl. "I'm starving," he declared to the legionnaires standing guard. "One of you boys get some grub for us. Buy it from a civilian—I'm sick of the slop we're serving in camp." He tossed one of them a coin. "Enough for all here, plus three. I've a mighty hunger."

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Teriana glanced at the ledger she was holding, adding the totals in her head. Already the amount was staggering, and it didn't even include the bricks of precious metals that were piling high in a building near the forge.

When the food arrived, Servius called a halt to the work, leaning against a moldering tapestry, his feet resting on bolts of silk that were marked with dark stains that looked suspiciously like blood. He was easily one of the largest men she'd ever met who wasn't an actual giant, his tunic sleeves stretched around biceps thicker than her thighs. That, more than the hue of his brown skin, spoke to his Atlian heritage, the island province known to breed people of impressive stature. That, in combination with what was undeniably an attractive face, made Servius tremendously popular with Arinoquian women.

"So," he said. "You going to tell me what happened on your way back from Galinha? What we know is mostly what was ascertained from what was left behind, if you get my meaning."

Bodies. Of the young men who'd been watching over her, including Quintus and Miki. Tears pricked in her eyes, knowing they'd died protecting her. "We received Marcus's message recalling us to

camp. Set out the next morning. We were about halfway back when Quintus noticed something was off.” She shook her head, trying to wipe away the remembered fear rising in her chest. “Was too quiet. And then next thing I knew, arrows were flying.”

Her chin trembled, and she took a mouthful of food to hide it, though her appetite was long gone. “Quintus got hit first, but then it was madness. There were so many of them, coming from all sides.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “Fifty. Maybe more. They all wore Urcon’s colors.”

“Big force to commit to catching one girl with uncertain worth, no?” Servius watched her intently, and she was reminded that he wasn’t the third most senior officer of the Thirty-Seventh just because the men liked him. “Especially with two legions camped on Urcon’s doorstep.”

This was where she needed to be careful. No one but her and Marcus knew about the traitor, and as much as she trusted Servius, it was Marcus’s secret to reveal. She shrugged. “They darted me in the neck, and I lost consciousness. When I awoke, I was in the hut where Marcus and Gibzen found me. Their leader—”

“This the Ashok that we’re looking for?”

Teriana forced herself to nod, her skin growing cold as the corrupted’s face rose in her thoughts. “He told me that they intended to use me to negotiate a withdrawal, but that I was dead either way. That they were only buying time for the mercenaries to arrive.”

“It’s always helpful when your enemy is a big talker.” Servius picked up another skewer. “What did he look like? Marcus passed on a few details, but the bastard has proven elusive.”

“Gamdeshian,” she answered. “Skin a bit darker than yours. Chin-length black hair. Silver earrings running up his left ear.” It was easy to provide the details, her memory of Ashok as clear as though he stood in front of her.

“Eye color?”

Black pits encircled with flame. Like staring into the heart of the underworld.

But she couldn’t tell him that—not when she’d kept the knowledge of the corrupted from Marcus. He already knew about healers, and if he learned about the corrupted’s powers, he’d inevitably start to wonder what other secrets she was hiding. “Dark.”

“I’ll pass the details on to Gibzen. It was his men who were killed, so he’s taken the hunt on as a matter of personal interest.”

He wasn't the only one. Marcus had not taken the news that he'd been betrayed by one of his men well at all, and that the traitor might be his closest friend only made it worse. But as much as it had been Marcus who'd been betrayed, Teriana also wanted vengeance.

"I'm sorry for what happened." She rubbed at her eyes, her chest tight. "Quintus and Miki were my friends. The last thing I ever wanted was them dead."

"Well, then, you're in luck," Servius said, wiping his hands on the moldy bolt of silk he was sitting on. "Because when I heard this story from them, they were still very much alive."

6



LYDIA

Cleaned up and composed, Lydia walked silently through the temple corridors, following the directions a servant had given her to a level with more lush appointments. Her new boots sank into the deep carpets, the air far warmer than it was in the dormitories. Stopping in front of an ornate wooden door, she knocked once.

“Enter,” a muffled voice responded, and pushing open the door, Lydia stepped inside.

The room was large, the floors covered with thick carpets and the air kept warm by the flames in the large fireplace to her left. The wall opposite to the door was full of windows, the drapes pulled back to allow in the muted sunlight. Quindor sat with his back to the view, bent over a heavy desk that was covered with papers.

“Take a seat, Lydia.” Then he pushed a large box in front of her. “An assortment of spectacles. Hopefully you can find a pair that suits, for I’m afraid there are no lens makers in Mudaire.”

“Where did these all come from?” she asked, trying on a gold-rimmed pair but swiftly discarding them, as they made her vision even more blurry.

Quindor gave a soft cough. “They are from those who no longer need them.”

From the dead. The contents of her stomach threatened to rise, but she swallowed them back down. Now was no time for squeamishness.

“We need to discuss your role in the patrols.”

“Patrols?” she asked, trying on three more pairs of spectacles before settling on a pair that improved her vision satisfactorily.

“The blighters are almost impossible to identify by anyone other than one of Hegeria’s Marked,” Quindor responded. “The trainees join the guard on their patrols in order to identify and put down those who have succumbed.”

“Put down?” She tried and failed to keep the acid from her voice. “They are human beings, not rabid dogs.”

“*Were* human beings,” the Grand Master corrected. “Now only corpses animated by the Seventh’s power. You must vanquish from

your mind any notion that they are otherwise, Lydia, or risk madness.”

“Is this why I’m here, then?” she demanded. “To be used to hunt down people we should be trying to save?” That wasn’t the battle she’d agreed to fight. She had come believing she’d be working to find a cure—a way to save her people. Not . . . *this*.

Quindor leaned back in his chair. “They cannot be saved. Do you think we haven’t tried?”

“Clearly not hard enough!” She dug her nails into the arms of her chair. “The blight still mars the land, which means people will continue to fall ill. If the answer is to kill them all, soon Mudamora will be populated by corpses!”

Quindor eyed her for a long moment. “Your passion is commendable, Lydia, if misdirected. The Royal Army is occupied with clearing the kingdom of the remains of the Derin army, but once that task is complete we can begin to discuss what might be done to stop the blight from infecting more people.”

“What about the tenders?” She remembered the conversation she’d once had with Killian. His theory that the blight might be caused by individuals marked by the Seventh. “Why haven’t they been brought to address the problem?”

“Because they are all dead.”

“All?” Her stomach dropped. “How is that possible?”

The Grand Master sighed. “The endless toil of forcing the earth to yield in order to provide food for the Royal Army. Our own ranks were decimated by the war. There are more trainees here in the temple than living healers left in Mudamora.”

So few . . . And she remembered Killian explaining to her that if the Marked weren’t where they were needed to protect the people, it damaged faith in the Six. And that was what gave the Corrupter his power. “If that is the case, then we must find a cure before it spreads.”

Quindor folded his hands, watching her over them. “I can see that you’ll not be swayed until you’ve seen the proof yourself. Come.”

He took her into the sublevel of the tower, the circular staircase illuminated by candles that cast dancing shadows over the stone steps. Much like the levels above ground, the corridor ran in a circle with doors on the exterior of the hallway, though what lay in the rooms beyond, she had no notion. Ahead, she caught sight of two guards standing outside of one of the doors, both of whom inclined their head to Quindor as he approached. “Grand Master.”

“This is Lydia,” he said to them. “One of Hegeria’s Marked who has recently joined us.”

They lowered their heads respectfully. “Marked One.”

It was all she could do not to cringe at the honorific, instead smiling at them.

“Before we go in,” Quindor said, “I’ll remind you that what you will hear is not the voice of a child, but the voice of the Seventh god. And the Corrupter is nothing if not a liar.”

At her nod, he pulled a key from his robes and inserted it into the lock, then swung the door open, allowing Lydia to step inside.

She’d expected to find a dungeon cell. Chains. A cage.

Instead, Lydia’s eyes fell upon a room with more comfortable appointments than her own. The walls were paneled with tapestries depicting each of the Six, the floor layered with carpets, and the bed at the center covered with thick blankets. Several lamps burned brightly, and a brazier gave off needed heat.

And on the floor, wearing a pink woolen dress and playing with a puzzle, was a little brunette girl. At the sound of them, the child turned, and a gasp tore from Lydia’s face as she recognized her as one of the orphans who’d lived with Finn in the sewers. A girl whose life Lydia had saved from illness.

A girl who now possessed no more essence of life in her than the stone floor she stood upon.

“Grand Master Quindor,” the girl said, smiling wide. “It has been so long since you visited.”

“I’ve been away, Emmy,” he answered. “Only just returned. How do you feel?”

“Well.” The girl—Emmy—beamed. Then her upturned grey eyes moved to Lydia, her head cocking slightly. “I know you.”

Lydia’s blood chilled, her mind recoiling at the idea that the words were coming not from a little girl, but from a dark god.

“You were one of the Princess’s guards!”

“Yes.” Lydia’s voice croaked, and she coughed to clear her throat. “I also saved your life in the sewers. Do you remember that?”

“That was you!” Emmy bounded to her feet, the pink ribbons on her braids bouncing on her shoulders, and Lydia had to steel herself from taking a step back. “Finn told us it was Hegeria herself.”

“Finn likes to tell stories. It was me.”

“Oh!” The girl darted across the room, flinging her arms around Lydia’s waist and squeezing tightly. “I remember your face sparkled like diamonds. You looked like a princess of the north.”

Lydia's heart thundered against her rib cage, her fingers like ice as she placed a hand against the girl's back, feeling the measured rise and fall of breath, certain that if she pressed her ear to Emmy's chest she'd hear the beating of a heart. Everything about her appeared alive and vital.

But Lydia's mark told her a very different story.

One could not heal the dead, she knew that. Except abandoning Emmy to the fate of the child she'd watched murdered on the street made Lydia sick.

Quindor was watching, his face grim. "Try, if you must."

She had to. She had to know.

"Emmy, will you sit for a moment?"

At the girl's nod, Lydia led her to the bed, lifting her on top of it and then sitting next to her. Then she took a deep breath and took hold of Emmy's hand, feeling the warmth of the girl's skin against her own.

And she pushed.

It was as though something sank its claws into her and yanked, dragging life from Lydia with painful violence. A scream tore from her throat, and then she was on her back on the floor, Quindor kneeling next to her. "Many others, including me, have tried to bring her back. But one can't heal death." He looked to the girl. "Thank you, Emmy."

A snuffle filled Lydia's ears, and she looked up to find the little girl weeping. Climbing to her feet, she sat next to Emmy again, careful to keep her hands a safe distance. "It's not your fault."

"The Grand Master tells me that I am dead," Emmy whispered. "But I don't feel dead." She looked up at Lydia. "Is he telling the truth?"

Lydia bit her bottom lip, then said, "There is no life in you."

Emmy's chin trembled. She reached into her pocket, pulling out something that glinted in the lamplight.

A gold-and-onyx cuff link in the shape of a galloping horse.

"He told me that he'd protect me," the girl whispered, then she dropped the cuff link on the floor with a clatter. "He lied."

He did protect you! Lydia wanted to scream, but instead bit the insides of her cheeks until she tasted blood.

"Calm yourself, Emmy. We will leave you to your toys." Quindor motioned Lydia to follow him outside, closing the door firmly behind them.

"That"—she pointed back toward the room holding Emmy—"is

cruelty of the purest form. No matter what has been done to her body, her mind is intact. She's a little girl who doesn't understand what's happening to her."

Quindor sighed. "What you were speaking to wasn't human, Lydia."

"But she has Emmy's memories," Lydia protested, wishing she could calm her galloping heart. "How could—"

"The Corrupter know such things?" Quindor interrupted. "Because he is a *god*."

"But she's nothing like those monsters that attacked the night of Malahi's ball. Those were violent and mindless and terrifying. Emmy . . ." She broke off at the expression on the Grand Master's face.

"Is dead." He caught her elbow, leading her around the hallway. "And what we are seeing is nothing more than a shift in the Corrupter's strategy to win this war. Before, those infected with blight served to terrify and kill, but now they serve a more insidious purpose: to destroy faith in the Six from the inside by undermining the Marked. By making the living followers of the Six believe the Marked have failed them."

The sound of Killian's cuff link falling to the floor echoed through her head, and Lydia's skin chilled.

"Yes, the cuff link." Quindor rose the stairs, his boots making soft pats against the stone. "She said much the same to me when first we brought her here. Truth twisted to a poison in the ears of all who'd listen. How many did she tell it to before we caught her? How many now see Lord Calorian as having failed in his duty to protect the kingdom and its people? How many have lost faith in Tremon as a result?"

A terrifying question, but all Lydia could think of was how much it would hurt Killian to hear it. How he'd blame himself as much and more than anyone else who heard it.

"The blight itself has ceased its spread, but we have no notion of how many of the infected were able to flee during the evacuation. Even now, dozens, perhaps more, of them could be spreading their poisonous words throughout the kingdom—throughout all of Reath!—with no one the wiser. They must be stopped, and Hegeria's Marked are the only ones capable of doing so."

There was logic in his words, but each time Lydia blinked, she remembered Emmy in the sewer tunnels the first night she and Killian had started healing the orphans. How the girl had rallied from her illness beneath Lydia's hands. How the first thing she'd done when

she'd recovered was fling her arms around Killian's neck, her faith in him absolute. It was hard to believe that girl was gone, but Lydia's mark didn't lie.

"If the blighters are so dangerous, why are you keeping Emmy alive? Why not just"—she remembered his words from before—"put her down?"

"Because it will allow us to see if the blight continues to evolve," the Grand Master replied as they reached the top of the stairs, the main level full of soldiers, as well as dozens of young healers in white robes and cloaks. "And because she reminds me both of the evil we face and of the goodness we have lost. Something you should keep in mind, because tomorrow morning, it's time you joined the hunt."

7

KILLIAN

“You look like shit.”

Killian didn't answer, only poked at the fire with a stick as High Lady Dareena Falorn sat on the ground next to him. Since the battle had ended, they'd both been charged with chasing down what remained of the Derin army, but he'd had little chance to talk to the woman who'd been responsible for most of his training. Who, more than any other, had stood as his mentor. And who had saved his ass, arriving at Alder's Ford with her army right as his lines were being overrun by Rufina's forces.

“Sonia tells me you aren't sleeping.”

“Didn't realize you two had met.” His voice was raspy, and he coughed to clear it, melted snowflakes dripping down the sides of his face.

“I hired all of Malahi's former guards, since you seem content to abandon them,” Dareena answered. “But Sonia has chosen to remain as your lieutenant.”

“If she wants to keep the job, she needs to mind her own business.”

“She's worried about you, so perhaps don't be an ass.” Dareena held her hands over the fire. “She thought I might be able to talk you into seeing sense. I told her that would be hard given that you're devoid of the quality, but she's a persistent one. Am I to assume this is about the girl?”

“Which one?” He gave a violent poke at the fire, sending sparks flying and thinking of Bercola. “I seem to be in the habit of getting the girls I'm supposed to protect killed.”

“Lydia,” Dareena said, “isn't dead.”

“It's a matter of time.” Killian flung the stick aside, wishing he had something to drink, but supplies in the Royal Army camp were lacking. “There are fewer than a hundred healers left in all of Mudamora, and you know as well as I do that Serrick has no compunction against using them hard.”

“Then why didn't you stop them from taking her?”

The smoke shifted to blow into his eyes, and he closed them against the sting. As he did, a vision of Lydia on horseback filled

them. Of her mouth forming the words *I choose this*, then of her turning her back and riding away. “She asked me not to.”

“Then she has chosen her fate.”

“She didn’t have a choice,” he snapped. “She knew what it would mean for me to fight her free, and she sacrificed herself to keep me from doing it. To protect me.”

“You always did have a way with the ladies.”

Anger flushed through him, and he rounded on her. “You think this is something to jest about, Dareena? Something to make light of? I—” He broke off, but he couldn’t silence the words within his own head. *I love her.*

The High Lady of House Falorn regarded him with steady green eyes, strands of midnight hair framing her pale face. She wore her armor, snow piling in little peaks on her silvered shoulders, sword resting across her lap. Marked by Tremon as surely as he was himself. The one person who should understand.

“Do you truly believe that the only reason Lydia went with Quindor was to protect you?” she asked. “Hegeria chose to mark her, Killian. And the gods’ choices are not at random. Has it occurred to you that this might be the fate she wants?”

He looked away, unable to stop images of Lydia healing orphan children in the sewers beneath Mudaire from crossing through his mind. Her unwillingness to let any of them suffer while she had the strength to save them. Hegeria had chosen well when she’d chosen Lydia, but it was the men in power around her whom Killian feared.

“She was marked to serve the followers of the Six,” Dareena said softly. “As were you. And I know it grieves you that her path is not at your side, but that doesn’t mean you stop walking. Serrick has put you in a position where you can truly make a difference to Mudamora. Don’t squander it.”

Before he could answer, a group of armed soldiers approached the fire, their ranks parting to reveal King Serrick himself. It was the first time Killian had seen the man since he’d offered Killian the opportunity to follow in his father’s footsteps and command the Royal Army. It had been his dream since he was a child, but he wished it were under the rule of a different king.

Or queen.

Dareena rose, and Killian joined her, bowing low.

“You’ve both served Mudamora well,” Serrick said. “The Derin army is little more than corpses on the ground, and those who remain alive flee back across the wall. The war is won.”

It doesn't feel won.

Clearing his throat, Killian said, "I'd like to take five hundred men and press into Derin territory, Your Grace. For Rufina to have brought so many men across the Liratoras suggests they have a xen-thier stem at their disposal, and we need to secure it lest she bring more men to make another attempt."

"With thirty thousand dead, I think not even that witch capable of rallying another host so soon," Serrick answered. "And we've more pressing concerns."

How anything could be more pressing, Killian didn't know. "Your Grace—"

"Anukastre has taken advantage of our distraction, and their raiders successfully stole a great deal of gold from one of our mines," Serrick interrupted. "Five hundred men you will have, but it will be to lead south to put an end to the raiders."

Killian stared at him. "You want me to protect your *gold mines*?" Gold mines that sat along the southern border between Mudamora and Anukastre, which meant they were about as far from Mudaire—and Lydia—as one could get.

"*Mudamora's* gold mines," Serrick answered, his face devoid of expression. "And it is gold that the kingdom sorely needs to rebuild. Unlike the remaining rabble of the Derin army, the Anuk are a true threat, which means I must send my strongest to meet them with force."

"But—"

"The gods chose me to rule this kingdom, Lord Calorian. And to lead its marked. Select your forces and do it quickly, because at dawn, you ride for the Rowenes stronghold of Rotahn."

8



MARCUS

Sitting on a stool back in his tent, Marcus stared blindly at the three remaining chests of coins he had in his possession. Two silver. One gold.

The silver would all go to paying the men their next round of wages, the pittance they received for endlessly risking their lives in the name of the Empire. It was in his power to withhold the coin, if needed for other purposes, but he'd never done so and wouldn't now.

"Sir?"

He turned his head to see one of his men step inside, paper grasped in his hand. "Yes?"

"Racker sent a count," the young man answered, approaching to hand Marcus the papers. "And a letter arrived for you, origins unknown."

Nodding, Marcus waited until the soldier had retreated out of the tent, then unfolded the first scrap of paper, recognizing the Thirty-Seventh's head surgeon's precise scrawl.

Two hundred thirty-three.

His chest hollowed, but he shoved away the grief in favor of retrieving a piece of paper in his own hand that sat waiting on the table. He added the number to it, then finalized the mathematics.

It was a start. In truth, a start greater than he'd hoped possible, but only if this gambit worked.

Marcus took several gulps of water from the cup sitting next to him, about to rise, when his gaze fell on the other letter that had arrived. Specifically, on the purple seal stamped in the shape of a flower.

Picking it up, he cracked the wax and unfolded the thick paper, a separate scrap falling loose onto the table as he did. The letter was written in Trader's Tongue, or Mudamorian, as he'd come to know it—the language spread across all of Reath by virtue of the Maarin's use of it. He spoke it well enough, but reading it was another matter, and he sorely wished Teriana was here. For more reasons than just his need for a translator.

Greetings to Marcus, Commander of the Armies of the Celendor Empire,

We have recently learned of your arrival on the shores of Arinoquia and of your desire to facilitate trade between the nations of the West and your homeland. It is our sincerest wish to come to a peaceable and mutually profitable arrangement between our nations. We are desirous of meeting you face-to-face to discuss terms—a meeting we look to with great anticipation.

Her Royal Majesty, Queen Erdene of Katamarca

He'd hoped for this. Katamarca was not a military power, but they were the breadbasket of the Southern Continent. An alliance with them would be advantageous on many levels. Then his eyes went to the letter's postscript.

Please find enclosed a token of our goodwill.

Frowning, he picked up the scrap of paper that had been included with the letter, turning it over. It was written in an unfamiliar language, which he surmised was Katamarcan. But he didn't need to understand what was written to recognize the handwriting. Or the name signed at the bottom.

Teriana, of the Quincense

His stomach hollowed, his fingers feeling the texture of the paper, which was identical to that the legions used. And written in pencil, rather than ink. Supplies taken from his own command tent, which meant it was pointless to hope it predated her capture by Cassius.

What did it say?

Nothing good. For what better way to earn the goodwill of a foreign power than to reveal a traitor in its midst.

What did you expect? a bitter voice whispered inside his head. *She's not here of her own volition. You know she wants you to fail, to be forced into a retreat to Celendor. You know you two are enemies.*

Yet knowing all these things did nothing to ease the pain that replaced the hollowness in his stomach. Even if she'd sent this note when they'd first arrived in Arinoquia, before they'd become involved, she'd still never confessed to having done so. Had been content with allowing the move she'd put in motion to play out.

You can't trust her.

"Do you have time to talk?"

Felix's voice filled his ears, and Marcus lifted his head to find his second-in-command standing at the entrance to his tent.

"About what?" The words came out sharper than he intended, and Felix grimaced before moving farther inside.

"You need to get some sleep."

"Noted. Is there something else you need?"

Silence stretched between them, the tension strange and unfamiliar. While he and Felix had fought many times over many things over the years, it had never been like this. Then again, no matter how hard they'd butted heads, he'd never had cause to question his best friend's loyalty.

"Yeah, I . . ." Felix's brow furrowed. "Are things all right with us?" Then he gave a violent shake of his head. "Don't answer that. I know you're angry at me for advising you to proceed with the battle rather than to negotiate with enemy demands."

"You advised me to allow them to cut Teriana up and send me the pieces rather than to pursue a different strategy."

"Yeah." Felix rocked on his heels. The tips of his ears, just visible through hair that needed to be cut, were bright red. "I'm not going to lie and say that I think what you did was right. That false retreat nearly resulted in us being crushed between two armies, and while we still would've won, a lot of our brothers would've died. It was only luck that you got back in time, and you know what Wex says about luck."

Wex was commandant of Campus Lescendor and Marcus's mentor. He was also famous for saying that a good commander should never rely on luck, because luck always ran out when you needed it most.

"You chose Teriana over your own brothers, and *everyone* knows it, Marcus. They know you gambled with their lives to save a girl."

It was the truth, though he hadn't realized how high the stakes were when he'd thrown the dice. Yet even if he had, Marcus knew his decision would've been the same. "Your point?"

"The men are letting it slide because you pulled a victory out of your ass, the way you always do. But you can't put her ahead of them again. You just . . . can't."

Marcus didn't answer, only stared Felix down, refusing to bend. *Are you a traitor?*

"I don't like her," Felix continued, his gaze fixing on the table

between them. "I think she's a smart-ass who believes she can say and do whatever she wants because you have her back."

True, except that Teriana would say and do whatever she wanted even if she stood alone.

"But that doesn't mean I want anything bad to happen to her. I know she didn't ask to be put in this position and is just doing what she needs to do to survive."

Felix was trying to cover his tracks. What other purpose could he have for saying all of this? For trying to make it seem he wouldn't have been delighted if Teriana had died at Ashok's hands? And then trying to cast the blame on Marcus for the mercenary army nearly catching them unaware, despite his actions having put them in that position in the first place. Anger coiled in Marcus's stomach, but he kept it in check, because he could not act without *proof*.

Felix sighed heavily. "It feels like you've forgotten that she's fighting for the other side. I hope you keep in mind that having you wrapped around her little finger is to her advantage, not ours."

Marcus's hand tightened, and Teriana's note crumbled where he gripped it. "Noted. Anything else?"

"No." Felix's jaw worked back and forth. "Everything you asked for has been done or is being done. We're watching the clans to make sure they aren't thinking of moving against us or one another, but thus far, it appears as though they're content to wait for their payout."

"Good. You may go."

"Sir." Felix saluted sharply, then turned to leave. But then he hesitated. "I can't watch your back if you keep pushing me away."

"Then it's a good thing I can watch my own."

Felix flinched, but said nothing else, only strode out of the tent, leaving Marcus alone.

You can't trust anyone.

The thought settled heavily on his mind, weighing him down more than exhaustion. Amarin chose that moment to enter the tent, pattering about and putting things back in their places. Busywork, and having lived with him for eight years, Marcus knew his servant was about to start mothering him.

Sure enough, Amarin said, "Your armor needs repairs. I'll have it done now so you'll have it back when you need it."

Teriana's note still gripped in his fist, Marcus stood and allowed the older man to remove his armor, which was sporting several dents.

“There’s wash water in the back.” Amarin gathered up all the pieces, frowning at one of the dents. “When should I wake you?”

“Three hours,” Marcus answered, his own voice distant in his ears. He went into the rear tent, his eyes flicking to Teriana’s bedroll. Her stack of belongings.

Strained muscles moving stiffly, he pulled off his clothes, tossing them in a corner, and glanced down at his body. He was covered in livid purple bruises and his ribs throbbed, but it was his throat, which had been nearly crushed, that hurt worst of all. It ached when he spoke. When he swallowed. When he breathed.

Ignoring the wash water, he lay down on the side that hurt less, staring at the knuckles on his bruised hand, which had been split in the fight and were now crusted with scabs.

And his head. His head felt like it was being crushed between the hands of a giant, every beat of his heart thunder in his ears.

Just go to sleep.

Except everything hurt and his mind kept flipping from problem to problem, refusing to settle. Refusing to give him any peace.

Reaching across to Teriana’s belongings, he retrieved a small silk sachet sitting on top. A ship had arrived today from the island where the *Quincense* was anchored, and they’d had a parcel of clothing that her aunt Yedda had sent. Pressing the sachet to his nose, he inhaled cedar and orange blossoms and sea. Scents he associated with Teriana.

But the reminder of her only made him feel worse.

Could he trust her? Or was Felix right that she was only manipulating his emotions to achieve her own ends? Was any of what he believed was between them *real*?

Tossing the sachet back on the pile of her clothes, he squeezed his eyes shut, running through the myriad of exercises he’d been taught to fall asleep, even in the worst of conditions.

But his mind refused to be silenced.

Rolling, he flinched as pain lanced up his side, but then his gaze latched on his pile of weapons, his belt twisted through the mess of metal. He reached out an arm and caught hold of it, unbuckling his belt pouch, fingers moving through the contents until they found a small glass vial at the bottom.

He stared at the foggy contents that he’d had no use for in a long time. Narcotics for pain, which he’d gotten in the habit of keeping on him when the Thirty-Seventh was in Bardeen. When they’d been finishing their training under the guidance of the Twenty-Ninth Legion and its legatus, Hostus.

Old hatred and fear twisted through his guts at the memory of the older legatus. “You’re not sixteen anymore,” he muttered at himself. “And the Twenty-Ninth is on the far side of the world.” Shoving the thoughts away, he unscrewed the top of the vial. Racker kept tight control over his narcotics, particularly this one, but there were certain advantages to being in command, and if Marcus wanted more, he could get it.

Rolling onto his back, Marcus measured two drops onto his tongue, hesitated, then added a third. He’d barely managed to return the vial to his belt pouch when his vision split into two. And then into three.

Curling in on himself, Marcus let out a slow breath, his body relaxing as the pain of his injuries faded, as a haze flowed over his thoughts, slowly silencing the prattle, dulling the emotions. But as he slipped from consciousness, one thought remained, loud and desperate.

Please let it be real.

9

TERIANA

They set up for the division of the treasure in a field just beyond the ridge overlooking Aracam. The same field where Marcus had defeated Urcon's mercenary army as it had tried to attack him from the rear.

Slaughtered was probably a better word.

Though days had passed, piles of dead still smoldered, the rain making it difficult to burn the thousands of bodies, and the stench of rotting meat hung heavily in the air. The mud beneath Teriana's boots was stained a dark red from all the blood that was spilled, and every which way she looked, there were *pieces* that had been missed. Decaying fingers and bits of flesh mixed in with arrowheads and broken weapons, all of it sinking into the damp earth.

It was a place that should be razed and then avoided until the land erased the evidence of the horror, but instead, Marcus had ordered his men to set up a tent in the middle of the field, under which they'd placed a long table. Seven chairs on one side, a singular chair on the other. The treasure she'd helped value sat to the side of the table, stacks of gold and silver bricks, open chests full of glittering jewels, and pieces of artwork wrapped in waxed cloth to protect them from endless rain.

She, Marcus, and Servius stood under the cover of the tent, and behind them were another fifty of the Thirty-Seventh. The legionnaires stood in neat rows, spears upright and shields held just so. Beneath their helmets, their faces were devoid of expression, and though Teriana knew most of their names, they no longer seemed the young men she'd sat around a fire with, but rather fifty killing machines.

"Thank you," Marcus said to both her and Servius, "for accomplishing this task so swiftly."

This was the first time she'd seen him since he'd left her in the treasure vaults with Servius, and she noted the shadows under his eyes were worse than before, his golden skin blanched and waxy. *Has he slept at all?*

"What's the plan?" Servius asked, and there was a slight edge to

his voice. As though, improbable as it was, he knew even less about what was going on than she did.

“We agree to the division of the wealth,” Marcus answered. “And then, hopefully, everyone takes their cut and returns to their lands.”

And then what? she wanted to ask, but before she could, Servius jerked his chin outwards. “Here they come.”

From across the field, Teriana saw flickers of motion as the Arinoquian imperators stepped from the trees, each followed by fifty of their own warriors. Ereni was the first to reach the table, the older woman’s green eyes fixed on Marcus rather than the gleaming treasure.

The same could not be said of the others, though Teriana could hardly blame them. This was *their* wealth. Wealth that had been stolen from them during the long years of Urcon’s tyranny and which they’d fought to get back. It would change the lives of everyone within the clans, allowing them both the means and the opportunity to trade with other nations. Would allow them to thrive, if they were wise in how they used it.

Once all the imperators had reached the table, Marcus inclined his head. “Shall we sit?”

Pulling out his chair, Marcus settled into it, the metal of his armor clinking as he rested his forearms on the table, seemingly entirely at ease. The imperators followed suit, the representatives who’d assisted with the counting moving to stand behind their leaders. Teriana glanced up at Servius, and when the big legionnaire nodded, she took a few steps forward to stand at Marcus’s elbow.

“You’ve all been provided an account of Urcon’s treasury?” When the Arinoquians nodded, he plucked up a piece of paper from the table. “As confirmation, then. One hundred sixty bricks of gold. Two hundred forty-three bricks of silver . . .” He continued, voice holding all the emotion of one reading a market list. “Your representatives swear to the accuracy of these figures?”

“I swear it,” Ereni’s representative said, then stepped back. The chorus ran the length of the table, and then all their eyes flicked to her.

“Teriana?” Marcus asked, not looking up. “Is it accurate?”

Her palms were sweating and her throat felt bone dry, though there was no reason for it. The treasure was all accounted for. She’d watched it be loaded, had counted it as it had been unloaded, and yet unease twisted her guts like bad fish stew. “I swear it.”

“Good.” Marcus set aside the paper and picked up another. “As is your custom, the profits of this venture will be divided based on the

number of fighting men and women whom you contributed to the collective force. Is this correct?”

“You know it is.” Ereni pushed her greying blond braid back over her shoulder. “I told you so myself, so let’s get on with it.” Rising, she rounded her chair and leaned on the back of it, eyes moving over her fellow imperators. “As agreed, we break it into fifteenths.” She rattled off the numbers, then said, “It is settled, then?”

Marcus coughed. “With respect, Ereni. I’m afraid I do not concur with your calculations.”

All the imperators turned to glare at him, and Teriana’s stomach dropped.

Picking up another piece of paper, Marcus eyed it. “You all provided me your numbers prior to the battle, and by my calculation, I am entitled to nine-fifteenths, or sixty percent of the profits of the taking of Aracam. Ereni, you are entitled to—”

Ereni jerked out her sword.

Before Teriana could even reach for her own weapon, the imperatrix had the blade pressed against Marcus’s throat, her wiry arm steady. “Stay where you are, girl. And you”—she pressed the blade harder, droplets of blood dribbling down Marcus’s throat—“tell your men to stay back.”

Behind her, Teriana could hear the legionnaires moving, but she didn’t dare look to see what they were doing.

“Servius.” Marcus’s voice was steady. “Hold.”

The men behind stilled to silence. Close as they were, there wouldn’t be anything they could do if Ereni decided she wanted Marcus dead.

Teriana lifted her hands, taking a shuffling step closer until the imperatrix’s glare stopped her in her tracks. “Ereni, please don’t do this. I know you’re angry, and I can understand why, but killing him isn’t the answer. Put away the sword and let’s negotiate.”

“Why am I not surprised that you’d try to negotiate for this thieving boy’s life?”

“Thieving?”

Marcus’s voice was brittle with anger, the first emotion Teriana had seen from him throughout this cursed meeting. He jerked to his feet, and only Ereni pulling back her sword kept him from cutting his own jugular. He rested his hands on the table, leaning across it. And though the rain hammered on the canvas above them, the *splat splat splat* of his blood dripping on the papers was all Teriana could hear.

“Allow me to remind you that you’d have *none* of this if not for my men. That if we had not arrived on your shores and offered you an alliance, all of this”—he gestured at the treasure—“would remain collecting dust in Urcon’s palace.”

“We didn’t need you to defeat Urcon,” Ereni snapped, but Teriana didn’t miss how her gaze went to the tabletop every time another drop of blood splattered against the papers.

“And yet you were content to *use* us for the sake of achieving it sooner.” Marcus tilted his head. “Out of desperation? Out of fear? Out of greed?” He laughed, the tone of it different than Teriana had ever heard from him, and it made her skin crawl. “Or maybe it was because it was *easier* to let me and mine take all the risks while you and yours planned to take all the reward.”

One of the other imperators leapt to his feet. “You’ve got balls, boy, I’ll—”

“Sit. Down.”

Though he was a hardened warrior, the imperator’s sun-darkened skin paled as he met Marcus’s gaze.

Splat.

The man sat, though Ereni remained on her feet, naked blade still in her hand.

“Since we arrived on your shores,” Marcus continued, “my men have fought to defend your lands and your people from Urcon and his raiders. Bled to achieve the peace you wanted. Though in hindsight, perhaps your goals were less lofty than I hoped.” His eyes flicked meaningfully to the treasure before returning to Ereni’s face.

Splat.

“Allow me to remind you that you wanted peace as well,” she said. “That you wanted to make our shores safe for your *Empire’s* trade. You have as much to gain from this as we do.”

“I do want peace in Arinoquia.” Marcus slowly panned the imperators. “And yet I don’t feel that I have it.”

Teriana’s pulse roared in her ears, her chest tightening as the tension in the group ratcheted up tenfold, the air so thick as to be nearly unbreathable. She understood now why Marcus had chosen this ground for the meeting, surrounded by stinking, smoldering piles of those his legions had slaughtered. Why they stood on ground soaked with blood.

Several of the imperators glanced toward the distant tree line, and Teriana knew what they were looking for, because she was searching

for the same. Signs of motion. Signs this was a trap to lure the leaders of the clans to one place and then kill them all.

There'd been no sign of the Thirty-Seventh mobilizing in their camp outside Aracam, but she knew all too well how quickly that could change. That thousands of men could be standing out of sight on the plain beneath the ridge, waiting for the command to attack.

And the imperators knew it, too.

"According to *your* customs, as allies who fought alongside one another as equals, we are entitled to a portion of the defeated enemy's wealth. According to *your* laws, the amount we are entitled to is decided by numbers. For you to stand here and say otherwise tells me that not only do you *not* consider us your allies, but that you consider the lives of the two hundred thirty-three brothers I lost in this fight *worthless*."

Splat.

No one spoke. No one even seemed to breathe. The imperator who'd objected coughed, then said, "Perhaps we've been hasty. Ereni, sit. Let us negotiate so that we might all remain friends."

Neither Marcus nor Ereni moved, blood pooling on the table between them.

Sit down, Teriana wanted to scream at Marcus. *Don't be like this!*

The battle of wills seemed a stalemate, then abruptly, Ereni sheathed her sword and sat. Marcus waited a heartbeat longer, then settled into his chair, revealing that his throat was coated with blood. Part of her was afraid for how badly he was hurt, but the other part wanted to slap him, because it hadn't needed to go this way.

"What amount would you be willing to accept as compensation?" Ereni asked, the words clipped.

"You would treat us as mercenaries?" Marcus huffed out a breath of disgust. "We are legions of the Celendor Empire. We do *not* fight for hire. You, Ereni, should be glad for that, else you'd be very much in my debt."

Teriana closed her eyes, struggling to keep her composure as she realized the depths of his strategy. The legions had paid for *everything* they'd taken in their time here, incurring not a single debt, while at the same time working for Ereni's clan without ever demanding compensation. Not giving the Arinoquians any cause to claim them anything but the perfect ally.

Had he known this moment would come?

Had he planned for this?

And what would he do, given that the Arinoquians were refusing

to name him ally in this and he was refusing to be treated as a mercenary?

It was a stalemate that would end in violence if one of them didn't concede, and Teriana's gut told her that Marcus had no intention of backing down. And from the look on Ereni's face, neither did she.

Splat.