

VILEST THINGS

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Flesh & False Gods
Book Two

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For the d.a.c.u.—

Christina Li, Racquel Marie, Tashie Bhuiyan, Zoe Hana Mikuta.

You know why.

*Look you sad, friends?
The gods rebuke me, but it is tidings
To wash the eyes of kings.*
—Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*





BORDERLANDS

TALIN

RINCUN

YOULIA

ACTIA

XIMILI

MEANNIN

LAHO

EDISO

LANKIL

JANTON

KELITU

DAOL

LEKSA

PASHE

CIREA

GAUYU

YINGU

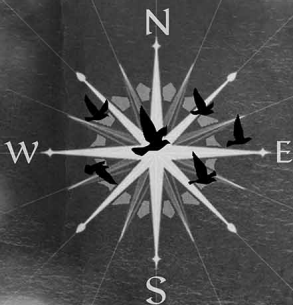
DACIA

EIGI

WALL

SAN

ER



CHAPTER 1

BEFORE

Power has a certain taste to it. A hot, golden tang slinking down the throat and trailing smoke in its wake, like seared meat or aged liquor. Something to settle the body, soothe the heart. It is the answer to every type of hunger, an addictive luxury that requires little else in accompaniment, some salve solely made to take up every bit of space it can find.

Power also has a certain taste coming back up. And Anton Makusa can't say he finds it very pleasant at all.

He takes a shaky breath, fighting to keep his stomach under control. The guards inside the throne room peer through the gold-thread curtains, calling in concern, but Anton wipes his mouth and waves them off. His vision flickers and doubles. His skin screams with raw misery, his qi at once too big for his body and too ill-fitting in its mold. The last minute of his existence tries to escape from understanding. He's struggling beyond belief to hold on to consciousness, to cling to life. Memories that are both his own and not flash before his eyes. He looks at his hands, and the image lurches. He's washing blood off. Writing with old ink.

Then, in a snap, the pain eases. Though the nausea remains, his body stands intact. His surroundings register again. One guard steps onto the balcony to ask

if he would like assistance to come inside now, and Anton throws his gaze out over the ledge in disbelief.

He doesn't entirely know how he's done it, but he has. The guard prompts him again, her eyes flickering to the sludge on the balcony floor where Anton emptied his stomach, and Anton raises a hand to stop her, barely holding down another shudder. Maybe he's only squeamish over the gruesome image below. Princess Calla Tuoleimi—player Fifty-Seven—has just been declared the victor of the king's annual games, having slaughtered her final opponent. The loud-speaker continues bellowing the results: *A decisive battle . . . the Juedou draws to a close . . . the final challenger is dead . . .* and even if Anton shuts his eyes, he can't keep the images out. His last moments in the arena are trying to coalesce with August's most recent memories: Calla, luring him close; the council, meeting late at night in the war room; Calla, her forehead resting upon his shoulder; a dove, pressed into the wax seal of an envelope before the paper is torn open; Calla, Calla, *Calla*—

"I am perfectly fine," Anton says. The voice is foreign. The voice is entirely familiar. His eyes open, and the world stabilizes. His previous body is facedown on the arena ground. Bleeding, still, even though player Eighty-Six is dead. "Pardon me. This is rather repugnant."

Asking for any pardon is enough to make the guard uncomfortable, and she steps back into the throne room obediently. Anton doesn't leave the balcony—not yet. He overlooks the arena, takes in the thousands upon thousands pressed tight against the rope barriers. When his hands curl around the railing, his knuckles are as smooth as marble, silver rings carving dents into his long fingers.

An armory shield hangs from the stone walls of the balcony. His mere conscious existence here proves that he's succeeded in his escape, and without notice among endless witnesses. Though he knows what he has done, he's still stupefied when he leans in, when the metal of the shield reflects back a shock of

blond hair, combed and ordered under a circlet. This is August Shenzhi's face. August Shenzhi's body. The only difference is his black eyes, catching light with the hint of purple instead of blue. Anton's eyes.

Delirium sets in. A bubble of laughter pushes out, and Anton hardly realizes he's the one laughing until his reflection moves too—*it's you making that sound. No one else stands on the throne room balcony. It's you wearing these silk clothes, wearing the prince himself.*

There's an incredible distance between where he stood in the arena and where August was watching. Yet he jumped, without having August in his sights first, without giving off that obvious flare of light. No evidence remains to show what he has done except for the pool of blood in the middle of the arena, noxious with the qi he drew from his previous body to fuel his move as he was dying. Amateur experimentation.

Anton clutches his hands behind his back. August's sleeves whisper with the movement, the light blue unstained and perfectly unmarred. No one below cares to watch him too closely in this moment, especially not while Calla is being led out by the guards, directed forward into the Palace of Union. He eyes her coldly, waits for a show of regret or some sign that *killing him* has affected her, but she disappears from view without looking back, her gait steady.

He dared to believe this would have ended differently, but that was his mistake. He may get caught in the next few minutes; he may get away with this forever. Neither one is more likely than the other when such an invasive phenomenon has been performed before, and as soon as Calla strikes, that throne will be his. This should have been impossible. And yet.

And yet.

"You're weak," Anton says out loud. He lifts his arm, waving goodbye to the arena audience, and half of them wave back instantly, summoned to attention by the gesture. He hadn't thought anyone would notice, but of course they do. A jolt runs down his spine, so strong that he has half a mind to check for a wound.

He's comprehending, slowly, the full implication of what he's achieved. Royal and noble bloodlines have been preserved over the centuries with the belief that their lineage holds favor with the old gods. August Shenzhi was born August Avia. As much as he's tried to escape it, he can't change that.

"Please, please, hold your applause," Anton whispers under his breath, turning on his heel. The words are reminiscent of a different life he lived long ago. This time around, there really is applause to accompany his exit: innumerable eyes upon his gestures and the knowledge that anything he proclaims upon the balcony will be heralded as law. He straightens his shoulders, smooths down his robes. The guards startle when he pushes back into the throne room, the curtains billowing to either side of the door. Though they hasten forward, Anton says nothing—not yet. He had little reason to enter the throne room back when this was the Palace of Earth and he resided in the other wing. The walls shimmer velvet red. Gold pillars prop up the high ceiling, their details carved with renderings of Talin's old gods. While he walks, slowly taking in his unfamiliar surroundings, his shoes sink into the deep green carpet threads, plush and soft. A smarter man would ask for the vault to be opened, gather whatever he can, and run before the opportunity slips by.

"The war room," he declares instead. "Let's go."

The royal guards must find the request strange. One steps forward—orange eyes, not a Weisanna—and says, "Highness, you're expected at the banquet. It will begin soon."

"I know." Something smells different about the palace, he decides. It's been years since he was last inside, but his memory of the rest of its layout hasn't faltered. Exile is lonely. Unforgiving. There was little to do during his quieter nights, and he turned to imagining these rooms in his mind, pretending he had clusters of priceless objects at his disposal rather than another sparse meal of a single fried egg when he woke in the morning.

"Your Highness?"

Anton is already on the move despite the guard, hurrying the few steps down and taking care not to trip when the flooring turns uneven. He passes the nobles at the door and pushes through the flurry of activity, paying no heed to the surprised greetings, the double takes. It's late. There must have been lurkers waiting to walk with him to the banquet, wishing to gain favor. Now they blink after him striding in the opposite direction, and the royal guards are quick to scatter the waiting palace nobles promising, *His Highness will be with you shortly if you could please make your way . . .*

Anton doesn't stop.

Outside the entrance to the war room, two guards step aside quickly upon sighting him. He asks them to stay there, alongside the royal guards who have followed him from the throne room, and he closes the door after himself before any of them can respond. There's cheering, somewhere in the distance. The crowds will be dispersing after the arena battle, drifting closer to the palace, hoping to catch sight of the banquet or receive scraps afterward.

Anton bites down hard on his teeth, marching straight for the filing cabinets pressed to the far wall. Talin's borders have been at peace for the past century, protecting the kingdom within from conflict, but the war room is well used, treated as the center of palace affairs. His fingers skate along the ornate table to the left, brushing across the rough surface and jostling the teacups that haven't yet been cleared. He opens the first filing drawer he sees, yanking all the way until its latch makes a metallic clang to signal it cannot be pulled any farther. A flurry of dust bursts upward when he fingers through the tabs, reading each one quickly. *Theft, Assault, Property Violation, Weapons Use, Protective Orders . . .*

He slams the first drawer closed. Only petty charges within San-Er. Not what he's looking for. He makes a wider glance around the room, considering where the information he needs would be stored. Instead of screens and machines, the war room is populated with shelves of thick books. The walls are covered in maps with curling edges, browning from age. Someone has drawn

the window's heavy curtains partway closed, but there's enough of a gap left to allow in the electric light from outside and illuminate his way.

Anton tries the next cabinet. Here, the tabs are separating different provinces of Talin, ordered by proximity to the capital. *Eigi, Dacia, Cirea, Yingu, Pashe, Daol* . . .

He closes this one too. Tugs open the next. Employee positions in the palace. Next. Property purchases under the council.

"Where *is* it?" Anton mutters. He still tastes acid on his tongue.

When he crouches down to open a drawer situated between two overgrown potted plants and no taller than his knee, he finally finds tabs ordered by aristocratic last names. *Makusa* waits near the back, a file thicker than all the rest.

He stares. A lock of hair falls into his eyes—gold and fine, like sunshine twisted into spun silk. He pushes it out of the way, barely resisting the urge to tear the piece right out of his scalp.

"Your Highness?" A guard is knocking on the door. "Would you like any assistance?"

"No," Anton replies shortly. It's not as though August would have answered any more kindly, been any more considerate. The evidence of that is before him, within the file he takes into his hand.

"I'd help if I could," August had said, when this place was still the Palace of Earth, when Anton practically lived in the training halls, vowing revenge on the attackers who killed his parents. "If there was any resource in the palace I could use, I would. But the palace knows so little. These people are entirely outside of our control."

Anton flips through the pages in the file. He scans past the family tree, past the different reports that note when each of his relatives was born and when they died, past the graphs showing the other noble families who were connected to the Makusas by blood.

On the last sheet of the family logs, he finally finds what he's been looking for.

Anton Makusa—storage room 345, north wing.

After Otta fell sick and only Anton remained to suffer the consequences of their crime, the palace took his birth body as punishment. True exile, flung into the cities without any ties to his former life. He has always known that they stashed his body somewhere in the Palace of Union; he just never knew where. The location was purposefully kept secret to prevent Anton from trying to get it back, and the councilmember who delivered the fateful verdict of his penance promised that the palace would take care of his body, that they might return it one day if he served his exile without trouble. He's almost surprised that they've held to their word. The palace puts up a front of valuing nobility—by their own law, the bodies of aristocratic bloodlines should never be destroyed—yet he suspected they would discard his after a few years, merely because they could. Every other Makusa was gone. Anton was the last one left until the palace could sweep this entire file under the carpet, blow away the imprint of dust, and pretend none of them ever existed. How tidy, how neat.

“Can’t you ask Kasa to send people in?” Anton asked. “Come on, August, he’s the *king*. He has complete reign over Kelitu. He can order palace guards to investigate. Someone in that province must know who did this.”

August was always the reasonable one, Anton the one whose voice got too loud with theatrics. Adults in the palace liked to listen to August.

“He’s tried,” August said levelly. In all the years they remained friends, Anton never could distinguish August’s tells between lie and truth. What other choice was there than to believe him each time? “Trust me. They’ve found nothing.”

Anton rises, brings the file to the desk in the middle of the war room, and lays it down so he can spread out the various sections. The Makusas come from a long history, but not any longer than the rest of the nobility, not enough to justify this much information kept under guard. He pushes away the atlas on his left and the paperweight shaped as an anvil on his right. Section after section, the

desk becomes covered with loose paper, scattered with every document Anton reads as he grows more and more confused by the contents.

Copies of his parents' administrative letters in Kelitu. Snapshots of rural villages and tax reports with boxes circled in red. When Anton peels apart two inventory logs that have become stuck together over time, a small photograph falls out, and he sees himself as an infant in his birth body, staring straight at the camera so that they could put his face into the kingdom registry alongside his identity number.

He can't fathom why any of this would be collected. Not until he reaches the end and his eyes land on a missive. Digitally typed, then stamped with King Kasa's personal sign-off.

I will keep this short. While your loyalty should belong with your councilmember, there has come undeniable evidence that Fen Makusa is a revolutionary insurgent. Where ambitions of usurping the throne usually call for arrest and a quick execution, his harm extends much further: he plots for the utter collapse of the kingdom. There is no scenario where this can be allowed to spread. For the sake of your province, and the sake of your people, see to it that the Makusas are eradicated in a manner that will not radicalize their followers. The palace cannot be associated with this punishment.

Though Anton continues reading onward, the rest of the missive stops registering past that line. He returns to the start, then again, and again. Finally, when it seems nothing more will change his understanding, his hands lash out of their own volition, flinging the file off the table and sending documents skittering across the floor.

He inhales shortly. Exhales, but can barely get the breath out of his lungs.

He's certain, in that first moment of panic, that August is trying to kick him out. When he's still heaving a few minutes later, he holds his breath in a snap decision, and his body responds accordingly. He's doing this to himself. The only harm to him right now comes from the fact that he can't keep himself under control. His panic shifts into red-hot rage. It finds its targets in front of him, within him.

His parents are dead because of King Kasa, not because they were the target of some random rural attack. After all these years wondering why his family had suffered something so awful, why his sisters needed to die as collateral, it turns out that the reason was because *the palace had ordered it*.

Another knock comes on the door. "Highness? What is that noise?"

"Come in," Anton says. "Just one of you."

A guard pokes her head through. Her silver eyes take in the papers littered on the floor, then flicker up. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Who was the last person who put anything away in this room?" Anton gestures around him. "It's a mess."

The Weisanna shifts on her feet. She hesitates, and Anton knows she'll only confirm what he suspects. What he knows, given the guards posted outside the war room.

"Only you and His Majesty are allowed in here outside of council meetings. I garner it must have been the wind if a window was left open for air."

It's a tactful excuse that she has come up with on the spot. What she must be thinking is: *Your Highness, it could only have been you who made the mess*.

Anton glances at the name emblazoned on the front of his family file, which is lying askew by one of the potted plants now. He wants to tear the label off. Slap it elsewhere, as if that might change the fact that this heinous massacre happened to his family instead of someone else's. *A revolutionary insurgent*. That's preposterous. He never heard his parents say anything close to revolutionary. They were palace nobles . . . why would they have wanted to change that?

“No, it wasn’t the wind,” Anton says plainly. “Wasn’t I the last person to go through these cabinets? *I’m* the one who keeps this information for King Kasa when he can’t keep up with what happens in his own kingdom.”

The guard flinches slightly, trying to gauge if this is some sort of test. It doesn’t matter. Anton knows: there’s no file in this place that has gone unread under August’s watch. The crown prince takes it upon himself to stay informed using what he has access to. And there was plenty of time between August acquiring access to these rooms and Anton being exiled from the palace.

“Ah, never mind,” Anton says, saving the increasingly anxious Weisanna from a response. He scoops up the file, then the papers, gathering them haphazardly before tucking them beneath his arm. “Make sure no one else comes in here.”

“Yes, Highness—”

He strides past her, through the door. Farther down the hallway, Anton doesn’t take the turn that’ll lead him toward the banquet hall. He proceeds in the direction of August’s bedroom, his polished shoes beating a war drum underfoot. Perhaps Calla has made her strike at the banquet already. King Kasa will die, and then Calla will be free to luxuriate in the only matter she truly cared about.

“Prince August.” Someone hurries to catch up to him. Another guard. “Your presence is strongly requested at the banquet.”

“No, that’s okay,” Anton replies.

Confusion dampens the air, a beat taken where the guard is perhaps wondering whether he was misheard. Anton is expecting rebuttal—of course there should be rebuttal. This is the Palace of Union. Affairs can’t be derailed simply because he doesn’t wish to tend to them.

But August Shenzhi is the heir to the throne, not some noble who has to capture favor. The guard nods in understanding, and Anton is free to continue onward without argument. He pivots left, then into August’s anteroom.

“You can go.”

The guards stationed outside August’s quarters are exclusively composed of Weisannas. No Galipei, so he must be at the banquet, waiting for his charge’s arrival.

“All of you,” Anton prompts. He waves vigorously toward the door.

It takes a few seconds more, but the Weisannas nod and step out, entering the hall. Only then can Anton toss his file onto the desk. Only then does he immediately follow the movement by slamming his fist against the paper too, a zip of pain spiriting down his arm.

See to it that the Makusas are eradicated.

That was all it had taken. A single command, and life as Anton knew it had been decimated. Did King Kasa invent the excuse because his father upset him over some arbitrary matter in a council meeting? *Revolutionaries*. It is laughable, knowing their lineage. Yet the suspicion worms its way into his mind, wiggles free the faint impressions he has of his childhood. He remembers little of their trips out to the provinces, but they were frequent. There’s a possibility that this was true, but still—

A drum beats throughout the palace, declaring the banquet coming to either a start or an end. Shouting echoes through the halls, either in ecstasy or horror. When Anton glares up, the mirror upon the wall catches his face, reflecting his expression. August dresses so regally, his hair combed neat and his posture straight as a needle. Anton’s sneer turns his appearance off-kilter. He has the desire to pick up the decorative vase on the table and hurl it at the mirror, so he does. The glass shatters. A few jagged pieces fall off, littering the carpet.

“You knew what he took from me,” Anton says to August. August’s mouth moves with each of his words. A mockery, even now. “You let him get away with it.”

August doesn’t have the decency to look remorseful. The broken mirror

cuts away parts of his cheek, carves into his forehead, distorts his mouth, yet Anton can find no scenario where his former friend might have apologized. The golden crown prince, only working to procure the throne he desired.

Fine. *Fine*. If King Kasa wanted to brand the Makusas as revolutionaries, then that is the inheritance Anton will accept. He'll finish what they say his parents started.

And then, Calla Tuoleimi is going to answer for what she did too.

CHAPTER 2

AFTER

At the farthest edge of Talin's border lies a province called Rincun, but that wasn't its original name. Ask the people living there how they used to refer to their home, and they aren't allowed to answer. A decade of the soldiers posted in the villages has instilled a healthy dose of fear, coating the villagers' teeth like a plaque they can taste any time their tongues press up to speak. They have seen the decapitated bodies staked by the yamen to make an example of those who kept using the old name. They would much rather survive than become the next example.

Calla Tuoleimi used to know Rincun's true name. She lost it at some point over the years, along with her own.

"Have you been out to the provinces at all, Councilmember?"

She's trying to ignore the conversation in the carriage. They entered Rincun this morning, picked up General Poinin where he lives, and are continuing onward to the yamen in West Capital. The general didn't have any luck starting a conversation with Calla, so he's moved on to lecturing Rincun's newest councilmember.

"First time," the councilmember answers. Her powder-blue eyes flicker over to Calla, silently requesting help. "My father never brought me when he visited."

Venus Hailira is the firstborn daughter of Buolin Hailira, who recently passed in his sleep. His council seat passed to her, and though the rest of the council questioned whether it was wise to continue with their delegation visit to Rincun while she was so green, their king was more impatient to get his newest palace advisor out of his sight after his coronation. There was no time for Calla to plead for forgiveness, to ask him how in the high heavens he was standing in front of her like this. The moment the coronation finished, Calla was ushered away, pushed out by the Weisannas with one wave of the king's hand. Hours later, while she paced the sitting room outside the royal quarters with each of her requests to speak to the king denied, she was told that she would be accompanying the delegation visit to Rincun.

"You'll be surprised at how backward everything is out here," General Poinin says, slapping his palms on his thighs. "The first time I met someone who still worshipped the old gods, I thought they were joking."

"I'm aware that the provinces still pray," Venus replies politely.

"They don't merely pray. You should pay attention to the number of bird figurines in the villages. I suggest ordering a province-wide sweep one of these days to get rid of them. It's unseemly."

Calla frowns, turning so that she's looking out the window. There are small clumps of snow still frozen where the paved road meets clay ground. Keeping bird figurines is about the most an ordinary villager can do in old worship anyway—it seems like overkill to be ridding them of that.

"I will add that to the agenda." Venus clears her throat. "We can ask the soldiers to make note of the numbers first."

That seems to mollify General Poinin. He settles into his seat, lacing his hands over his white jacket.

Calla senses the moment his gaze wanders back to her.

"Princess Calla, you appear to disagree."

She holds in a sigh. This trip is a formality, a survey staged for show. The

palace doesn't learn anything new, and the provinces certainly don't gain much either when their councilmembers come by with a retinue of advisors taking note of their grain numbers and water levels. Rincun and Youlia are the only provinces in Talin where delegation visits are still placed in the palace calendar: they're far across the kingdom, and too new to have reliable, well-marked roads out. They're also too ramshackle for their councilmembers to keep holiday houses, which usually suffice as *visits* for other provinces when those councilmembers are off escaping the hot weeks in San-Er. If anyone from the palace is to make a visit to Rincun, a whole delegation is indeed necessary. The horizon of Rincun stretches for miles and miles without life, plenty of excess land roped in after the throne's conquest took their villages and swallowed the lake in the middle. Palace delegations must make use of the local generals, the ones who have been stationed out here long enough to know the way and direct their path. Though there's a seaboard and the raging ocean at the western edge of the province, one would never know that for how long it takes to travel over from the villages.

"Don't speak to me."

The carriage goes quiet. The two other advisors shift uncomfortably.

"I—you—*pardon?*" General Poinin demands.

She considers backpedaling to conceal her overt disdain. She could say that his suggestion is unnecessary by the palace's own decree. It is illegal for the provinces to speak anything other than Talinese, and so the villagers cannot truly pray when prayers to the old gods were made in their original tongue. Excessive worship in the provinces has already been cut down. The palace has no need to draw more ire from their farmers.

"Don't speak to me," Calla repeats instead. "Your voice is so fucking grating."

Prior to his ascension, August Shenzhi put the decree in place to make Calla his advisor, to pardon her from any past crimes and come into power alongside

him. No one can overturn the command, unless August himself decides to renege on his word and yank Calla away from her new title.

But then people might start asking why.

Then the council might start sniffing closer and realize that King August is not King August at all, but Anton Makusa, refusing to leave the body he has invaded. Now, for as long as Anton allows Calla to keep this power, there is not a soul in this kingdom who can say otherwise, and Calla is going to make the most of it.

They continue the rest of their journey in silence.



“We’re just about ready, I gather,” Calla announces, stretching her neck and hearing a click. The sun is setting. They should leave before then, get on the road as soon as possible instead of spending a third night sleeping on village cots.

She’s impatient. It took a full week to travel here by carriage, so it will likely take another to get back to San-Er. Time will not linger to await Calla’s return. While she’s been flung to the farthest reaches of the kingdom, Anton is at liberty to do whatever he likes, and she wouldn’t have the faintest clue about it. The thought itches at her, inciting an overwhelming physical restlessness across her limbs.

“I’d agree. Do you need a blanket, Highness?”

Calla glances down. Surveys her torso, her legs, her dirty boots. She figures there might be some reason why Venus Hailira asked the question, as though she’s unwittingly started to shiver, but everything appears normal. She leans on the yamen wall, her arms folded. Though the wall is rubbing grime onto her jacket, Calla remains clad in leather, not the fine robes and silk of palace dwellers. She still dresses like she’s lurking around San-Er, like she needs to blend into the perpetual night of the twin cities while playing the king’s games. If anything, she’s probably the warmest here at present. Even the palace guards

accompanying the delegation seem a little chilled in their practical black cotton. As do the horses, already saddled and latched to the carriages.

“No?” Calla’s answer comes out as a question. “Do I look like I need one?”

“Uh, no. I only wanted to check.” Venus’s gaze goes over her shoulder, to the building enclosed behind the wall. “Maybe the yamen would like some extra blankets.”

“The yamen doesn’t want blankets,” Calla says dryly.

“They’re low on supply. Some of the windows are cracked, and—”

“Let me revise my statement.” The day’s shadows shift, light ducking under the horizon. “The yamen doesn’t want blankets from *us*. Leave them alone. You’ve seen the way they’ve behaved during our visit.”

It has barely been three days, and the reception in Rincun could not be frostier. The villagers stay inside. Rural dwellers have no use for the palace unless the palace has use for them. While the other advisors make their rounds and receive reports from generals and soldiers, Calla has spent her time either in the yamen or dully trailing after Venus Hailira while her mind remains back in San-Er. She can count on one hand the number of people who have talked to her.

Venus frowns. “Don’t be such an aristocrat.”

“That is what I am, after all.” Calla picks at her gloves. “They don’t like us. Let them have it rather than trying to feign generosity.”

“I’m not *feigning*—”

“You are.” More guards emerge from the yamen, finished with their final bathroom breaks. “We are, as you say, aristocrats. If you were truly generous, you would open the Hailira vault for them instead of giving bits and pieces. Say you won’t. You’re allowed.”

Venus’s mouth opens. Before she can say anything else, Calla—still ever casual—gestures at the councilmember’s pocket. “Phone’s beeping.”

“Oh.” With a start, Venus takes the cellular phone out from her pocket, pulls the antenna long, and walks off to take the call. Once her generals return from

their survey of West Capital, their delegation can leave. The palace guards seem impatient too: the ten or so—strong force stays close while they wait by the West Capital yamen, ready to set off at a moment's notice. Venus isn't very good at controlling the operation here. Unsurprising. Calla only knows of the Hailira family through peripheral knowledge, but she remembers hearing about the Palace of Earth turning up their nose at Venus for abandoning her birth body. It's not as though palace nobles don't often help their children quietly swap bodies when they insist they're not a little boy and need to be addressed differently—the problem is that Venus did it herself when she was a teenager, and the Hailiras couldn't just claim that nothing had happened, as other nobles did.

"That was peculiar," Venus reports, striding back. Her headpiece has shifted to the left, the blue jewels on the side tangling with a knot of black hair.

"Don't tell me there's a delay."

Venus frowns, raising her cellular phone to the sky. Signal is always weak in Rincun, and only phones specifically suited for the provinces work out here. "Lieutenant Forin is having trouble getting in touch with General Poinin. He'll call back once he checks with East Capital's yamen. Shouldn't be long."

"Why are we waiting on General Poinin? All he does is give you bad advice."

Venus pretends not to hear the remark. "He's supposed to be here by now with East Capital's final report." Venus lowers the phone. She catches the look on Calla's face. "We need to take *both* province reports back to the palace."

"Oh, do we?" Calla muses, though she knows. "My mistake."

She would bet the councilmembers in Eigi and Pashe never struggle to receive prompt answers from their generals. Their chain of command flows cleanly from throne to councilmember to general to soldier. Loyalties are clear; tasks are cut-and-dried. Rincun, meanwhile, has been split into two since its conquest. It is the only province in Talin that distinguishes between a west side and an east side, yet still one councilmember remains in charge of a dozen generals operating in both. Venus Hailira is not incapable in the slightest. But she is Calla's age,

and she's naive as any aristocrat raised without tribulation is, which means the palace is going to mangle her into pieces. Let a month or two pass, and another noble family will make a play for Rincun, even if it's the least desirable province.

Calla would give Venus three months here, at most, before her own soldiers turn on her and the palace slams its fist down.

They wait another few minutes. Nothing more comes over Venus's phone.

"If this goes on past sundown," Calla suggests, "let's just forge the report and leave."

"The palace won't like that."

"The palace will not *know*, Councilmember Hailira."

"But—"

"Your phone's beeping again."

Venus starts. Looks down. "It is indeed. Excuse me."

The councilmember strides off. Meanwhile, one of the palace guards appears to be calling for someone a few steps away, and though Calla hears it, though she registers that the words he's repeating are "Your Highness. Your Highness?" she doesn't think to respond. Not until the guard, finally, prompts "Princess Calla!" and her attention snaps up.

"I am only an advisor," she says. "No need for a royal address."

"All right, Highness," the guard replies anyway. No matter her objection, there's still a smooth band of gold metal on her head, stark against her black hair. Royalty or advisor or mere palace aristocrat, all these titles mean the same thing: she is an intruder in Rincun. "We should remain for the night if this report takes any longer. It's getting cold."

Calla unfolds her arms and takes one glove off, letting the breeze blow against her bare skin. The horizon has taken on an orangish tint, bringing an imminent sunset that stretches its own long fingers into the clouds.

She doesn't remember this scene, though she must have witnessed it before. Her recollection of Rincun feels faint and faraway, like the logic of a dream upon

waking. She can recount the series of events she experienced shortly before she left this province, the events that pushed her to invade Princess Calla Tuoleimi when she was eight years old. Yet she cannot look upon Rincun and acknowledge that this was once home.

Her fist closes, her palm turning numb. All her memories have a fragile nature to them. She needed it to be that way to fool herself and everyone else in the palace. Now her stomach churns each time she looks too long upon the flat plains, plagued by repulsion and pining alike. Somewhere in this province, rotting at the bottom of a deep puddle of water, there's the body of the girl she was born as. This place may feel foreign, but the tether between Calla and that girl has led her to this. It pushed her hand in the Palace of Heavens, bid her to spend the last five years a renegade princess instead of a comfortable one.

"Strange," Calla remarks. "It wasn't this cold last night."

Even as she speaks, the temperature drops again. A sourness rises in her throat. Her pulse hastens, nudging against her ribs.

"What?"

On hearing Venus's sharp cry, Calla swivels her gaze to the councilmember.

"What is it?" Calla asks.

Venus doesn't immediately answer, though she does turn her shoulder, caught in half motion. She's clutching her phone tightly.

Calla pushes off from the wall. "Councilmember Hailira." Her voice is hard enough that Venus stiffens, meeting Calla's eyes properly. "I'll ask again: What is it?"

"They've located General Poinin," Venus answers in a whisper, her hand coming up to cover the bottom of the phone. "He's . . . he's dead."

The freezing temperature suddenly seems like more than a weather anomaly.

"Where? East Capital?" Calla demands.

"No, he's here in West. Outside the barracks," Venus manages, and Calla

is already running for a horse and unhooking it from the carriage. “They’re getting in contact with his unit, but there’s no answer at—”

“I’ll be right back,” Calla interrupts, hoisting herself into the saddle. The palace guards stir, puzzled by the sudden commotion.

“Wait!” Venus puts her phone away. “If you’re off to see what happened, I’ll come—”

“No! Stay here. Stay with the palace guards.” She points at one of the guards, catching his attention with a threat in her eyes. “Watch her!”

Calla snaps the reins. Her horse surges forward. She isn’t certain she knows the way to the barracks they inspected earlier, but Rincun shudders beneath her at menacing speed before she can doubt herself. The wind turns razor-sharp as it blows against her face. Calla, wheezing, grabs the collar of her shirt and pulls it up beneath her eyes for protection, then continues charging forward with only one hand on the reins, her horse stomping a cloud of dust along the main path through West Capital. She rushes past two meager, gaunt villages. Scans their greeting gates, keeping track of the names.

There. The barracks were close to those brown trees. She remembers that.

Calla skids to a stop and rolls off the horse. It’s quiet. Startlingly so, given that West Capital’s main strip of shops stands to her right. Her jacket isn’t enough to stop her from shivering anymore, and Calla pauses for a moment to stare up at the darkening clouds. There must be some better explanation than what her instinct is telling her.

“Where is this coming from?” she whispers to herself.

Without time to waste, Calla runs forward, curving around the barracks and drawing a knife from her boot. They didn’t let her bring her sword—*this is a peaceful delegation, Princess Calla; the royal guards are your best protection*—so she’s making do with a smaller blade she swiped from the palace vault. The wind pulls her long hair in every direction, whipping it back and forth, over and around her eyes.

At the back of the barracks, she finds three men outfitted in the clothing of officials. Yamen workers already in the area, probably sent to poke around when East Capital couldn't locate General Poinin either.

"Your Highness!" one of them says stiffly, spotting Calla as she approaches. The delegation was introduced to him upon their arrival; she doesn't recall his name. He bows, but Calla's attention is already fixed on the dead general lying before him.

General Poinin has one arm tucked beneath him and the other splayed out. The left side of his face is pressed hard into the ground, his stare an eerie, unblinking burgundy. Hard to believe he was chattering nonstop earlier in the day. Maybe a villager finally had enough of his insistence on ridding them of their old gods.

"What happened?" Calla asks, putting her knife away.

"It's hard to tell," the official in the middle answers.

"An examiner will be here soon," the third says. "We called this in the moment we saw him. They'll find the cause."

"Let me save you the investigation. Make some space." Calla leans down and rolls the general over. There's a moment when the left side of his face is terribly red—then, seconds later, unnervingly pale. The officials must have noticed too, because one emits a disgusted noise, and Calla waves a hand at him to back up farther. She drops to a crouch. Peels back his jacket.

Two of the yamen officials start to gag.

"I *did* recommend that you make space."

A gaping hole glares out from his chest. Despite the gruesome sight, it is shockingly bloodless—a clean carving that goes through the sternum, past the ribs, and leaves empty space behind. Calla reaches her hand in, and the gagging noises behind her get louder. She runs her finger against white bone, gently. Smooth. Before a weapon made this cut, the body had already stopped bleeding.

"This doesn't make any sense," Calla mutters, standing up.

It's happening again. In San-Er, these qi experiments were the work of the Crescent Societies under Leida's guidance. But Leida Miliu is currently in a prison cell underneath the Palace of Union, and the Crescent Societies have no temples or reach outside of San-Er's limits, so what gives?

Calla loosens her shirt collar, lowering it from her face. The temperature appears to be returning to normal, the switch back just as abnormal as the sudden glacial plummet.

"What was he doing out here, anyway?" the first official asks. He's fanning himself to prevent further gagging.

"Probably wanted to see what other complimentary remarks he could include about the soldiers," the third answers, his hand still grasped around his nose. "Poinin has been petitioning for budget changes. Less for the farms, more for palace operations."

"Well"—the second official searches the grass around the general's dead body—"I don't see the report anywhere."

"Perhaps he handed it off already."

"What was he doing lurking around behind the barracks if he had already handed it off?"

"What are you sniping that question at me for? Let's just ask a lieutenant in the barracks—"

Calla doesn't have much to contribute to the conversation. She says nothing before turning on her heel and walking toward the entrance of the barracks. Though the three officials fall silent at her sudden exit, they don't follow her. She's alone when she rounds the bend again, steps over the raised entryway, and enters the walled facility.

"Heavens," Calla whispers.

When Yilas was kidnapped during the games, they found her in the Hollow Temple, surrounded by other unconscious bodies. Enough time has passed that Calla can rewind back to that scene on occasion without flinching, try to recall

the details and wonder if there might have been an easier way out that night than brute force. An easier way than being stabbed in the heart, than having Anton Makusa yank her out of there to recover under his watch, his hand threading through her hair and her fleeting sense of peace molded into his bedsheets.

Inevitably, each time she forces herself out of *that* thought sequence, her mind wanders back to the Hollow Temple. She should have tried harder to get those others out. The nameless faces, the wrong-place-wrong-time kidnappings. She counted her job done the moment Yilas was safe. But there had been so many other bodies there. Some were still breathing, still alive. She never went back for them.

Calla exhales, scanning inside the barrack walls. She takes in the swathes of grass, the water troughs at the far end, the climbing ropes trailing from the watchtower rising higher above the perimeter.

And the bodies. Countless bodies clad in the uniform of palace soldiers, splayed dead.

Slowly, Calla makes her way over to the nearest corpse. He's slumped at the waist, his sword still sheathed. She hardly dares to breathe as she leans down, pushing his shoulder carefully so that his head lolls back to face the rapidly darkening sky.

But he has no wounds. Calla frowns and lifts his eyelids, finds his gaze dulled but with color remaining. She pats his chest. Rummages around his uniform. His skin is clean, his organs appear intact, and there's no blood on the ground around him.

The soldier has merely fallen dead, without any indication as to *how* he died.

Calla stands. There's more than a thirty-strong force at these barracks. How could all of them go down without any sign of a struggle?

"What *happened*?" she mutters. "Did a god come down for vengeance?"

A rustle echoes from the water troughs.

Calla stiffens, drawing her knife again in one motion. There's another sound—a suppressed human snuffle—and Calla flips the blade so that she can secure a better grip on the handle.

Just as she's about to throw her weapon at the first sight of motion, two children poke their heads out from behind the trough.

"Shit." Calla barely reins in the knife, snatching it out of the air and shoving it back into her boot. "Hey! You there!"

The children disappear back behind the trough.

Calla hurries forward. It's not like there's anywhere they can run, but she doesn't want to startle them. She's making her nicest face when she peers over the trough, slowing her movements.

"Hello," Calla says. "Are you all right?"

The children start to scream.

"Shhh, shhh!" she urges. She tried her best. Clearly, her nicest face isn't as nice as she thought. "You're okay. You're safe!" She throws her hands up, palms outward. "See? I'm good, I promise. I won't hurt you."

The boy on the left takes a ragged breath. He calms, wrapping his arms around himself. It takes a bit longer for the girl on the right to quiet, but she does so in stuttered bursts, each sound coming softer and softer until she stops.

"There we go. Nothing bad is going to happen to you." Calla crouches to their eye level, hovering on the other side of the trough. "Can you tell me what happened? Why are you here?"

No response. For a brief moment, Calla wonders if the children speak Talinese at all, but the thought is swiped aside as soon as it registers. There's no world where children would be raised without speaking Talinese. Someone would have reported the family otherwise, knocking on the yamen wanting to be rewarded, and then the punishment would come down swiftly from the mayor.

Still . . .

"You can tell me," she whispers. The past hums in her ears, lands a strange

taste on her tongue. Before she fully registers where the word has come from, she's saying it out loud—*please*, she's just said the word for *please*, here she was thinking she forgot every bit of Rincun's dialect—and the two children perk up, a new glint in their eyes.

"You speak our secret," the boy says.

"I do." Calla looks over her shoulder. The yamen officials are going to make their way around shortly. She's made her point: she switches back into Talinese. "I'm just like you. I can help. Tell me what happened."

The children exchange a glance. An air of deliberation passes between them, making them feel older, far more sensible than should be expected of their age. Whatever they decide, Calla catches the girl nod before she shifts forward to lean on the trough, only her two gray eyes peeking out above the wood.

"They let us play in here and eat the rice if there's left over from the meals," she mumbles carefully. "We're not soldiers."

Calla holds back the flicker of a smile. "Yes, I figured. Did an attacker come in?"

"No one came in." The boy, bravely, decides to stand then. "The barracks turned really cold. Mother says that we should run when we feel the air turn cold. Cold means qi is being stolen. Great-Grandfather died that way."

Stolen? Calla glances to the side, to the dead bodies littered across the grounds. In her mind's eye, again she sees the Hollow Temple, the bodies that had been carved open. Stealing qi. Such a claim would normally be considered provincial superstition, just as some people here believe that being too nosy allows the gods to invade one's body and suck out their qi.

"Is that . . ." She doesn't know how to phrase this, not without sounding like a dubious city dweller who believes all the old gods are dead. "Is that *common* here?"

The two shake their heads. They remain silent.

"But you didn't run."

“It was my idea,” the girl insists. She stands, too, now, as though her dignity is at risk. She’s so small, barely taller than Calla’s waist. Calla has the absurd thought that she could pick her up and shove her into her pocket if she wanted. “It felt safer to hide.”

“And you were right to do so,” Calla murmurs. No attacker came in. The world simply turned cold; the throne’s soldiers fell dead. In the midst of it, two village children remained perfectly unharmed.

“There you are!”

Calla turns over her shoulder. A woman runs in through the entrance, her eyes the same gray as the two children’s. They both scramble around the trough, hurrying to their mother. It’s then that Calla catches sight of the scuff marks by the trough where the children were hiding. Three lines—simple enough that it may be mere coincidence.

Few matters tend to be coincidence when the unexplainable has occurred.

“What is this?” Calla asks. She points to the lines.

“A sigil,” the girl chirps immediately, clinging to her mother’s dress. “For protection—”

“Deera,” her mother interrupts. There’s a scold in there, sharp but subtle. “Remember what we said about making things up?” The woman looks to Calla and says, “I’m terribly sorry. May I take them home? They shouldn’t be seeing this.”

Odd that the woman hasn’t asked what happened. Nor does she seem shocked at the presence of so many dead bodies.

“Of course,” Calla says anyway.

“Your Highness!” A new racket comes from the entrance. The three yamen officials, finally catching up. “Your Highness, your palace guards are nearing!”

She registers the announcement dimly, still thinking about the situation at hand, trying to make sense of it. Hearing the officials, the little girl echoes “*Highness?*” with an edge of surprise, and Calla nods once in response. For the

first time, she's starting to wonder if the provinces are better at hiding secrets from the palace than she thought.

"Better hurry out of here before the guards come to clean up," Calla says lightly. She looks to the mother. "If these two have anything more to say about this incident, please ask your mayor to reach me directly."

The woman lowers her head. "Yes, Highness."

I'm just like you, Calla said to the children earlier. Then the officials called out, and all they heard was: *I am nothing like you*.

She watches them go. The officials enter the barracks. They talk over each other, debating what happened and what could have possibly caused this. Though Calla doesn't look again for fear of bringing attention to it, she traces the shape of the three lines on the back of her hand. It reminds her of the two lines that the Crescents in the Hollow Temple wore.

"Shit," she whispers under her breath.

Just as the palace guards rush into the barracks, Calla finally gathers her thoughts and makes up her mind, storming out.

"Let the yamen deal with this," she commands. "We're *leaving*."