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The Exiled Prophet (novel excerpt)

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*When the Martyr of Heavens falls in her stride
And the King of Great Might reveals all he lied,
A ruin far greater than than wailings of war
Shall drown Adolinë and its holy shore.*

*Of Olunë's People no joy shall be found
Until the bright world has spun twice-ten around,
For the Heavenly Child shall strike the King's heart
Tho' the King's noble daughter makes vengeance her part.*

*The fires of fury, long-stoked, shall blaze forth
Unveiling the Speaker once hid in the north,
Fled there forever to suffer and sing
Until the Successor returns with their Ring.*

*Then shall the battle awaited commence:
Kin against kin, without bond's defense.
The sun set in blood and the Kingkiller slain,
No vain prayers might salvage what few souls remain.*

chapter one

The ring burned like it did when it was going to be a difficult day. Réyan rubbed their knuckle, wanting to take it off and put it around their neck on a chain like they usually did in circumstances like this, but even the slightest movement would bungle this job, and they were running low on food. They needed this to work.

At their side Falaci shifted. Réyan cast her a glare, but Falaci ignored them, staring with narrowed eyes at the priest before them. He couldn't see them, hidden behind the booth-skirt as they were, but Falaci was almost within grabbing distance of the purse at his waist.

They'd been hiding here nearly all day. Réyan was the one who'd found the booth, dragging Falaci out here before the spice merchant showed up to market; they were the one who'd managed to keep their restless friend still enough to avoid getting caught—but when it came to the actual business of robbery, Falaci's quick fingers were the ones who'd do the actual job. It made Réyan feel useless, sometimes, but so long as Falaci shared they wouldn't complain.

It was a slow market day: slim pickings and no crowd to hide in. But finally the priest had wandered up, haggling with the merchant for her spices, and here at last was a mark worth robbing.

Falaci pressed her hand on Réyan's bare upper arm. *Now?*

No, Réyan sent back. *Wait.*

Falaci huffed, and Réyan glared. *How* many times had they told her they needed to keep *still* and *silent*? That was the *point* of using datikē instead of speaking aloud!

On their finger, the ring burned hotter. Réyan bit the inside of their lip to prevent themselves from cursing. This would teach them to wear it on a day they had a job.

The priest shifted from foot to foot, digging around in his purse. Above, Réyan could hear his high whine: “That’s two emeralds more than last time!”

“It’s getting to winter,” the merchant replied. “I must conserve my stores to survive through the cold season.”

“I’ll pay *one* extra emerald.” He lifted his hand, leaving the purse open. Falaci tensed, but Réyan’s glare held.

“The price is two—”

At last it came to Réyan: that moment of clarity, absolute surety, that this was the right moment to act. They gripped Falaci’s shoulder briefly, hissing out, *Now!*

Falaci sprang into action, reaching her hand through the slit she’d cut in the boothskirt that morning and up into the priest’s purse. She made a face—must be another mark who kept their gems all loose—and pulled back, quick as a snake, with a handful of sparkling stones.

Réyan eyed her haul greedily. In the dim light emitted by the ring, they caught a glimpse of quartz, topaz, emerald, a few peridots, was that a *sapphire*? Unease gripped their heart suddenly. If this priest was wealthy enough to wander around with that kind of money, he must be awfully high-ranking. If they were caught—

But they wouldn’t be. They hadn’t gotten caught in years, not by anyone they couldn’t bribe to look away for a few jaspers. No matter if the ring burned or not, they wouldn’t—

“Alright, I’ll sell for another topaz,” the merchant conceded, and the priest huffed. He dipped his hand back into his purse—

The ring burned so bright even Falaci could see it now. Her eyes widened and she scrambled back, trying to escape just as the priest cried out, “I’ve been robbed! Thief, thief!”

“This won’t get you out of that topaz,” the merchant snapped, but Réyan heard the dreadful *click-click* sound of approaching footsteps and knew it was time to flee.

Where had Falaci gone? Damn it, she always disappeared the second things got even a little troublesome. It was how she’d stayed alive so long, Réyan knew, but they still resented getting left behind.

They crawled down away from their hiding place beneath the booth, praying to Olunë for an escape. But Falaci had stolen their luck along with the priest’s gems, for the moment they were out of hiding the merchant shouted and kicked them.

Réyan rolled out of the way. They were used to much worse blows than that! They scrambled to their feet, not bothering to glance behind them as they bolted for the nearest alley, but the merchant and the priest were both screaming their heads off, and the thumping steps of the iron-toed boots only grew louder.

Falaci was probably halfway to their safehouse by now, they thought grimly. Or worse, she’d bolted for good this time, and Réyan would never get to see those jewels again—

A massive hand grabbed them by the arm, lifting them half off their feet. Réyan grunted and flailed their legs, trying to knee their captor in the stomach, but soon they were surrounded. Their captor smacked them with a heavy palm, and Réyan bit back a scream. They would *not* be cowed by this; they would hold strong. Besides, the ring hurt twice as bad as any slap could.

Réyan’s hands were tied behind their back, and when they struggled to get free they were rewarded with another slap. Their captor—through the haze of tears they could not restrain,

Réyan saw that it was a Sérakkari soldier—wore a ring of his own, and though it did not burn it *hurt*. They felt the skin of their cheek break, blood trickling down their jaw.

They were caught. Damn it. *Damn it*. It had been *years* since they'd been captured like this, and they were grown now, not a child who could weep their way out of a real punishment. If it had been another priest, they might've been able to talk their way out if it, use what brief flashes of foresight they possessed to strike up a kinship with Olunë's servants, but no. These were Sérakkari warriors, and Réyan knew exactly what their kind did to people like them.

Réyan straightened their back, sitting as tall as they could in their unfortunate position, and glared at the lead soldier in the eyes. He sneered down at them, spitting on their face, and it took all of Réyan's self-control not to spit back. They knew *that* would be the end of them, for sure.

"Where's the goods?" the soldier demanded. "Give em up and we *might* go easy on you."

Out of the corner of their eye, Réyan saw a flash of movement in the shadows. The faintest glint of a gemstone in the sunlight—

Really, Falaci? they groaned to themselves, wishing they could reach their companion's mind all the way from here to berate her. *You didn't even have the wits to run while you still could?*

But she was well-hidden, and Réyan took a strange comfort from knowing she hadn't left them behind after all. Réyan refocused their glare back up at the soldier and sneered, "Don't have em. If I did I'da *scrammed already*."

That was as pointed a comment they dared make. In the shadows Falaci hesitated, and truly her loyalty was admirable, but if Réyan was gonna get out of this alive they needed the insurance that they had a friend—and a fistful of gems—waiting for them at the end of it.

“Liar,” the soldier growled. “Where’re you hiding them? Under your cloak?” He tugged at it, a ratty old thing that didn’t stand a chance against the force of a trained soldier. It ripped, and the soldiers laughed.

“See why you’re thieving if *this* is all you can afford,” one soldier mocked.

Réyan ignored her. The only good soldier was a dead soldier, *especially* when it came to the Sérakkarim, and they knew their life was worth ten times more than hers in the eyes of Olunë. Even if they weren’t the most devout of followers.

“Where’s the baro they robbed?” another soldier asked.

“Probably *ran away* when you brutes showed up,” Réyan grumbled. They dared another glance to Falaci’s hiding place, and with great relief saw her nod slightly and take off.

But—*what are you doing?* they wanted to cry out. Falaci had turned *north*, not east to where their hideout was, the only thing in the north of Adolinë was—

Oh, *damn it all*. Falaci *knew* how Réyan felt about the rebellion, if she was going to *them* for help...

Well. They’d just have to figure their way out of this before Falaci could get the rebels involved. They’d lose the ring for sure if that bastard Vakila demanded repayment for their “rescue.”

“Coward,” the lead soldier muttered. “Damn barra don’t know what’s good for them, ‘snot like this dump *likes* them, might’s’well cooperate with the King’s justice!”

Réyan spat on the ground between the soldier’s feet. As little as they liked the priests—and as little as they liked the rebellion—they liked King Kalataro even less.

The soldier kicked them, and Réyan fell over, wheezing.

“Don’t disrespect his Majesty,” he snarled. “No more politeness, now. Give up the gems *or else.*”

“I don’t *have them,*” Réyan growled. “And even if I did, the baro’s gone—”

Another kick. Réyan’s head spun; they shut their mouth. The ring on their finger burned so hot they were sure they were gonna have a scar later. If they survived to *have* a later.

“What’s that you’re wearing?” asked one of the other soldiers. “A street rat like you has no reason to have something that shiny!”

Réyan clenched their fist, hiding the ring beneath their thumb. It hurt, but they knew that losing it would hurt more. Much more.

“S’nothing,” they muttered. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? All praise to the King, or whatever, and I—I really *don’t* have the gems but if you want ‘em so bad I can filch some off another priest—”

One of the soldiers seemed intrigued in that prospect—of course they were in it for the money, even if the priest had stuck around they’d have taken a generous amount of gems for their ‘trouble’—but the lead soldier screwed up his face in a hideous expression. He reached down and hauled Réyan to their feet, lifting them up to growl in their face:

“I don’t like you or your kind,” he hissed. “Any of you. Pathetic, the lot of you, we did you a favor when we took over twenty years ago—if I’d’ve been old enough to serve then, why I’d...” His lip curled in a smirk. “I’d’ve killed your bearer before they’d birthed you. Bet they were a filthy rebel, too.”

“I’m *not* a rebel,” Réyan snapped, the fire in their heart sparking back to life against their better judgement. “Wouldn’t catch me with the likes of *them*—” Unless, of course, Falaci gave them no other choice. Which she probably had.

“Anyone’s a rebel who spits at the name of the King,” the soldier rumbled, and threw them back down to the ground. “I should gut you right here.”

“Captain, look at their finger,” the first soldier insisted. “They’ve got a glowing ring. Think they’re a barë?”

“Why’d they rob a baro, then?” the lead soldier scoffed. “And since when have you seen a barë dress like trash?”

“Maybe they took it from another barë,” a third soldier suggested. “It looks plenty magical to me.”

“It just *glows*,” Réyan exclaimed. “Nothing else, it glows and it *burns* your finger when it does it, stupid thing—”

The soldier grabbed their wrist and lifted their hand to his face. He squinted at the ring, and the sigil on it, the one Réyan had never been able to find another example of, and paled.

“We’re taking this in,” he said, his demeanor abruptly changing. “The General will want to see this.”

“It’s just a glow-ring, even if it *is* stolen,” the second soldier said doubtfully. “General Harmelo won’t be pleased to be bothered with something like this.”

“Am I your captain or not?” the soldier demanded, and his subordinates bowed their heads. “Harmelo will be *very* interested in this, I think. *We captains* are privy to information you privates aren’t, I know he will.”

Réyan’s blood ran cold. No, no—they couldn’t get taken to the General, not across the river, not *inside* Sérakka—they’d never escape, they’d never—

But all they could croak out was, “Didn’t steal it...”

Not that their captors, hauling them to their feet and shoving them along west to the river, heard their muttering, or cared if they did.

...

Réyan thanked Olunë when instead of being hauled across the bridge or dumped in a boat, the soldiers led them to a Sérakkarim outpost on the outskirts of Adolinë. This section had once been a nice district to live in, or so Réyan had heard; they'd been born after Sérakka conquered Adolinë, and hadn't been alive to see it.

But still. They weren't lying about not having stolen the ring, but they *had* undersold its true value. It was certainly more than a glow-ring, even if they weren't quite sure what it *was*.

They should've just left the damn thing at Falaci's hiding place. The soldiers might've roughed them up a little, but without the ring they'd have been let go eventually. *At least* they should've worn it on the chain around their neck, but it had broken the other day and they hadn't found a new one yet, and...

Well, none of that mattered *now*. They'd worn the ring, and it had led them right into all this trouble. So much for any heads up about it being a difficult day.

Réyan kept their head low as the captain dismissed all his soldiers save one and dragged them up to a heavy wooden door. His bravado faltered, and he stopped short, taking a deep breath before jerking his head at his subordinate. She rolled her eyes and lifted her fist, knocking firmly three times.

A silence. Then:

“Come in,” said a deep voice, clipped and precise in the way the elite spoke. Réyan’s blood turned to ice. The common soldiers were at least on their level—but this general sounded like a priest. Like someone to be afraid of.

But that’s what he wanted. Réyan gritted their teeth and stopped themselves from trembling as the captain pushed open the door. They wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of their fear.

“General,” the captain said, his voice cracking a little. “I’ve, I’ve got something you might want to see.”

Réyan lifted their chin defiantly, glaring at the general. He was tall, broad-shouldered, bright-eyed and dark-haired; his dark blue uniform was clean and sharp, but showed signs of wear. His jaw was a hard line, and his gaze as it met Réyan’s was cold enough to cut right through their heart.

They felt him probing at their mind with *datikë*, and they looked away, pulling up all their mental defenses. He was strong, this one, in body and mind. Réyan was no weakling, but compared to him...

“Captain Gorvon,” the general said. “I trust you are not wasting my time. You know how great a mistake that would be.”

“No sir, not at all, sir,” the captain—Gorvon—stuttered. “I was on my patrol in the lower markets, you know, sir, and we heard a commotion, so we rushed over to stop a thief, and then—”

Behind Gorvon, his subordinate coughed meaningfully. He swallowed, then hurried on, continuing, “Well we caught the thief, that’s this rat here, but that’s not why I’m here, General. It’s that—” he lowered his voice— “they’ve got a ring, sir, that they must’ve stolen, and it’s got that symbol you mentioned...”

The general's posture changed, from relaxed and bored to suddenly alert and eager.

"Oh?" he asked, leaning forward. "Show me, Captain."

Gorvon pushed Réyan forward, slamming their knees into the desk. They bit their lip and cursed under their breath, pain shooting through their legs. The next thing they knew, Gorvon had dragged their hand out of their pocket and tugged it forward to display the ring.

"See, General Harmelo?" Gorvon said eagerly. "That's it, isn't it?"

Harmelo lifted Réyan's wrist, shaking despite themselves, and examined the ring for a long moment. He looked over every detail; Réyan felt him gently brushing his mind against it only to hurry back as the ring flared in power, burning their knuckle again.

"No," he said at last, and leaned back in his chair. "Unfortunately not, Captain."

"But—" Gorvon wilted. "But, sir..."

"You were right to bring this to me," Harmelo said calmly. "It is a very good replica. But it is only a fake. Keep your eyes out. But alas, this is not what I am looking for."

"Yes, General," Gorvon sighed. He gave a stiff little bow, then turned to drag Réyan out of the room. Réyan almost breathed a sigh of relief—maybe now they would be let go—but then...

"Ah, Captain Gorvon," Harmelo interrupted. "Leave the thief here with me. I would like to interrogate them as to the origins of this item. After all, it may be the true owner has information on the original."

Gorvon mumbled something else, then was nudged out the door by his lackey, leaving Réyan alone with Harmelo. The room seemed to drop in temperature, despite the burning on their finger.

Réyan's eyes darted around. There were no windows in this small office; the walls were bare, and on the desk was only a few papers, an inkwell, and a quill. Harmelo was armed; Réyan was not. There was little chance of escape. The general may be behind his desk, but he was powerful in might, and they doubted that they could flee before he caught them.

“Do not bother attempting to escape,” Harmelo drawled. “I would catch you, and have you; even if I did not, you would be taken in the moment you stepped out the door.”

Réyan glared at him. They wouldn't give him the satisfaction of their fear, only their silence.

“That ring.” He nodded to their hand, balled into a fist at their side. “Where did you come by it, thief?”

“I did not steal it,” they said through gritted teeth.

Harmelo smiled, a cold and dreadful thing. “I did not say you did. But you are a thief, nonetheless.”

Well—he was not *wrong*. Even if the guards couldn't prove they'd stolen the priest's gems, because Falaci had run off with them. But Réyan had stolen to survive a hundred times or more, and would do so again—if they had a life to preserve, after the Sérakkarim general was done with them.

“So, little thief, I ask again: where did you find this ring?”

“I didn't—”

Before they could insist that they'd *always* had it, that it had been theirs as long as they could remember, that even though their parent's face was only the vaguest of memories they were certain they had worn the ring since before whoever birthed them had disappeared—before

they could blurt out any of that, the ring burned so brightly that they hissed aloud, rubbing at the worn-away insignia that marked its surface until the pain subsided.

“Is it a lie-ring, then?” Harmelo asked drily. “A pretty toy that compels honesty?”

It was not; Réyan lied frequently while wearing it, and it did not always warn them when others were false with them. If anything, the burning of a moment before had been a warning that they *ought* to lie, ought not to tell the general the truth: which was, now that they thought about it, the obvious thing to do.

“Maybe,” they said, surly and mean. Perhaps if they played into the role the Sérakkarim expected of a dirty Adolinéri thief-child they would be set free.

“Then you would not care if I demanded the ring as the price of your freedom?” Harmelo inquired, his voice even and mild.

Réyan stiffened. “It is *mine*, whatever it is.”

“And Adolinë is the King’s,” Harmelo reasoned. “Kalataro the Mighty rules your city, and I enforce his will, and therefore any possession of yours is mine by right in the name of the King.”

Réyan would’ve spat on the ground if they thought they could get away with it and live. “I’ll not let you tell me my worth,” they growled.

“Oh? Then enlighten me, thief.” Harmelo leaned back into his chair, eyes gleaming. “Who are you? What is your name, your lineage, your rightful profession? Which priest is your guide upon your ‘path of light’? Why do you resort to theft, if you have any value at all?”

It was all lies, a trick, misdirection, for of course Réyan would not tell him such details. Some of them they *could* not tell, for they had never prayed at a priest’s bidding, nor did they know either of their parents.

“I’m no one,” they snapped. “Just a petty thief. A nothing.” Their blood boiled to say it: Réyan knew they were meant for more, knew that there was something out there they could achieve. But in this moment, before someone so high and mighty as General Harmelo? Here and now, they *were* nothing.

“Úver, then,” Harmelo surmised. “But you have a name.”

Réyan flinched. Yes, technically they were úver; they could not recall their parents, and only vaguely remembered a guardian abandoning them in the slums. But they *knew* they were not truly the child of no one, and the ring they bore was proof. They’d had it always, a constant presence from their earliest memory, and it must have been given to them as a babe.

“Of course I have a name,” they said, wrinkling their nose. “Paziran.”

Harmelo snorted. “Ah, yes, my apologies, Abari,” he drawled. “I didn’t recognize you; you’ve...*shrunk* since our last meeting.” He leaned forward, drawing his belt-knife and using it to pick dirt out from under his claws. “Last chance, thief. Cooperate, or...”

He didn’t need to tell them again. Réyan swallowed, then muttered out, “Réyan. My name is Réyan.”

“There we are.” Harmelo smiled. “That wasn’t so difficult, now, was it? Tell me, Réyan: do you truly have no family name?”

“I do,” they said sullenly, “but I don’t know it.”

“Mm. Tragic.” The general sheathed his knife, but Réyan did not feel any less threatened. “And the ring?”

“What will you do to me if I won’t tell?” they demanded.

Harmelo shrugged. “Toss you in the Fohasë and let the current carry you out to sea. Or, rather, I’ll Captain Gorvon back in here and have him do it.”

Réyan glared at him, not sure if they believed the threat. “And if I do tell you?”

“I’ll consider letting you live,” he said drily. “Your time for any possible *reward* has long passed, Réyan Úver.”

What would Falaci do? Réyan almost snorted at the thought. Falaci would’ve spilled the story the moment she’d been dragged in here, or before. Falaci would’ve done anything to save her skin. But Réyan wasn’t Falaci, as evidenced by the fact that she had scrambled off the instant she could, and it was they who were stuck here with the cold-hearted general and the burning ring.

That blasted ring. What good had it ever done for them?

“I really have had it my whole life,” they blurted out before they could talk themselves out of a confession. “I don’t know how I got it or who gave it to me, but it’s been with me longer than I can remember.”

Harmelo narrowed his eyes. “You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth,” Réyan grumbled.

“Let us presume it is. What properties does it possess?”

Réyan tried to tug it off their finger—but it burned again, biting into their flesh, and they let out a hiss of pain. “It *burns*,” they said. “Whenever it’s going to be a difficult day. Whenever I need to think twice about something. I don’t know how it knows, but it does. And the damn thing *won’t let me take it off*.”

Harmelo’s hand strayed to his belt knife again. “I could take care of that for you.”

“No thank you,” Réyan snapped. “I need my fingers.”

“It would take care of another pickpocket,” Harmelo mused, but the malicious glint in his eye was mirthful. “Alright. So you’ve had it since birth—how old are you?”

“Um. Twenty, I think.”

At this Harmelo paused, his brow darkening. “Twenty. And with that symbol...you truly do not know your parentage?”

“You think I *like* being called úver?” they demanded.

Harmelo snapped his fingers. Immediately, the door opened, and another soldier poked their head in.

“Get the iron bonds,” Harmelo ordered. “And ready my boat.”

“Yes, General.”

“What?” Réyan said, rising to their feet. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“Oh, Réyan.” Harmelo rose also, towering a foot over them, filling up the whole room with his mighty frame. Réyan felt so *small* before him. “I know what that ring is. I know who you are. And I know that his Majesty will be quite interested in both of those things.”

“What do you *mean*?” Réyan demanded, panic rising in their chest. He knew—? But *they* didn’t even know! What was going on?

“I’m taking you to the King’s court,” Harmelo said, lifting his cloak off a hook and caping it about his shoulders. “You’ve never been to Sérakka, have you, Úver?”

“Like I’d want to visit that stinking—”

Harmelo snapped his fingers again, and Réyan found themselves unable to speak. What had he done? Was he some kind of priest? They thought Sérakka didn’t *have* priests—they didn’t follow Olunë—but how else could he work magic?

“Behave yourself, or there will be no return journey,” Harmelo warned, beckoning the soldier back in and gesturing them to bind Réyan in iron. “Of course, even if you do, I doubt you shall see this slum again.”

Falaci! Réyan cried out in their mind, but they had no bond with their friend, and she could not hear them.

“I thought at first it was a shame that you could not remove the trinket,” Harmelo mused, striding out of his office and letting his subordinate tug Réyan along. “But...you are a prize in and of yourself, Réyan. You have never been more valuable than in this moment! Why, I think you are almost as worthy as myself!”

Réyan would’ve cursed and shouted if they could, but his silencing spell held firm. What was he *talking* about?

“But of course, my lineage is a noble one,” he continued. “The House of Cobak is ancient and powerful; and very soon we shall rise again to the throne. Long live the King, of course, but we all must die eventually...”

Cobak. Réyan vaguely recalled that name, hearing it hissed by—someone. They couldn’t remember who. *The Cobak is coming*, the voice whispered, the hard *ch* of the first syllable sending spittle flying into Réyan’s face. *Hide, little one, or else—*

Or else you’ll get dragged across the river, they finished grimly in their own mind. They knew not why they should fear Harmelo Cobak in particular, or what awaited them across the waters of the Fohasë, but they knew the fear gripping at their heart.

Réyan had escaped the Cobak for twenty years, but no longer. Now, they were in his clutches; now, they were doomed, and the ring on their finger burned ever brighter to confirm their awful fate.

(fifteen years ago)

“This is important,” Nuviduna said. “This ring will guide you. Do you understand, Xoféya?”

Réyan nodded. If Nuviduna was using their private name, it was important.

“Good.” Nuviduna didn’t smile. It took a lot for them to smile, Réyan knew. But there was a little glint of pride in their eyes, and that made Réyan smile.

“It’s warm,” they said as they slipped it on.

“That is how it guides you.” Nuviduna reached out, about to brush their finger against the ring, then hesitated. They pulled their hand back. “At least, so I believe. So said your nuvi.”

Réyan’s eyes widened at the mention of their mother. Nuviduna rarely spoke of their sister.

Sometimes Réyan forgot that she had once existed.

“Did Nuvi say anything about me?” they asked hopefully.

But the pride in Nuviduna’s eyes was gone, replaced by that distant look they got when the past and the future crept over them so strongly they would weep and hide away. Réyan

hurried to say, “Or—I mean—what is the ring going to guide me to?”

“Your fate, little one,” Nuviduna said faintly, and Réyan knew it was too late to save them from the thundercloud that settled over their mind.

On their finger, the ring burned.

chapter two

Hanumi was not prepared for her father's fury when she entered the throne room. She did not flinch—princesses did not flinch—but she did pause at the room's entrance when she heard him shouting.

King Kalataro cut an impressive figure under normal circumstances: tall, handsome, broad-shouldered, his green gaze piercing. Hanumi had never been able to lie to him; he always saw through her falsehoods and chided her for the slightest untruth.

But now his eyes were far from clear. Instead they were clouded over with rage, blinding him to all but the object of his chagrin: his husband, Prince Consort Meleq.

“—so foolish, so *neglectful* as this!” Kalataro bellowed. “It is as if you are purposefully sabotaging me—have you forgotten all I have done for you? Have you forgotten what is at *stake* here?”

Meleq's voice was cool and controlled, like the calmest part of the river. “Of course not, your Majesty.”

“Don't *your Majesty* me, Meleq,” Kalataro snapped. “How long have we been beyond that, you and I? And yet you *still*—”

“We have been together long enough that I know the dangers of your...*obsessions*.”
Meleq's voice was deadly soft. “The prisoner had nothing of value—”

“Nothing of *value*?” Kalataro screamed. “I ought to make *you* a prisoner, you fool!”

At this point Hanumi stepped forward into the light. These spats between her fathers had been happening more frequently in the past months, and it frightened her to see them so cruel to one another. Her childhood had been a happy one, doted upon by both of them and her nurses,

and now that she was grown it was difficult to come to terms with the fractures between them. If she could diffuse the situation, she would.

“Nuvo, Nunu,” she said, forcing a smile onto her face. “Whatever is the matter?”

She already knew, of course, and her heart sank as Kalataro turned his wrath her way. It was her fault, after all.

“Your *nunu*,” he growled, “has set free an important prisoner for no justifiable reason!”

Hanumi coughed to mask the alarm that seized her by the heart. “I am certain there was a reason, Nuvo,” she said, keeping her voice as light as she could. She turned to Meleq, not hoping for much if he had not been able to justify himself earlier. “Isn’t there, Nunu?”

“Our prisons are full enough as they are,” Meleq reasoned. “With the unrest in Adolinë, we needn’t fill them with innocents as well as rabble rousers.”

“Innocents!” Kalataro scoffed. “Every Adolinéri is guilty—not one of them gives me respect as their king and overlord. And this one was brought to me directly by Harmelo Cobak!”

Meleq stiffened. “Ah,” he breathed. “Had I known the honorable General Cobak was responsible for their containment, I may have reconsidered.”

“It was my fault, Nuvo,” Hanumi said demurely, bowing her head. It wasn’t—Meleq had ordered her to let them go—but it had been her who had turned the key. The poor creature had been so frightened, scratching at their finger where an angry red burn was forming around a too-tight ring, they had almost not believed her when she said they were free to leave.

“Is it now,” Kalataro hissed. “Look at me, child.”

Hanumi raised her chin, shivering as she felt him reach along their bond and into her mind. He was unnervingly talented with *datikë*, able to pick thoughts out of her heart and sense even her most hidden secrets.

“You know better than to lie to me, Hanumi,” he said softly. “Do not try to save your nuvo from what he has brought upon himself.”

“I was complicit, your Majesty,” Hanumi said stubbornly. “I should have known not to question your will, even at the command of your Prince Consort.”

“You should have known better,” Kalataro agreed, “but *he* should have known better also, and has not the excuse of youth and inexperience.”

Hanumi bit her tongue, schooling her emotions, hoping they did not show too blatantly on her face. She hated how he treated her like a foolish child. She was an adult now, grown and ready to take on further responsibilities. Kalataro himself had not been all that much older than she was now when he had ascended to the throne amid the River War.

And yet it was missteps like this—letting the prisoner go, attempting to cover for Meleq—that proved that he was, perhaps, right to doubt her maturity. He had been a great king from the beginning, bringing down the rebel leaders, slaying Naravi the Heretic personally, uniting the people of the waters under one banner. What was Hanumi? A pampered princess who couldn’t distinguish a good instruction from a bad one.

“I am only worried about you, dear,” Meleq said, bowing to his lord husband. “Your mind has been troubled of late...”

Hanumi felt his will reach across their family bond, soothing and gentle, but Kalataro was a raging rapid, unable to be calmed. She hesitated, wondering if she ought to aid him, but before she could decide Kalataro closed himself off from both of them and reached forward to slap Meleq across the face.

This time, Hanumi did flinch. It was not what a princess did in times of stress, but to see her father hurt his husband so—this was simply too shocking, too horrific. Now she wondered if

perhaps Meleq was right, and these recent obsessions with traitors and trinkets were harming his mind.

Meleq took the blow in stride, standing firm and impassive, his cheeks flushing blue as his eyes. “Your Majesty,” he murmured, demure but for the glow of his display spots. “I will take my leave, if you see it fit.”

“Leave me,” Kalataro snarled, his ear-tips flushed an angry green, and Meleq bowed once more, striding swiftly out of the chamber.

“And *you*,” Kalataro said to Hanumi. “Do you know what you have cost me, child?”

Hanumi’s voice caught in her throat. “No, Sire,” she whispered. What information could that prisoner possibly have had to stir his ire so profoundly?

“I do, Sire.”

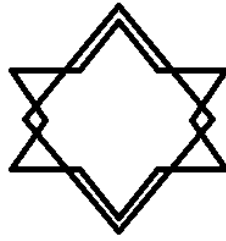
Hanumi stiffened at the new voice, cool as morning dew. Kalataro lifted his gaze to over her shoulder, where the newcomer stood with her arms crossed in respect.

“Tari Isléya,” Kalataro growled. “You had better be bringing good news.”

“I do, your Majesty,” Isléya promised. She strode forth, not looking Hanumi’s way, and she felt her blood boil as the King’s youngest advisor neatly intercepted her attempts to placate her father.

“I have spent the morning in the library archives,” Isléya said, perfectly composed. “The symbol you requested I research took some hours to find, as it was not always so significant...but it is here, in this scroll. Alongside the Prophecy.”

She lifted a roll of parchment, spreading it to reveal a strange symbol: a six-pointed star set within a diamond, with the rays on its side poking out of its boundaries.



A shiver ran down Hanumi's spine at the sight of the symbol. She did not recognize it, but for Isléya to invoke the Prophecy...

"This is indeed the symbol of House Toltarra," Isléya said gravely. "For generations it served as nothing more than a maker's mark for metalwork, but in the War it became the secret seal of the Toltarra siblings."

"Toltarra?" Hanumi asked. She knew of Naravi the Heretic and the Harbinger Lisera, two of the rebellion's most infamous leaders, but the name Toltarra was unfamiliar to her.

"I *knew* it," Kalataro growled. "That damned ring—it was *hers!* Naravi Toltarra!"

Hanumi peered closer to the scroll Isléya held. On it was inscribed the prophecy, foretelling the victory of Sérakka's King over the rebels, and much calamity to follow. It had been spoken by the Harbinger himself in the final days of the River War, but it brought the Adolinérim no hope, and for their doom-laden words they had been exiled from their own people.

Thus far only the first verse of the Prophecy had come to fruition—and Hanumi understood, suddenly, why her father had become so fearsome in the past months. *Until the bright world has spun twice-ten around, the Harbinger had spoken, for the Heavenly Child shall strike the King's heart...*

The twentieth anniversary of Kalataro's coronation had passed with much celebration the previous year. But the twentieth anniversary of the war's ending—that was *this* year, and there were rumblings of a second rebellion in the slums of Adolinë. Kalataro feared for his life.

“The ring,” Hanumi whispered, the symbol sparking to life in her memory. The prisoner's ring—it bore this symbol. And Hanumi...she had...

“You buried this information well, Sire,” Isléya said, nodding to her King. “I admit, until you directed me to the archives, I did not know the Harbinger and the Heretic were bound by blood. This, the symbol of their House...”

“Not a House,” Kalataro scoffed. “They were not *nobility*. They were crafters—metalworkers!”

“And yet they came close to overthrowing your provenance,” Hanumi pointed out under her breath.

Kalataro loomed over her. “*And yet*,” he growled, “they are *dead*, and I am King, and their stories are all but wiped from history!”

“Except for that ring,” Hanumi said, feeling very faint. Fury pulsed off Kalataro in waves, choking her through their bond, and worst of all she knew his anger was just. If the Prophecy woke, he would fall to the “Heavenly Child”—and if the Heretic was the “Martyr of Heavens,” as her own people called her, then her heir would be the one to strike the blow.

Her *heir*. The one who bore her ring—who had been safely locked in the dungeons of Sérakka, until *Hanumi* had set them free.

“You see, now, child,” Kalataro said, his voice dropping to a deadly softness, “why I am so cross with your father?”

“I see it, Nuvo,” Hanumi croaked. She bowed her head. “We—I have done wrong.”

“Sire?” Isléya inquired with a polite cough. “Have you further need of my skills? Or would you like me to interrogate the prisoner?”

Kalataro glared at her, but Isléya met his gaze steadily, not even the hint of a gleam dusting her cheeks. Hanumi could feel herself blazing blue from her ears to her toes, and she hated Isléya for her perfect composure.

“That will not be necessary, Isléya,” Kalataro said curtly.

Isléya bowed her head, long silver hair falling elegantly about her face. “Very well, Sire. If you need me again, but call for me, and I will be at your service.”

As she retreated, Hanumi forced herself to take a breath. It would not do to lose control of her emotions now, not when Isléya had been so calm and collected. She needed to prove to her father she had that strength, that intelligence; or, at least, that she was not an utter fool.

“Nuvo,” Hanumi said, bowing to her King and father, “I have made a grave error.”

“You do not even know the depth of that truth,” Kalataro hissed, grabbing her chin and forcing her upright. “For years I have searched for this mark, this *ring*, and you have cast it aside as a frivolity!”

“I will make it up to you, Sire,” Hanumi vowed.

“How?” Kalataro spat. “The traitor will have slipped back into the muck of Adolinë by now, or fled the river entirely if they have any sense at all!”

“No,” Hanumi said, surprising even herself.

Kalataro’s eyes bulged out of his head. “*No?*”

“No, I don’t think they would.” She closed her eyes, recalling the words of the Prophecy every citizen of Sérakka and Adolinë knew by heart: *The Heavenly Child shall strike the King’s heart...*

“If they bear the Heretic’s ring,” she said slowly, “then they must be her heir.”

“Harmelo said they knew nothing of the symbol,” Kalataro snapped.

“Surely that is what they want us to think,” Hanumi countered. The threads of the story were tying themselves together in her mind, and she could see her father’s curiosity getting the better of him. She felt him try to pry her thoughts out of her, but she drew up her mental defenses, wanting to make the connections herself.

“Nuvo,” she said, “perhaps they *wanted* to be captured. Perhaps they wanted to get close to you—to—” She hesitated. Thus far, no one—not Kalataro, nor Meleq, nor Isléya—had mentioned the Prophecy directly, and what it entailed should its doom unfurl. “To attack you,” she finished clumsily, not able or willing to speak the word *kill*.

“Then you have let them loose and free in our fair city—!” Kalataro cried, gripping her shoulder so tightly it hurt, but Hanumi shrugged herself free and scrambled backward. Ai, had he gone *mad*? Certainly the wild look in his eyes made it seem so.

“No, *no*, I sent them back across the river,” she stammered. “Nuvo, you must believe me—I saw them board the boat, I saw it sail east—” A sudden burst of inspiration flashed within her spirit: “They must be *regrouping*! Surely they have allies—the Heretic’s heir must be a powerful figure within the rebellion—”

Some of the mindless fury in Kalataro’s eyes cleared away, and he leaned back, still glaring at her. “The rebels,” he growled. “Yes—of course those scum would be working with her brat...”

He smiled suddenly, something *hungry* hidden behind his teeth, and swiftly grabbed Hanumi and pulled her into a tight embrace. Just as quickly, he shoved her away, and through

their bond Hanumi could feel his thoughts tangling together, working faster than she could follow.

“I will find them again, your Majesty,” she promised, trying to hide the shakiness in her voice. “And when I do, they will lead me not only to their ring, but also to their co-conspirators. We will crush the rebellion beneath our heel, as you did twenty years ago, and keep the peace in our cities!”

Kalataro laughed, a booming sound both fey and fearsome. “Spoken like a true Vasti royal,” he cried. “Ai, if you succeed, Hanumi—this will redeem you utterly!”

Hanumi lifted her chin proudly. “I will not fail you again, Nuvo,” she promised. “To ensure the power of your throne, to render the Prophecy void, to set the Adolinérim in their place—for this, for *you*, I will prevail.”

(twenty years ago)

She had always known it would end like this.

He was a storm, strong and invincible, and she was but a lick of flame against his wrath. She had been doomed from the moment they first kissed, from the moment she opened her body and soul to him. No, earlier: from the moment she knew she loved him, she was cursed.

Perhaps even from the moment they first met.

She had always known it would end like this.

But that did not mean she would sacrifice her pride in death.

They'd taken her baby from her—her baby, her *baby*, they'd *taken* her *baby*—but they could not take away her pride. She would not regret; she would stand tall, or kneel tall as she was forced into that same position he once had assumed for her sake.

Naravi Toltarra held her head high as her lover's sword came down, and died with the echo of his kiss upon her lips.

chapter three

Réyan simply could not believe their good fortune. Captured by a Sérakkari general and dragged across the river, right into the belly of the beast, they'd thought their life was all but over. And *then* when the *princess*, King Kalataro's *daughter*, strolled into the prison with the keys—that was the end, they'd been sure. They would be interrogated and executed. The King was not known for his mercy, especially when it came to people who had something he wanted. (Not that Réyan knew *why* their ring was suddenly so valuable.)

Except—she hadn't taken them to the throne room, or a torture chamber, or anything of the sort. She'd wrinkled her nose at them, insulted their “petty little ring,” and told them they were free to go.

Free? Réyan wasn't about to stick around and find out if she was serious. They let her lead them out of their cell, and were about to rush to the riverside and sneak onto a boat heading across to Adolinë when she stopped them.

This is it, they thought grimly. *This is where she kills me.*

But instead she tossed them a coin, wrinkling her nose in distaste, and said, “Get back to your side of the river.”

She didn't need to tell them twice. Réyan hitched a ride on the next boat across the Fohasë—*legally*, even—and didn't look back.

Now to find Falaci. They had a pretty good idea of where their friend had run off to, but they weren't excited about crawling to the rebels asking for help. Maybe Falaci had gone her own way by now. Maybe the safe house she'd judged unsafe wasn't dangerous anymore. It wasn't very likely, but Réyan wasn't going to go to the rebels until they had no other choice.

The first hiding place they checked had been ransacked. That wasn't much of a surprise, really; they hadn't dared camp out there in a month. Réyan couldn't even get close to the second; the area was crawling with soldiers. And the third, the one closest to the rebel hideout, looked exactly the same as it had when they and Falaci left it.

It seemed impossible that they'd been there only this morning. Today was quickly turning out to be the longest day of Réyan's life.

Well, if they were here, they might as well pick up the last of their supplies. Passing over their long-since-stale emergency rations, Réyan shoved the last morsel of dry bread into their mouth and yanked out the sturdy length of rope Falaci had hidden in the walls. They didn't bother sorting through the pile of rags Falaci slept on, or nabbing the threadbare blanket the two of them shared, or even filching Falaci's "secret" stash of lockpicks. The Sérakkarim soldiers hadn't bothered to search Réyan past confiscating their knife, which the princess had even given *back* to them upon their release, and it wasn't as if the blanket did much. The season was turning to summer, anyway, and soon it would be too hot for such small comforts.

Well, unless Falaci had found some new safe spot, that left just one place where she could be. Grimly, Réyan shouldered their bag and set out in the direction of the rebel camp.

The rebellion wasn't really all that impressive. More a ragtag band of malcontents than a truly organized resistance, they had taken the remnants of a half-burned tavern as their headquarters and the block around it as their "territory." Rumor had it that fifteen years earlier, when Sérakka's dominion over Adolinë hadn't been quite so complete, a different rebellion had all but ruled the city—but now King Kalataro's control was so absolute that any attempt at fighting against him was laughable. The only other source of power in Adolinë was the

priesthood, and everyone knew that the High Priestess did everything she possibly could to suck up to Kalataro and win favor for herself and her lackeys.

And the current leader of the rebels—well. Réyan simply could not *stand* them.

“Comrade,” greeted a stick-skinny redhead, emerging from the shadows. Réyan tensed, narrowing their eyes and wishing that when the princess had released them she’d seen fit to give them back their dagger. But the ring on their finger was cool at the moment, so they figured this person meant them no harm.

“Hey,” Réyan replied. “Just...passing through. Don’t mind me.” The less they could manage to interact with the rebels, of whom this person was undoubtedly a part, the better.

The redhead raised an eyebrow. “Without paying your respects to the leader? Vakila will be displeased.”

“Vakila will not want to see me,” they said flatly. “Let me pass.”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, but there’s been trouble recently,” the rebel warned. “A thief got taken to Sérakka and murdered without justice. We’re not to let any stranger pass through without interrogation—the rumor says a priest turned them in.”

Réyan sighed. “That’s not what happened,” they muttered.

“Oh? And *you* know better?”

Having been the supposedly-executed thief, Réyan did, but they weren’t about to waste time explaining themselves to this fool. “Look. I’m not a stranger. You recognized me, didn’t you?”

The rebel wrinkled her nose. “I have seen you before. I don’t know *who* you are.”

“Well, Vakila does, and we’ll both be happier to have missed each other,” Réyan said shortly.

“Give me your name first,” she demanded.

“Give me yours. *Comrade.*”

“Marsavu,” she said easily. “See? It’s not hard.”

She gave no family name, Réyan noted, but it was hardly unusual for someone in the rebellion to cast aside their kin for the sake of their cause. Or perhaps she simply didn’t trust them with her full name.

“Réyan,” they said through gritted teeth. “My name is Réyan.”

Marsavu’s face changed instantly. “Oh. *You.*”

“So you understand now that Vakila won’t want to see me?” they demanded.

In response, Marsavu drew a knife from her belt. “No, Réyan. I have specific orders that Vakila very much *does* want to see you.”

Réyan clenched their fist. Dragged before tyrants twice in one day—and this time the ring didn’t even have the decency to put them on their guard.

“No need to threaten me, comrade,” they grumbled. “I’ll go.”

...

“Réyan Úver,” drawled Vakila. “I thought you knew better than to slink around rebel territory.”

“I don’t particularly want to see you, either,” Réyan snapped. “And please. As if you’re not *also* an úver.”

Vakila sniffed. “I didn’t mean it as an insult. Simply a fact.”

“You certainly didn’t mean it as a call to our kinship as orphans,” Réyan shot back.

“Show some respect,” Marsavu growled, her knife too close to Réyan’s back for comfort.
“Our leader’s done so much for this city—”

“They’ve done nothing for *me*.” Réyan glared at them. “None of you lot have.”

“So why do you return?” Vakila demanded. “You know I never want to see your face again.”

“I had a bit of a mishap with some soldiers earlier today,” they said vaguely. They didn’t want to become some kind of martyr of the rebellion if people found out that they were the person who had been “executed”—and had somehow survived and escaped back to Adolinë.
“My buddy and I got separated, and I think she came here.”

“Ah. Yes.” Vakila smirked. “Falaci Téyeq.”

“Where have you got her locked up?” Réyan demanded.

“She’s not locked up. She came to us willingly, asking for help.” Vakila smirked. “Have you come, also, to beg for our aid?”

“Let me take her off your hands, and I’ll call us even,” Réyan said flatly. There was no way they were going to give Vakila the satisfaction of *begging*. Not in a thousand years.

“Téyeq fits in quite well here,” Vakila said. “Are you sure she *wants* to go with you? From what she’s told me, life on the streets is rough when you’ve only got one ‘buddy.’ Perhaps we can offer her more than you.”

Réyan balled their fist. “Then that’s her choice,” they snapped. “But let her make it, not you. Where *is* she?”

Before Vakila could answer, there was a commotion at the entrance of the hideout.

“Vakila!” a deep voice cried. “Vakila, there’s been a breach—!”

Réyan turned just in time to see the sentry collapse, a dagger in his back. A Sérakkari soldier forced their way inside, yanking their weapon from his still-gasping body, but before they could make any further move, a dart pierced them in the throat, and they crumpled to the ground beside their victim.

Marsavu snarled, another dart in her hand, poised to throw. “Intruders!” she growled. “Vakila, get out, I can—”

“You *idiot*,” a petulant voice complained. “I said *not* to attack—”

Réyan bolted, searching for whatever exit Marsavu wanted her leader to flee from. Falaci could wait, or look for them herself when she heard they’d been here; right now, they needed to get out, fast. It didn’t matter who caught them, they’d be dead meat either way.

What’s worse? they thought to themselves grimly as they ducked under a table. *Executed for leading the Sérakkarim crown to the heart of the rebellion, or executed by the Sérakkarim crown for consorting with rebels?*

They decided they didn’t want to find out. Better to escape and be free of it all. At this rate, maybe they should even flee the Fohasë altogether.

Except that they couldn’t find the damn secret exit—and instead of showing them where it was, Vakila had stood and drawn their sword to face the intruder. What was the *point* of having underlings if you didn’t let them die for you? The princess certainly seemed to have figured that out, at least, if her glassy-eyed bodyguard was anything to go by.

“You are not welcome here,” Vakila declared, advancing slowly but steadily.

“I don’t know where ‘here’ is, but I am welcome everywhere,” the princess sniffed. “I do not care who you are, only that you return that—*fugitive!*”

Vakila halted, astonished. Réyan's heart sank. She wasn't using them to find the rebels—she apparently didn't even know these *were* the rebels—she was just looking for *them*.

“Who?” Marsavu demanded.

“Them!”

Everyone turned to stare at Réyan, still crouched under the table and suddenly feeling very, very foolish and very, very dead.

“Réyan?” Vakila asked. “Why in Olunë's name do you want *them*?”

Réyan had a pretty good idea—or, they *thought* they did—but they weren't going to stick around and find out. Grabbing their chance as everyone paused in confusion, they rolled out from under the table, smashing into Marsavu's legs and sending her dart flying *just* shy of taking out the princess. They didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. They certainly didn't want the royal brat tailing them—but if she called on her father in her dying breaths...

Somehow, miraculously, they made it to the door and raced out into the alley. They'd half-expected to see a whole platoon of soldiers backing up their princess, but there was no one. Well, they'd never have made it that far with so many people, Réyan supposed. All the better.

Where to now? For the time being, Réyan dismissed that problem. The most important thing right now was to get *away*. They bolted down the alley, keeping an eye out for any possible place to hide, and for a brief minute a strange elation soared in their chest. They couldn't hear anyone behind them—they had *escaped*, they were *alive*, they were *free*!

But then, of course, the ring on their finger blazed white-hot, and Réyan's bitten-back laugh turned into a grunt of pain.

Damn this thing! If they'd never had it in the first place, they'd be relaxing back at their hideout with Falaci, enjoying the fruits of their theft.

And they'd gone all the way to Vakila's court to find Falaci, but hadn't even *seen* her.

Could this day get any worse?

"Fugitive!" cried a shrill voice, far too close for comfort.

Of course. Of *course* it could.

Barely thinking, Réyan leapt onto the scaffolding of the nearest tower-house. Their arms burned as they climbed, up and up and up. This was still close to rebel territory; there weren't any priests around. Hopefully if they ducked into that window near the top, the occupants wouldn't be home—

A clattering below. Réyan dared a glance back down, their gut whooshing at the sight of the ground so far away—but even more so at the sight of the princess, a dagger held between her teeth, scrambling up after them. She was much more agile than Réyan had expected, and lighter, too; she seemed to leap effortlessly from bar to bar, shortening the distance between them.

At least Vakila's not after me, too, Réyan thought hysterically, pulling themself up with one final burst of strength and toppling into the open window at the top of the tower-house.

When they got their bearings, they weren't sure if they should laugh or cry. The room was empty—thank Olunë for that—but it was well and truly *empty*. Not even a box or broken bedspring to be seen—and when Réyan rushed to the door, it was locked.

Their first thought—a foolish one, in retrospect—was to press the burning ring against the lock in the hopes that it would melt. Trying that wasted a few precious seconds before Réyan remembered that they were a thief and a sneak, and that when the princess had let them go—*hah*—she'd given them back their hairpins. They fumbled in their pocket for a pin, bending it and jamming it into the lock, jiggling it around wildly. They knew this wasn't as effective as it would be if they were calm, but the intensity of the situation—hearing the princess slap a hand

over the windowsill and start to pull herself into the room—removed any sense of cool concentration Réyan may have once possessed.

The lock wouldn't budge. Réyan snarled, shoving harder—and the pin broke off, its end buried inside the mechanism where it would be impossible to get out. They were well and truly doomed.

“Got you,” the princess snarled, breathing heavily, her knife at their back.

Réyan froze, more terrified now than they'd ever been in their entire life. Even facing General Harmelo had been nothing compared to this.

“Turn around,” the princess ordered.

Slowly, Réyan obeyed. Their mind had gone completely blank: they had absolutely no idea how they would get out of this one. The only thing they knew was that if they did what she said, their death would at least be a little less immediate.

The cool and confident royal that had set them free was long gone: the princess's hair was frizzy and wild, her cheeks flushed, her ears flared. Had she been shorter before? Réyan wondered, giddy with terror. They hadn't remembered her towering over them like she did now.

“You,” she panted, “are under arrest—for escaping the King's justice.”

Réyan's throat worked. “But—you let me go.”

“A move made in error,” she said shortly. “Now it shall be corrected.”

“But—”

She lifted her dagger, an inch from their throat. “Do not protest. You are now the property of the royal line of Vasti, subject to our dominion—”

Suddenly she broke off, her face paling, her sharp eyes fading into the distance. Réyan tensed further (if possible) and stared as she seemed to lose track of them entirely. Yet despite

the tremble in her hands, the dagger was still far too close to risk anything resembling escape. Besides, they had nowhere to go.

“No,” she whispered, her nose twitching strangely. “N—*no*—no!”

Réyan bit back a demand to know what she was talking about. They couldn’t risk offending her, not right now.

“No, you can’t—he’s—Nuvo!” A sob wrenched its way out of the princess’s chest, and the dagger clattered to the floor. She sank down to her knees beside it, already wailing and weeping, and Réyan was so shocked that they couldn’t even flee for their life.

“Wh...” they mumbled instead, dazed and shocked and certainly not thinking right. “What are you—?”

“He’s—I can *feel* him—” the princess wailed. “I can—I *can feel him*—”

“He—?” *Nuvo*, she’d said. *Father*.

A cold pit opened up in Réyan’s stomach. Her bond—her father-bond. Something had happened—something bad—her father. Her father, the *King*.

They ought to run. They ought to scramble back down out of the tower window and disappear into the depths of the city. They ought to hide, lay low, and then find a way out; find a way to make a new life somewhere else. Dorfhak, they thought distantly. A faraway land of spices and sand, where no one could find them. Or—the Guléryuri Forest. No one who went in there ever came out; it was the perfect place for an exile—

But they were frozen to the ground. Something horrible had just happened—to *the King*—and as soon as the news spread the city would burn, in one way or another. If they left now, it would be without anything. It would be without Falaci, even if they were only going to

leave her with a goodbye. It would be certain death out in the wild, if the soldiers didn't catch them first.

"*Nuvo!*" the princess cried out once more, clawing at her chest like she wanted to rip her heart out.

"The King!" came a cry from outside: a herald. Someone had found out. Of course— whoever discovered the issue in Sérakka would immediately inform the Prince Consort, who would pass it to the High Priestess using *datikë*. Consort Meleq and Abari Paziran were notoriously close, to the point of scandal, almost.

"The King is dead!" the herald proclaimed.

On the ground, the princess fell back, eyes glassy.

On Réyan's finger, the ring blazed bright and hot—then cooled rapidly, as if informing them that their fortune had turned.

(twenty years and one day ago)

There was something terribly wrong. Lisera couldn't feel their sister any longer; where had she gone? Why was there so much shouting? Why was it so dark? Why—

Why was their baby not in their arms?

That last question overtook their mind entirely, the world narrowing down into that one panic. Their baby—where was their baby?

They stumbled to their feet, the world spinning around them. They couldn't see anything, couldn't feel anything but the buzz of chaos and terror all around them. Their baby—who had taken their baby?

A rush of dizziness knocked them to their feet. No, *no!* Not now, no, they couldn't succumb to a vision *now*—

A light. Lisera crawled toward it, their body weak from their recent birth but their desperate need to find their baby overwhelming all exhaustion. Their baby, their baby—they tried to feel along the bond that had been there so recently, when the child was safe in their womb, but to have the babe ripped from their arms so soon...

And their other bonds were cold and dead, too. Kal had broken theirs long ago, but sometimes Lisera still expected to feel him, and now that Naravi was gone too they felt the absence all the clearer. What had happened? She'd promised, *promised* she wouldn't leave them, not again. And where was *her* baby? Had she taken both of the children? Why would she do that—why would she leave Lisera behind?

They reached the light. It was the flicker of a torch outside the window, disappearing over the horizon almost as soon as Lisera caught a glimpse of it. They could still hear the echoes of the mob, jeering, shouting Naravi's name—

They'd been found. Naravi had been taken. Diri and Tokero must be dead, or hiding—and where were the children?

Lisera turned their face away, into the darkness—and their breath failed them.

A child.

A child, lying still upon the ground, as if it had been thrown aside—

And only *one* child.

Had they taken Naravi's baby, too?

Had they done this to Lisera's baby?

A sob catching in their throat, Lisera knelt and cradled the infant in their arms. The child was cold and still, and they could feel no life-beat within it. Only the faintest flicker of a dying bond remained, and Lisera knew: their baby was dead.

They collapsed on the ground, losing all their resolve, and the vision swept over them before they could muster any will to resist it.

chapter four

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. The King is dead.

The words echoed in Hanumi's mind over and over again, the only thing she could comprehend. Her soul was in utter agony, the bond connecting her with her father torn away with sudden violence. He was dead—she had *felt* him die—had seen it through his eyes, for a brief moment, just as the knife slid into his back—

But even that excruciating sensation was fading, now, and no matter how tightly she clung she could feel his spirit slipping away, down the Dreamriver and into the Eternal Sea.

She shuddered, curling into a ball and sobbing without any care for her surroundings. She felt along her bond with her nunu, but though she could feel his presence, he did not respond. Of course—Meleq was the Consort, not just Kalataro's husband. He had to deal with the politics of it all; he was probably deep in datikë with Abari Paziran.

Which meant—Hanumi was alone. For all her friends and allies in court, she only had bonds with her fathers. How could a princess truly trust her so-called friends, when the push and pull of politics and prestige was impossible to untangle from their personal affections? Hanumi didn't even trust her fathers half the time. She didn't even trust herself.

“You're not *alone*,” snapped a vaguely familiar voice. Hanumi shuddered, lifting her eyes, uncomprehending. Of course she was alone. Who was this person to claim she wasn't?

“As much as I wish you *were* alone, I am unfortunately here with you.”

Hanumi blinked, then wiped her tears from her eyes. She focused on the person in front of her, her mind slowly coming back to the physical world. She was—in a tower. She had climbed it; her arms ached from the effort. She had been chasing—someone.

The prisoner. Right.

“What are you doing here?” she croaked.

“Running away from *you*,” they scoffed.

“I mean—what are you doing here *still*? Why *haven't* you left?”

The prisoner, the fugitive—she really couldn't remember their name—looked away.

“You kidding? The city's in chaos already. If I go down there, who knows what could happen.

At least in here, it's just me and you, and uh...you're not really in any condition to do anything to me, not anymore.”

“Where are we...?” Hanumi asked. She knew she should fight back against those accusations, but they weren't wrong. And she was tired—tired and aching, body and spirit, too weary to protest.

“Uh.” The fugitive glanced out the window they'd climbed through. “Think this used to be the crafters' corridor? Before your nuvo's taxes drove half of them out of business.”

Hanumi flinched. “*Don't* talk about my nuvo.”

“Right. He's dead. Sore spot, I understand.”

“I will—if you don't—I swear I'll—” But Hanumi didn't even have a threat to spit. Her confidence, her drive, her source of power was gone. Without her father, who was she? Was she even still a princess?

—or was she now the *Queen*?

That sudden burst of light gave her enough strength to stumble to her feet. She glared at the prisoner, trying to stare them down for all they were taller than her; she thought they shrank back a little, though not enough.

“*You* did this,” she growled. “*You* killed him. I know it—you must have—”

The fugitive *laughed*, high and hysterical. “You’ve really lost it,” they giggled. “Me? Kill the *King*? I was here *with you* when he died! I saw you feel it! And how in the world would I have achieved that, huh? I’ve never even seen the sot!”

A glint in the sunlight: as they waved their hands around in agitation, the ring on their finger—the ring Kalataro had been so desperate to find—caught Hanumi’s eye. She lunged forward, catching the fugitive off guard enough to grab their hand and yank at the ring.

“What are you *doing*?” they yelped. “Why is everyone so obsessed with my ring all of a sudden?”

“It’s not *yours*,” Hanumi hissed. She remembered what Isléya had said: *The Harbinger and the Heretic, bound by blood*. “That’s the symbol of House Toltarra—enemies of the crown—if you’ve got it, if you *claim* it, then you’re one of them!”

The prisoner wrenched their hand away from her. “You’ve gone mad,” they said flatly. “i don’t know who Toltarra is—”

“They’re a family,” she snarled. “Siblings—*rebels*. The Harbinger Lisera and Naravi the Heretic. And—I thought they’d been killed, but they both had *children*, at the end of the war, if you’ve got that, then you—”

“I’m an *úver*,” the fugitive said flatly. “I’ve never had a family.”

“Everyone has a family,” Hanumi said. “Even if you’ve disowned yours—”

“I’ve *never had a family!*” the fugitive shouted. “And if you’re so upset that you don’t have one anymore, either, then you should—”

Hanumi punched them. It felt good.

But her relief was short lived, for the fugitive kneed her in the groin, right where it hurt, and she doubled over in pain. The next thing she knew, her own dagger was pressed to her throat. They must have stolen it while she was insensible in her grief.

“This day,” the prisoner panted, “has been the absolute *worst* day of my life. I have been captured, interrogated, dragged across the river to your *foul* city, imprisoned, threatened, let go just for you to *chase* me down like it’s some kind of game, abandoned by my only friend, humiliated in front of those stupid rebels, and now the King is dead and it’s somehow it’s *my* fault. And you know what? Somehow the worst part is *still* being stuck in this tower with you!”

“Do not speak to me this way, prisoner,” she rasped.

They glared. “I have a name, you know.”

“Oh, I thought you were an *úver*.”

They pressed her knife closer to her skin, drawing a prick of blood. “*Réyan*. My name is *Réyan*.”

“And who gave that name to you?” Hanumi hissed. “Your mother, Naravi Toltarra? Was it the same time she gave you that ring?”

Réyan’s hand trembled. Then they dropped the knife, stumbling backward. “I am *Réyan Úver*,” they said dully. “I don’t—I think...there *was* someone. Who said they...who said they were my...my mother’s kin. But I never knew her, and they—left me here. When I was a child.”

“Tragic,” Hanumi croaked, rubbing at her throat. “Tell me again what it’s like to lose a parent, *Réyan*.”

They cursed at her, but it was without any heat. “You are the worst person I’ve had the misfortune of encountering today, and that includes that awful general of yours.”

“Harmelo Cobak?” she guessed, wrinkling her nose. For all her nunu seemed to admire him, she’d always been a bit unsettled by him. “How very rude.”

“Maybe he did it,” Réyan mused.

“Did—what?”

“Killed the King,” Réyan said. “Hah. It’s just as plausible as *me* doing it.”

“Do *not* jest,” Hanumi snarled. “That is my *father* you speak of!”

“It’s as much a joke as your accusation,” they shot back. “If this really is the ring of—of Totalis—”

“Toltarra.”

“Whatever. Even if it *is* some heirloom of the Martyr, that doesn’t mean anything about *me*. For all I know it’s just been stolen.”

“The Prophecy,” Hanumi hissed. “The Harbinger’s prophecy—it says, it says that the Heretic’s child will kill the King—!”

“And you think *I’m* the Martyr’s child.” Réyan scoffed. “You’re even madder than I thought.”

“You’ve got her *ring*—”

“I’ve got a malfunctioning glow-ring that refuses to get off my finger!” they cried. “You want it? *Take it!* Just try! Here!”

They shoved their hand in her face. Hanumi flinched back momentarily, then snatched at their fingers. The moment she touched the ring, it glowed hot and burning, and after a few ineffectual tugs at Réyan’s knuckle, she was forced to let go as the heat became too much.

“How can you *stand* that?” she growled, sticking her tender fingers into her mouth to cool.

“It’s not *always* burning,” Réyan muttered, but Hanumi could see the blisters forming around the ring. “And I usually keep it on a chain—but I put it on this morning and now I can’t *take it off*—”

“It recognizes you as its owner,” Hanumi insisted. “Your mother—”

“*I don’t have a mother!*”

“Neither do I,” Hanumi snapped. “And now I’ve only got one father, and it’s *your* fault—”

“I was *here with you*—”

A deafening *crack* resounded outside the tower-house. Réyan froze, backing up to glance out the window while still keeping Hanumi in their line of sight. Hanumi peered over their shoulder, and gasped just as Réyan breathed out a foul curse.

In the streets below, Sérakkarim soldiers were amassing, pointing their spears at the citizens of Adolinë, who hurled rocks at them, screaming taunts and insults. Hanumi’s ears wilted to hear such vile things said of her father, and she was sure her whole face was flushed blue in anger, if grief had not drained the color out of her entirely.

Sérakka’s noble soldiers would quell this riot swiftly, Hanumi knew. She watched with a certain vicious satisfaction as one captain shoved a rioter out of their way with their spear, and blood spilled upon the ground. Good—the Adolinérim had done this; let them pay with their blood, let them feel her pain.

Beside her, Réyan’s body was wound tight as a bowstring, ready to burst into action at any moment. Hanumi’s gaze slid down to their feet, where her knife lay discarded on the floor.

The King’s noble daughter makes vengeance her part...

She could end this now. It didn't matter that Réyan professed ignorance; it didn't matter that they had been with her in the moment of Kalataro's death. They were guilty—the Harbinger doomed them so—and it was *Hanumi's* fate to set things right.

“Don't even *think* about it,” Réyan hissed the moment she started to bend down. They stepped on the dagger, placing the blade firmly beneath their foot. “You're *not* killing me here.”

“Who would miss you?” Hanumi snapped. “You said yourself, you've no family—you're an úver, not even your kinfolk can stand you, if that scene in the tavern I walked into says anything—”

“I have *friends*,” Réyan snarled. “That's *why* I went crawling to Vakila, looking for—” They cut themselves off, eyes narrowed. “You don't even know half of what's going on,” they realized. “You don't even know how close you got...”

“And *you* know, O Ignorant One?” Hanumi demanded. In the streets below, the rabble of Adolinérim rushed the Sérakkarim soldiers, and bodies began to fall. With savage satisfaction, Hanumi saw that only a few soldiers lost their footing. The smell of blood wafted into the air, and she lost what little patience she'd managed to grasp onto: she dove for the dagger, knocking Réyan off-balance—

But Réyan stood their ground. They kicked the dagger across the floor and braced themselves against the wall, grabbing Hanumi's arm and flipping her over. Hanumi wheezed as the breath was knocked right out of her, and in the ensuing struggle she found herself half-hanging out of the window, held up only by Réyan's grip on their throat. The ground was dizzyingly far away, and terror seized her as grief had in the moment of her father's death. If she fell—if Réyan killed her here—

But though Réyan's face was flushed gold with anger, their eyes glittering in the light of the setting sun, they did not shove her out of the tower-house and to her death.

“You—*swear* to me,” they hissed, panting, “that you'll *stop trying to kill me*—or I'll—I'll—”

“Kill me?” Hanumi croaked, her gaze unfocused, her blood singing as the acrid ting of the brewing massacre below her wafted into the air. “Like you killed my—”

Réyan pushed her further out the window, and Hanumi shut up, her vision spotting with black. She laughed desperately, feeling already more than half dead. “You—you *bastard*—” she choked out.

“If you think,” Réyan growled, “that somehow *I* am the one who killed the King, because of that *damned* Prophecy somehow relating to my *damned* ring—then—then—who else will think the same?”

Hanumi squinted up at them, astonished. Their grip loosened on her neck, and she whimpered as she slid back another inch toward death.

“I—” she choked out— “there are—my nunu—General Cobak—Tari Isléya—”

In one swift movement, Réyan tugged Hanumi back inside the tower-house, and she tumbled onto the floor. Shoulders shaking with something between tears and laughter, Hanumi let out a pitiful whine that devolved into a series of racking coughs as she fought to regain her breath and balance.

Réyan picked up her dagger, holding it threateningly before them, but their arms were trembling, and they hadn't killed her when they'd had the chance. Hanumi wiped her eyes, feeling as if all the world had gone mad, and herself with it.

“The consort,” Réyan said grimly, “the general, and this—Tari Isléya. That’s all? That’s everyone who might be after me?”

Hanumi smiled crookedly. “And me.”

“No.” Réyan grimaced. “You’ll be with *me*.”

“Or—or *what*?” Hanumi demanded. “And what do you mean—*where* will I be?”

Réyan glanced out the window. “We can’t stay here,” they said flatly. “Can’t you smell that?”

“The blood?” Indeed, that was the main scent that filled Hanumi’s senses, driving her more than a little out of her mind.

“No. The *smoke*.”

Hanumi shivered. Now that they mentioned it...

“We’ve set the city alight,” Réyan said, their voice tinged with mixed disgust and pride. “We know our hiding places, our safe places. *You* don’t. Your soldiers will burn.”

“And you want to bring *me* to your safe places?” Hanumi said in disbelief.

“No.” Réyan’s eyes glinted like molten gold. “No, I’m taking you *out* of the city.”

“To do *what*?”

They closed their eyes for a moment. When they opened them again, they were hard and bright, seeming to stare directly into her soul.

Just like the way Kalataro’s emerald eyes could.

A strange new feeling overwhelmed Hanumi. It was not unlike a bond, for all she and Réyan had only just met, and had nothing in common but their immediate circumstances. She was helpless to resist as they delved into her mind, prying out her secrets, and she cried out, jerking back.

“To clear my name,” Réyan declared. “To find out who *really* killed the King. And—”

They lifted their fist, where the Ring of Toltarra burned red-hot on their finger.

“—to get this cursed thing off my finger, so I can be free of it, and this Prophecy, and whatever else you’ve dragged me into.”