

## ABSTRACT

*Mara*

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Stories are a way for us to share what we love and believe to everyone in the world. It's a medium that has the ability to cross all divisions, no matter our differences. With storytelling comes the responsibility of what truth, or danger, we choose to create and give to the world. With this in mind, my story takes on the task of giving a villain's backstory rather than a hero's, attempting to show that even the worst of characters that pop off of the page have so much more to them than just inherent evil.

*Mara*

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## PREFACE

Stories are the bridges around the world that transcend time and space. Whether we are reading stories of King David from the Bible, the trials of Macbeth from Shakespeare's writings in the sixteenth century, or Katniss Everdeen's fight with President Snow from our generation, we are experiencing something that has managed to survive and make its way into our lives. Stories such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have been credited to starting wars, others such as *Harry Potter* caused stirs over "devil-worshiping propaganda" and cause many to ban such tales from their children's bedside tables. Powerful stories stick with us and are passed down through generations. I do not know about you, but something coming into my life and sticking around in this manner sounds anything but neutral.

I will never forget the moment during my sophomore year's Masterworks in Drama class when Dr. SJ Murray practiced her TEDx speech on storytelling. SJ spoke of how stories get our brains whirling with power, calling on all of its corners to fire up and pull together to form the story in our mind's eye. She was right that I would never forget her black standard poodle hurtling through fields and over fences to go run the cattle. As she spoke of it, I felt the sun on my face, the grass brushing against my legs; I saw the cattle, the dog's ears flopping as he jumped the fence, and I felt his excitement, his anxiety as he waited for the door to open. I remember it all very well today.

But picture if SJ had told the story slightly different. What if the dog was

beaten viciously for running from the house? What if his owner had not chased after him and could not have cared less that the dog was gone? What if the poodle had never gotten the chance at his dream and herded the cows? Well, I would not have walked away feeling so happy from the story, for one. But for example, if SJ had told a story of a dog trying to escape his house to simply fulfill his calling as a herder and was horrifically beaten for doing it, leaving this tale with the feeling that the owner was in the right for doing this to the animal, what would that story teach us then?

These ethics behind storytelling are what set me off on the adventure that became my thesis. Originally, I wanted to create something like the books I had adored growing up, namely *Harry Potter*. I began in the spring semester of 2015 and continued on into the summer of 2016 writing a story of a little girl and boy with magical powers who had to return a magical object to set the world right again. I wanted to create my own world, something along the lines of *Eragon's* story, and settle them in a sort of fairyland. This was the original outline for that story:

**Opening Scene:** The back yard of the orphanage is an open yard surrounded by old, curled trees. The orphans circle around the area to watch as Bryony (15) takes over Hadley's (15) fight with Dalon (14) in the yard.

**Ordinary World:** Ever since she left the streets of Labrynhor, Bryony has lived in the orphanage with her best and only friend, Hadley. It lies on the far side of the village, across from the ruins rumored to be the home of a witch.

**Brewing Storm:** Dalon steals Bryony's necklace and tells her she can get it back by going to the witch's ruins at midnight. Headmistress Carroll threatens to throw her out if she steps out of line once more.

Inciting Incident: Bryony and Hadley meet the witch at the ruins. Bryony discovers that her necklace belongs to a magical group, and she has been chosen, along with Hadley, to return the necklace to the Tree of Power.

Dilemma: Dalon rats them out for being out late. Carroll plans to send Bryony away.

Crossing the Threshold: Bryony flees the orphanage with Hadley to join the witch, Zinnia, on the quest.

New World: The three travel to the next village to get across the river. Zinnia shows them ways to use the magic.

Gaining Support: Brooks joins the group to take them across the river.

Midpoint: Zinnia is left behind in order for them to escape to the river. Although they're almost out of daylight, Bryony decides to enter the forest. Brooks stays behind.

All Downhill: Bryony uses magic without Hadley, unknowingly draining him of power and energy. She almost kills him trying to get into the garden. She gives Zinnia power to heal him, but Zinnia turns on them both. She uses their magic to get to the tree herself to keep her powers forever.

Brick Wall: Bryony wants to go back so she does not hurt Hadley anymore. He and Brooks help convince Bryony to go back and fight Zinnia.

Final Face-Off:

1. Bryony and Hadley get around the ruffians that Zinnia has hoodwinked into helping her. They make it into the garden.
2. Zinnia needs a sacrifice to gain her power. She stabs Hadley and tries to use him.
3. Brooks comes back to help. He throws a knife at Zinnia, but she blocks it, sinking it into the tree. Bryony fights Zinnia. The knife in the tree contained a small amount of Zinnia's blood. The tree takes Zinnia.

Resolution: Bryony and Hadley restore the castle ruins in Labrynhor and reestablish the balance of magic in the village.

Needless to say, this is not what I went with for my thesis. I finished this project completely disappointed in what I had written. All I had done was tell this simple story, but I knew that stories are meant to tell so much more. I wanted my



story to speak a truth that I felt I needed to say. It was deciding what to say that was the problem.

Another issue that I wrestled with was the scope of my project. Initially, I wanted to plan out a series and write the first installment. This was because, based on my experience with books growing up, I believe that series have a tendency to hook readers, especially young ones, and spark their interest and love for reading and keep them going on into adulthood. This, of course, was much too much for me to try and handle for a thesis project. Realizing that my timeframe left me with no room to endeavor in such a project, I looked at what interested me the most from that horrible, awful vomit of a first draft, the one thing that appeared redeemable to me: My villain.

This was the kick-start to my project, and it coupled well with the issue of deciding what to say that I had been wrestling with for a while. You see, a villain cannot be an inherently evil person without reason for being evil. If you create such a person, what sort of message are you sending to the world? Villains such as Hannibal Lector can be sociopaths or have some other mental difference that separates them from the world to explain their view, yes, but this was not the tale I wanted to tell. What if a villain is a completely normal, down-to-earth person? If my villain was the equivalent of anyone I would bump into today, or even myself, what happened that turned her into a villain?

If your opinion aligns with mine, you might not be in agreement with the *Star Wars* trilogy that was released after the original three, but I was intrigued by how they tried to tell the story of Darth Vader's creation. Anakin Skywalker was a poor

slave boy who became a Jedi and was sucked into the Dark Side out of his attempt to save his wife. He was enslaved as a child, held his mother's dead body in his arms after she was murdered, and was living with the fact that his wife was going to die because of him. That sounds like more than enough to break a person. Maybe the movies were not wonderful, but they gave a reason to why Darth Vader is what he is, and it also allows us to believe that he is not inherently evil, thus setting up his chance for redemption at the end of *Episode VI*.

So I began to write the story of my villain from that original story. With this change came a switch in scenery. While taking Creative Writing with Professor Arna Hemenway, we watched Alfonso Cuarón's film version of *Children of Men*. Based on a book of the same name, this film explores a world that suffers from infertility, so the world looks normal or very similar to our time, but it is obviously set in the future. This film inspired me to look into changing my setting to something more modern with the question in mind, "What if the magic race was about to be wiped out?" I disposed of my original world idea and decided to set my story in modern time, actually in Waco, on the brink of fallout. My villain's name changed from Zinnia to Ianthe, and the story was told from her point of view as a magical student in training to become the next leader, along with her partner. My outline looked like this:

Opening Image: Ianthe (20s) and Ranun (20s) compete against another pair in the race for the leadership roles. The arena is in flames, but Ian and Ranun put out the massive fire before the others, winning this stage of the competition.

Ordinary World: Ian lives with the other magical pairs in Waco, Texas, keeping her secret life with a human, Corbyn, and her child a secret from the others. With their training in its final stages, they are now competing for who shall keep their powers and become the next leaders.

Inciting Incident: Narcis, the second-in-command, offers Ian a spot in a secret society, Nox. He tells her that the *Grimmorum*, a magical book, has chosen her as its possessor. He offers to help her train. She refuses the book and his offer, but he reveals to her that he knows of her hidden family.

Dilemma: The *Grimmorum* follows Ian home, and once she touches it, she is bound to it. She learns that if she does not win the competition and loses her powers, she will not be able to keep her family. She and Ranun are also set to compete against the leader's favorite pair.

Crossing the Threshold: In order to keep her family safe and keep her powers, Ian agrees to train under Narcis and learn the powers of the *Grimmorum*.

New World: Through her training, Ian learns how to draw magic from other objects in order to make herself stronger, beginning with a plant and moving on to an animal. She uses these new powers to win the next competition.

Midpoint: Ian learns that this battle is not the final; she must now defeat Ranun as well or have to bind her powers to him.

All Downhill: Ian meets with Nox and learns that Narcis is using her to get back into power. Mara decides to tell Ranun that Nox plans to overthrow the magical hierarchy and begin a new system of reign. She tells Ranun the truth and reveals her family to him, making him promise to not tell and keep them safe. The leaders and several others follow Ranun to her home. They destroy her home, killing her family.

Brick Wall: Ianthe, believing that Ranun betrayed her, decides to complete the *Grimmorum* and kill. She finishes off Narcis as well.

Final Face-Off:

1. Ianthe kills the current leader and offers the others a chance to join her. She sets the room on fire.
2. Ranun fights back and manages to get on top.
3. Ianthe defeats him and pushes him into the fire. She leaves the building ablaze.

Resolution: Forced by the promise he made to Ian, Ranun returns to the remains of her home and finds her child there, still alive in the rubble. He decides to find her a new home and watch over her as she grows up.

However, I finished this draft with a big problem on my hands. I wrote it as if magic was only relevant to Waco, but it was not what my story implied, nor what I

wanted it to imply. I also had no grasp of how magic in my story worked and needed to become much more knowledgeable of this. Along with this, I felt that my protagonist, Ianthe, had nothing but the tragedy of losing her husband and child to turn her to evil. There was nothing else in her story that turned her from her original path to darker magic. She needed a reason to turn from her normal life, something that came from within her. This was another problem I needed to fix.

I sat back down to more research. To figure out my magic problem, I remembered a poem I wrote years ago that mentioned “druid witches,” and I decided to start with this term. This search lead me to reading about Celtic Mythology and Mages, discovering an entire basis of magic that was readily available for me to reap ideas from. I expanded the world in my story and looked at specific instances from other books in the same genre to figure out how to handle my own scenes. My new outline became this:

### Act 1

Opening Image: Narcis and his followers discover the hidden warehouse where the Ignis Talis is kept. They kill the guards, but one of them manages to send the Talis away before he can get his hands on it. Enraged, he destroys the warehouse and takes the guard along with him.

Ordinary World: Mara (20s) works in a university library part time in Waco, Texas. She lives with her boyfriend, Corbyn, and her child, Attie.

Inciting Incident: An object appears to fall from the sky on her way home from work, blasting her from her bike. She does not recognize it as the Talis, so she wraps it up and takes it home. After trying to get rid of it several times, she touches the Talis and it marks her. An old friend from the Mage world, Leto, finds her to take her and the Talis back to the Mages. Mara refuses to leave her family.

Dilemma: Narcis finds her home and destroys it, killing her family.

Crossing the Threshold: Refusing to run from her past any longer, Mara decides to go with Leto.

## Act 2

2.1.1: Mara and Leto go to Austin to find Leto's old friend, Ulysses, an ex-Mage. They offer him a job to use his plane and give them a flight to the new Mage location. He refuses at first, but takes the job once he realizes how much trouble he is in with his boss and needs the money.

Gain Support: Lys joins their group.

2.1.2: Mara helps them get the plane in the air while under attack from the people after Lys.

2.1.3: Mara learns how to wield an Ensis, a magical weapon used by certain Mages. Lys manages to crash land the plane on the island where the new headquarters is located, which they learn has been taken over by Narcis.

Midpoint: Against Leto's orders, Mara convinces Lys to help her go inside and find Olwen, the guard that Narcis kidnapped, who is an old friend of hers.

## All Downhill

2.2.1: Lys and Mara manage to get inside the building and kill the guards.

2.2.2: They find Olwen and break her out of her room, but they are caught by Narcis while trying to escape.

2.2.3: Mara is entangled in a fight with Narcis, who almost manages to take the Talis from her. Leto saves her and dies in her attempt. Mara, Lys, and Olwen manage to escape.

Brick Wall: Mara knows that Narcis is going after the next Talis, the one kept by the dwarves. She decides to use the powers of the Ensis Talis to beat him to it. Olwen agrees to help, but Lys refuses.

## Act 3

Final Face-Off:

1. Mara and Olwen manage to get inside the dwarves's dwelling and reach the Talis.
2. Olwen reveals that she is actually working for Narcis now and intends to give it to him, along with the Ensis Talis.
3. Mara defeats Olwen by using the Ensis against her and escapes.

Resolution: One year later, Lys watches as Mara's child plays on the playground, her adoptive parents watching from afar. He decides to stay in Waco to watch over her.

By using the Celtic influence, I began to understand how magic would function in my story. I gave Marzanna, the rebooted version of Ianthe, a different reason to turn to the dark side. The pain from the loss of her family influences Mara's switchover, but this is paired with her hatred of how the magical world views humans, which it calls "Avari," taken from the Latin word that means "greedy." Mara separates herself from the Mages, and her time away from them allows her opposing views to continue to form and grow. By the time she is called back to her former world, she cannot operate in the same way. She cannot see humans as the horrible, mistrustful beings as the other Mages do, and this makes it to where she cannot possibly side with Narcis in the end, who believes that Mages should rule everyone. Because of her different views of humans and mistrust of the Mages, she takes the opposite extreme, similar to the villain that appears to us at the end of the newest *Dr. Strange* film: Mages cannot be trusted, so they must be wiped out.

Also, by getting a firmer grasp on the magic, I was able to include something that was very much so missing from the earlier draft: *magic words*! For this, I was able to put some of my rudimentary knowledge of Latin into practice and use it as my basis for their magic. This is more similar to *Harry Potter* than I prefer, so it is something I will look into potentially changing later.

With this new version of the story (which came along very late in my thesis timeline), I finally had a complete, working draft to run with. With this, the main problem that I faced was with my second act. By creating my second act, basically, in

the same style as *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, I did not introduce my readers into the Mage world. I wanted to center my third act on the fight with Narcis, so I edited my outline slightly to this:

### Act 1

Opening Scene: The Magister, her apprentice, the Haeres, the Consul, and guards of the Ignis Talis meet to discuss the peace treaty with the human representatives. Narcis and his minions breach the area to steal it before the humans arrive. The Magister and the guards are killed. The Haeres sends the Talis away. Narcis disappears, taking the Haeres along with him.

Ordinary World: Meet Mara (early 20s) at her job in the university library. She lives with her boyfriend and child in a small apartment in Waco.

Inciting Incident: The Talis appears to Mara. She uses it, then immediately recognizes it and tries to dispose of it. Leto, the Consul, appears to tell her that her mother, the Magister, is dead, Narcis has her sister, the Haeres, and they need Mara to return to Patrisym to help them find her. Leto explains that the Talis has chosen her as its protector, now that the guard is gone, but she is never to actually use the Talis, due to its instable nature as the Ensis. Mara refuses; she cannot leave her life in Waco.

Dilemma: Because she used the Talis, Narcis finds her. Her boyfriend, child, and home are destroyed.

Cross Threshold: Mara agrees to join the quest, refusing to fear her past any longer.

### Act 2

2.1.1: Leto has lost contact with the Mages after the Magister's death. They find an ex Mage, Ulysses, who still works the black market between the different species. He refuses to help them at first, but agrees once offered enough money to pay off an angry boss.

2.1.2: They convince him to help them get back into headquarters using his plane and connections. An angry benefactor holds up his plane. They manage to escape and get to Patrisym.

2.1.3: By using Lys's passage to get into Patrisym, they allow Narcis's followers to enter as well. They fight, and Mara manages to overtake one of his men and steal the Ventus Talis from him.

Midpoint: Mara thinks that Leto and the Mages are trying to use her and keep her there permanently. Mara convinces Lys to help her escape and go after Narcis and save her sister. She uses the Ensis Talis to discover Narcis's location, which is at the warehouse that they thought he destroyed.

### All Downhill

2.2.1: With the help of another Mage, Lys and Mara manage to get the plane away from Patrisym. They forget about the loud noise at take off, but Mara manages to cover the noise and get them in the air with the help of the new Talis.

2.2.2: Mara breaks them in to the warehouse and finds her sister.

2.2.3: Narcis and his followers attack. Just as Narcis overcomes Mara, Leto appears and saves her, dying in the process.

Brick Wall: Leto is dead because of Mara. Mara decides that none of the Mages can be trusted. Instead of doing what she was told, to guard the Talis, Mara decides to use the Talis and harness its power and bring the world peace as she sees fit: a world without any magical being outside of her power. Her sister stays to help, but Lys refuses to help her.

### Act 3

1. Mara attacks Narcis using the fiery powers of the Ensis Talis, catching him off guard.
2. Olwen attacks Mara, stopping her from finishing Narcis. Lys returns to help Mara one last time.
3. Olwen reveals that she is on Narcis's side and wants to help him take over. Mara defeats them both and leaves the building in flames.

Resolution: Lys returns home. News of Mara's rule has spread through both the magical and human world. Lys discovers that Mara's daughter has survived. Since she's both human and Mage, Lys decides to stay close and watch over the child.

I introduced the normal Mage world in this draft, as well as centralized the fight with Narcis, but I think the most important change to come out of this draft is the reasoning for Mara's commitment to the second half of the second act. In the draft before this, Mara decides to disobey Leto's orders in order to save her friend. In this draft, Mara decides to leave because she believes that the Mages are trying to keep her there. Mara is unsure of exactly what she wants to do, but she is through



with any of the Mages deciding for her. This is also how she convinces Lys to go with her. He wants more than anything to leave the Mages, so when he hears from her that they are going to keep him there because of his friendship with her, he is all for getting out of Patrisym. This, I think, is a much stronger desire line for my character than the original.

I also cut the relationship between Mara and Olwen in my current thesis draft. I think I was much too close to the idea of including this relationship, which might seem to some readers as “scandalous” due to its homosexual nature (thus part of the reason why I wanted to keep it), but it became something that was not important to my story. As Alfred Hitchcock so aptly puts it, I had to kill my darlings.

Looking back on my thesis, there are many things I would change and plan to potentially fix in the future. One of these I have mentioned, which would be to cut out all romantic relationships within the Mages in order to show their lack of emotional connection compared to humans. I feel especially strong about this after reading some of the works of Lucretius and Seneca in my Capstone course this semester. The Mages, what with their potential for such immense power, would not believe in much of an afterlife, I think. I believe their view of honing their skills in magic would be similar to the Stoic or Epicurean views of tempering the mind or pleasures. This is something I think I would want to make more apparent in a later draft.

Another thing I would love to add to my thesis is more of Narcis. There are only one or two moments in my thesis that I go to his viewpoint, and I wish that I had done that more. I also would want to have at least one scene between him and

Mara towards the end of the novel. I do not know why I did not think of it until now, but I would love to write the scene when Mara and Narcis have to be face-to-face and talk about their different views of the world and who should rule it. I honestly think this sort of scene is somewhat crucial to the story as a whole, and I most definitely would want to add it in.

Along a similar line as the Narcis-perspective addition, I would want to add more moments of interiority throughout the story. There are two moments that I recall especially right now: the first when Mara is sitting in her room at Patrisym, and the other when she and Lys are flying to the warehouse. I remember how much I loved writing these scenes where everything was completely within her brain. As I reread my thesis, so much of this comes off as a very detailed screenplay, and one of the biggest differences between a screenplay and a novel is the ability to go into a character's mind! I did not take advantage of this tool nearly enough, I feel, and I would very much like to go back and add more of those moments.

A smaller detail that I would like to add to the project is chapter titles. This is not that big of a deal, I think, but it is something that I enjoy about some of my favorite books. I think this would also help me think of how each section or chapter of the story has its own mini arch, so to speak, and has its own way of mirroring the story as a whole. This is something I would add in, and it is also something I would like to include in the beginnings of my writing process for future projects.

While noting all of these changes I would like to make to my thesis, I cannot help but think of all the things I have learned while writing this project. I have learned that constant reading is a non-negotiable necessity to writing. I have

learned that journaling for twenty or so minutes before beginning is an amazing tool to get into my story, as well as doing things like taking a walk around the block in silence before sitting down to work. After writing each of these drafts chronologically and learning what that process feels like, I would like to try future projects in a different order. I have this vision of having all of my scenes listed out on separate sheets of paper, all hanging from a line by clothespins with chapter titles at the top, and I will be able to pull whichever scene from the line to write that I wish at that given moment. I have learned that not receiving feedback and having to battle through my story issues alone for the majority of the process is the best way to learn how to write. While Professor Hemenway might be disappointed that I did not title my thesis before writing it, I learned that a story almost has the ability to name itself. I had no idea what I was going to call my thesis, but then I thought about how the protagonist adamantly demands to be called Mara. This name that I suddenly remembered from the Biblical texts as meaning “sad and bitter” encompassed so much of what Mara and her story had become, so the correct title for this story found its way from the pages. Above all of these, I think the most important thing I will carry with me from this project is that, no matter how close the deadline is or how much I doubt myself and my ability to write well or finish, I am capable of completing a project such as this while juggling numerous others. That is a lesson that will stick with me long after this.

It is hard to not feel at least slightly proud of the work that I have put into this thesis. The two journals that I have filled with notes and details that are so crucial to the process of writing, not to mention hundreds of written pages leading

up to this draft that will never see the light of day, are more than enough proof that I put blood, sweat, and tears into this project; however, I cannot write this without saying that I am disappointed with it. That being said, SJ shared these words of Ira Glass with me several semesters ago:

What nobody tells people who are beginners — and I really wish someone had told this to me . . . is that all of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, and it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not.

But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase. They quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know it's normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story.

It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through.

These words have stuck with me long since SJ first quoted them. I will admit, there were days, many days, heaps of days and weeks and months, that my personal insecurities and doubts were what stood between my thesis and me. There were moments when writing felt like the most impossible task of the day, but these words are a sort of ray of hope for me. I am disappointed by my work. I look on the writings of J.K. Rowling, Christopher Paolini, C.S. Lewis, Cornelia Funke, J.R.R. Tolkien, and so many more, and my thesis is nowhere close to what I feel that their stories achieved. There are moments, spots in my thesis that I am proud of, that I am

happy to call my own work, but much more of it saddens me, and I know this is because I want so much more for it, as well as my own skill as a writer. SJ once told us the story of *Braveheart's* screenplay, how it was originally so awful and only managed to become useable after much instruction from Mel Gibson and many, many, many drafts from the writer, Randall Wallace. By remembering tales such as this and Ira Glass's words, as well as the instruction and encouragement (along with the occasional kick from behind) of several deeply caring Baylor professors, I am able to read my thesis and know that, yes, this is a first attempt at writing a novel, but it is by no means a perfect example of everything I will ever be able to accomplish as a writer. My skills at storytelling begin here, but this is an important steppingstone in my learning process.

I am not sure what I plan to do with my thesis. I intend to go to graduate school after a couple of years, so I might continue to work on my thesis as a potential writing sample for graduate school. I do not know if I will look to publish this story. I have a future story in mind that happens after the one I have told here, so this project might be the perfect setup for beginning that story. I might look into publishing this tale, but I may wait until I decide what I want to do with the other stories bouncing around in my head. Whether this story ever sits on a shelf, is read by a board for graduate school, or sits in a drawer at home in its green binding for all time, this thesis and the process of bringing it to this point has been the most grueling, shaping, and incredible experience of my college career. This thesis process, with the many classes and conversations and writings and research that helped develop it and my skills, not only has shaped me as a writer, but it has

pointed me in the direction that I wish to continue after graduation. I may not ever write another piece of fiction again, but I will always believe that stories will never be neutral. This fact brings me to the conclusion that no work I ever do can be done if it is not supported by my beliefs. Without the professors I have had during this thesis process and without having to write the thesis itself, I do not know that I would feel so firmly about that.

*Mara*

By

Ashley Waters

## CHAPTER ONE

The flecks of snow swirled and flickered in the dim streetlight. The wind curled around the corners, howling eerie whispers into the spaces. Narcis roamed his eyes over the warehouse. The windows were busted, the door mere splinters in the entryway. It was a clever façade. No human would dare to approach this building. Even he would have passed over it. But after years of searching, he knew what he was looking for. Only a Mage of his caliber would know the difference.

Narcis turned to the three Mages beside him. They shuffled in the cold, rubbing at the thin cloth on their arms. He curled his lip. "There will be no mistakes. After I dispose of the Magister, find the guards. I will take care of the others. Kill them, or I will kill you myself."

"Yes, Master." They bowed their heads.

"It should be any moment now." He had waited for this night for so long. The human representatives would only find destruction when they arrived. This night planned for peace between the clans would end in nothing but glory for himself. And he would have it.

Narcis waved his hand. "*Revelo*," he muttered. The barrier surrounding the building melted under his motion, its structure shimmering before them until it melted in the darkness. The broken windows were renewed, the splinters a thick door that swung wide for them.

"*Ensis*," the Mages whispered in unison. Blades that shimmered and crackled,



so thin that they disappeared from view at the sides, appeared out of thin air. One by one, the Mages entered the building. They disappeared around the corner.

Narcis counted the seconds. The Mages knew the plan. They were more than capable of taking care of the three guards over this Sanctum. It should take them no longer than three minutes to dispose of the guards. But there was no room for fault. He ticked away the seconds under his breath.

They were coming. He could feel it in the air. The ring on his right middle finger burned, and he waved his hand over the snow, causing a flurry in the small alleyway. A *pop* in the air alerted him of their presences. The figures appeared a few feet before the door. The Consul and Haeres were stepping through the doorway, followed quickly by the Magister. Narcis sprung forward like a cat, his *Ensis* appearing in bright red as a short blade in his right hand. He seized her head and slid the blade across her throat before she could make a sound. Her blood soaked through the snow in a silent crimson stream, and he laid her down on top of the puddle. She was dead before she hit the ground, and the others had not noticed a thing.

A shriek pierced the silence. The Consuls and Haeres jerked their heads upward and rushed for the stairs. Narcis focused on the third floor window to his left. Ninety-eight seconds and at least one of the guards was down. Feet stomped along the third floor, swords clanging. The two guards remaining were not going down without a fight. One hundred twenty-six seconds. A gasp alerted him that one of his own was wounded. It would be an even fight then. Narcis ground his teeth.

A shuffle to his left broke his concentration. A man in ragged jeans and house

shoes blinked at him from the street. A shout bellowed from inside. The man jumped. "What da hell y'all got going' on in there?" the man hollered.

Narcis lifted his hand as if he were casually greeting an old friend. "*Decido*," he said. The man gasped. Blood splattered from the slash that stretched from his Adam's apple to his groin. Narcis turned from the man as he hit the ground. "One hundred eighty," he whispered, sneering. He entered the warehouse.

The first guard's body dangled over the side of the stairs. Narcis pushed the dwarf to the side with the bottom of his boot, sending him toppling over the edge. The Consul and Haeres turned at the noise, their eyes wide at the sight of him.

"*You?*" the Consul shrieked.

He smiled, "Me," and blasted her into the wall.

The Haeres dashed up the stairs and out of sight. He could afford to worry about her later. His man was at the top of the steps, his eyes glassy, a deep, narrow gash oozing from his chest. Narcis curled his lip and stepped over the body, treading on his fingers. The elf was to the left, her long silver hair traced with blood that dripped from her ragged face. Only the Mage and Haeres were left.

The fight ensued down the hall. His two men grunted as they swung their Ensi, the blades whistling through the air, missing their target. The Mage arched her back parallel to the ground, her attackers' swords passing over her torso. She kicked her legs over her head, her dark hair whirling around her face as she landed on the railing. Her sword sang with the flick of her wrist. The edge sliced through his man's neck like a knife in butter. His head flipped through the air and landed with a *thunk*

next to his body, his eyes open and empty in wide terror, their gaze staring straight through Narcis. He curled his lip in disgust.

Narcis hissed in anger. The Mage flicked her eyes in his direction, her dark skin paling at the sight of him. His man took advantage of her distraction. She twisted off the railing with inhuman speed, the tip of his sword just making contact with her cheek. In midair, she formed a dagger of her Ensis and released it from the tips of her fingers. He fell face first, pushing the dagger deeper into his forehead before its image disappeared. The Mage's feet were silent as she landed. She wiped the blood from her cheek with the back of her hand.

Narcis stepped in her direction. "*Decido*," he snarled, slashing his hand through the air.

She ducked and rolled over his man's body. "*Praefigo!*" she shouted, throwing another dagger at him.

"*Oppilo*." He blocked the knife. It stopped dead in its track and vanished in sparks. The Mage's narrow eyes widened as he approached her, his sneer bright in the darkness.

The Mage turned the corner and ran for the door. Her hands hit hard against the metal. "*Decido!*" Narcis shouted behind her.

She cried out as her hand sliced open, the blood dripping down the door. "*Aperio*," she said through her teeth. The door pushed forward beneath her hands. She slid through the gap, Narcis's attack banging off the metal as it sealed shut behind her. The door bought her some time, but it would be mere moments before Narcis would find a way through it. There was no stopping him.

The Talis floated in the center of the empty room, its deep ruby surface glinting in the column of light that held it in place. The Mage grabbed the Talis with both hands. "*Relevo*," she whimpered, blisters bubbling over her skin from the Talis's defense. The light released the Talis into her grasp.

The door behind burst open. The explosion threw her across the room. The Mage smashed into the wall. The Talis fell to the floor to her right, just out of reach. Narcis smiled and lifted his hand to her, opening his mouth to utter his attack.

"*Iacio!*" The Mage's spell sent Narcis careening across the room. He grunted as his back smashed against the floor. He turned his head, his gaze catching the lightning quick flash of a hand snatching the Talis from the floor.

"No!" He shrieked and sliced his hand through the air. He heard her body hit the floor before he looked up. The Mage's eyes glazed over as her gaze roamed from him to across the room, blood soaking through the boards beneath her chest. He followed her gaze to the doorway where another figure stood.

The Haeres's lips moved rapidly as he rolled to his feet. A flash of red light blinded the room. "*Glacio!*" The Haeres froze, her body hard, her hands enclosed in fists, and fell to the floor. Narcis smiled and kneeled beside her. "*Relevo*," he whispered. Her fingers released their clutches. The Talis was gone.

Narcis's scream echoed through the night. He jumped to his feet and kicked the Haeres. Nothing but her eyes reflected her pain. "*Sopio*," he muttered through his clenched jaw. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and her long lashes fell over her cheeks as her eyelids shut.

Narcis held his hand over her frozen body. "*Pendeo.*" The Mage hovered beneath his hand. She floated before him as he retraced his steps to the alleyway below. Keeping his left hand above her, he lifted his right hand to the building, the blue stone on his finger glinting in the streetlight. "*Displodo.*"

The explosion was heard on the outskirts of Portland. Firefighters rushed from their beds to their trucks. Sirens wailed through the streets as first responders hurried to the spot.

Narcis roamed his eyes over the Haeres's body. She looked peaceful in her cursed sleep, her face unmarred and empty, like death. He could end her now. It would exhaust him to take her with him. But would it be a waste? He had time to recover after this. He curled his lip. She would talk. He would use every power he knew if he had to.

The sirens were close now. The lights bounced off the destruction, casting Narcis and the Haeres in shadow. He lowered his hand to her throat, his fingers white as they squeezed. "*Eo,*" he growled. His feet left the ground as his body twisted around the Haeres's. Their forms disappeared in the darkness.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Excuse me.”

Mara woke with a snort. The girl on the other side of the desk wrinkled her nose, noting the drool soaking into the pages of the *Aviation Handbook* that had been serving as Mara’s pillow for the last forty-five minutes. She flipped the cover over, opened her mouth to ask what the girl wanted, and let out a yawn.

“The printer’s out of paper,” the girl snapped, crossing her arms.

Mara rolled her eyes. Anyone who spent any time in Moody Library late at night knew where the paper was located. She grabbed a stack from the slot labeled “Extra Paper” beside the machine and stuffed it into the drawer. The girl tapped her toe as the printer spit her pages out, snatching them from the top one by one.

“You’re welcome,” Mara muttered at the girl’s back.

She waved the desktop’s mouse: 3:56am, less than four minutes left in her shift. She moved the pointer to logout. An email notification titled “Running Late” slid across the screen. “Of course you are,” said Mara. She swiped the email from her coworker away and stretched her arms high over her head, relishing solid *pop* of release in her lower back. She was not waiting around for Raheem to get there on time again.

She gathered up her books for the night and slid them into the book return. *Stick and Rudder*, the *Handbook*, and the *Complete Encyclopedia of World Aircraft*; it was one of the greatest perks of working in the university’s library that she got to

read whatever she wanted. Besides, the students did not check them out anyway. Someone had to read them.

The bike ride home was a short one, but the Waco streets were no comfort at night. Mara tried her best to stay on the sidewalks the fifteen minutes it took her to get to her apartment, but they disappeared from time to time. Mara pulled up on the handlebars and dropped the front wheel off the curb to the street. She pulled the strings of her hood tight beneath her chin. The Waco air was sharp tonight, courtesy of the cold front blowing in for the weekend. Thankfully, the road was abandoned at this time of night. Mara was less worried about needing her peripherals than she was about the wind biting into her cheeks.

Cameron Park's playground came into view around the corner. Mara's breath puffed in a white cloud as she pedaled for her street. She lowered her left foot to turn off her toe, and a burst of red light blasted her from her bike.

The air whooshed from Mara's lungs. She was staring up at the night sky, her right shoulder grazing the curbside. She sat up, the dizziness threatening to lay her out flat again. She shook it off. Her bike lay beside her. A dent cratered the center frame, and the back wheel was folded over almost in half, the spokes snapped and sharp, splintering in all directions. Mara cursed under her breath. She would not be able to replace that for at least a month.

The bushes on the other side of the street smoldered. Flecks of burning leaves fell to the ground in piles of ash. Once a solid mass of green, a circle of flame burned in the center of them. Mara kicked her boot through the bush, sending sparks flying from the scorched plant. She swatted them from her sleeves and

stepped into the center of the bushes. The grass was flattened and black. Something dark and metallic glinted from the ground, sunken deep into the earth.

Taking the scarf from her neck, Mara wrapped it around her hand and pulled at the object. It did not budge. The metal was hot even through the fabric. She tightened her grip and pulled. A few more inches appeared. Cursing, Mara squatted down next to the object. She could just leave it there. But why did it land there in the first place? And why was it when she was the only person in the world passing by?

Resolved, Mara wrapped her hands around it and yanked. The rest of the object pulled from the ground. The force of her pull sent her toppling backwards. She landed with a huff, her tailbone slamming into the ground. She flipped the entangled scarf from over the object and studied her find.

It was a strip of metal almost the length of her hand. It looked black in the darkness, but the streetlight above reflected its deep red color. Mara rotated the smooth object. It looked like a solid piece of metal, like a short stake. A sick feeling dropped in her stomach like a rock as she stared at it. She was sure she had never seen it before, but something about it was familiar. The faded image of an old book appeared from the recesses of her memory, something she had seen years before in a life long since behind her. A similar object had been pictured on the cover. Maybe it was mere coincidence, but her gut told her otherwise. She glanced up and down the street. No one was there. But someone had to have sent it there.

Mara wrapped the object in the scarf. She stuffed it between her backpack and her back, lifted her wrecked bike to her shoulder, and started down the street.



Mara flicked the hallway light off as she closed the front door. Corbyn never failed to leave the light on for her, even though she knew it kept him from falling asleep unless the blanket was pulled up at just the right height. Sure enough, she opened her bedroom and could just see the rise and fall of his breath under the quilt in the dim light from the window. She opened the door to her daughter's bedroom across the hall. Attie's tiny arm curled around Soozle, her current favorite stuffed elephant who was the only one who could convince her to go to sleep at a decent hour. Mara stroked her chubby caramel-colored arm before leaving the room.

The bottom drawer beside Mara's bed was already partially open. Mara tiptoed to her nightstand and lowered to the ground, careful to make no noise. She slid the drawer open, lifted the old papers and envelopes from it, and stuffed the scarf with the metal beneath them.

"Hey, Babe."

She closed the drawer. Corbyn lowered the blanket and blinked at her, his eyelids heavy. Mara dropped her backpack to the floor, kicked off her boots, and stepped out of her jeans. She slid under the covers. It was warm and cozy from the hours Corbyn had already slept.

He jumped at her cold toes touching his leg, but sighed as she slipped her leg between his. She burrowed her face into his chest. "Go back to sleep," she murmured, planting a kiss on his collarbone.

"Mmm." He wrapped his arms around her. Within seconds, they were heavy with sleep. Mara tried to settle her mind, but it kept returning to the object in the

drawer. Maybe it was a broken piece of a plane. Maybe a satellite had lost part of its antenna. Or maybe it was related to the book.

Mara squeezed her eyes shut. She could not think about that. She had not been in contact with anyone from those early days in years, twelve long years, to be exact. *They've forgotten about you by now*, she thought to herself before falling asleep.

### CHAPTER THREE

The faint smell of burnt coffee hit Mara's nose. She always caught that the pot was on before Corbyn remembered. She adjusted Attie on her hip and switched the machine off. "Daddy only makes this nasty stuff worse," she said. Attie giggled and twirled Mara's tight black curls around her tiny fingers while Mara poured the black liquid into a travel mug.

"So, Attie has a play date at Jennifer's at 9," Corbyn said, rushing into the kitchen. He swooped Attie into the air, earning a shriek of laughter from her. "I figure we'll be there until noon or so."

"I can take her, if you like," Mara offered, hoping he would refuse. She grabbed Corbyn's face between her hands and combed his bright red hair out of his eyes. "I'm not too busy this morning." It was not entirely true, but she was not about to tell him about her plans.

Corbyn sipped his coffee and shook his head. "I got it. Take advantage of the quiet to work on that manuscript." He planted a kiss on her forehead and headed for the door.

"Wait," Mara called after him, rushing to the bathroom. Various bottles of gel, mousse, and conditioner were splayed out before her. "Oil or condition, oil or condition," she muttered under her breath. She snatched her bottle of oil from the counter and hurried back to them.

Corbyn shook his head and held Attie out in front of him. "I'll never understand this hair," he said, watching as Mara swirled oil over her daughter's curls.

Mara smiled. "I should say the same thing," she looked up at him and winked. Attie might have inherited her mother's curls, but the color could only have come from Corbyn. It was a contrast everyone loved to take notice of, the child's creamy skin next to her fiery, wild hair.

Corbyn reeled Attie in. "At least our eyes are brown." He pulled Mara's front curl before opening the door.

At least there was that. Mara's eyes had faded to dark brown long before she had met Corbyn. She and Corbyn together, her dark hand in his pale, freckled one, were a stark enough contrast for Waco, let alone the looks they garnered from Attie. There was no telling what kind of stares or comments she would get if her eyes had retained their once violet vibrancy.

Corbyn caught the door before it shut. "I'm stopping by the shop on the way back, so we'll probably be here around two-ish."

Mara feigned a puzzled look. "But you were there yesterday." She was glad for the extra time. She might need it.

"Yeah, but I just moved Tom to the slow bar, and I want to make sure he's not getting in the way." He leaned around the door to give her one last kiss. "Catch you on the flip side." He closed the door.

Mara flicked the lock and turned straight for the bedroom. She snatched her computer from her bag, opened up the browser, and started typing.

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She was ready to give up. After only an hour into her research, she was positive there was no chance of finding any information on that book. She was not surprised. Sure, there were myths of magic everywhere, whispers of crazy happenings, and plenty of histories listed tales of books and grimoires. She snapped the computer shut. Why she had expected to find information on something she could not even remember the title of she had no idea.

“Not that it even had a title,” she mumbled. Mara closed her eyes and recalled the memory. The book rested on a shelf with six others. She loved to stroke her fingers over the fine, black leather as a child before her mother could catch her with them. The books were tucked away on the highest shelf of her mother’s study, each facing with the cover out rather than the spine on their silver stands, displaying their varying colors on the covers. There was not much use in placing them out of reach. Mara could not read them. Only the writing within the book marked by blue had ever looked familiar to Mara. The rest were a mystery.

She opened her eyes and tucked the memory back into its resting place. Mara pulled open the bottom drawer and stared at the bundled scarf. Why had she even felt the need to pick it up in the first place? It was probably a broken piece of metal, nothing more, nothing less. There was no sense in keeping it, no sense in drudging

up all those memories of the life she had left behind. She had made it clear she wanted nothing to do with it.

Mara grabbed the bundle and went into the kitchen. She unrolled the scarf on the table. It looked like a harmless piece of scrap metal. If anything, it was pretty. Its surface was smooth and unmarred, even after its grand entrance last night. The dark red gleamed under the light. She reached forward to touch it with her finger, but thinking better of it, she withdrew her hand. She had no desire to keep it in the apartment. All it did was make her think about everything she wished she could forget. But it seemed such a waste to just throw it out.

That was when it clicked. Chris. One of Corbyn's oldest friends, Chris was always taking junk off of people's hands to make products for her booth at Spice Village. It turned quite a profit, buying broken pieces no one wanted and altering them just enough that some Wacoan wanted them to fit into his or her rustic décor. Mara stuffed her arms through her jacket and rolled the scarf around the metal piece. Besides, she had to think of fixing her bike now. She might as well try and turn a profit with it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Only a few customers ambled around Spice Village that morning. Two girls whom appeared to be students picked over a booth with pieces of board painted in green and gold inscribed with messages such as “home is where the heart is.” Mara shook her head as the girls decided on one with the “o” in home replaced by a green Texas symbol. She would never understand why anyone would pay so much money for junk.

Mara turned and bumped into a man heading for the stairs. “Excuse me,” he muttered beneath his hood. The hairs on her neck stood up at his words. He sounded like someone familiar. She leaned over the railing and watched the tall figure disappear through the door.

“Mara!”

Chris heaved a box onto her counter. Mara crossed the short distance to accept Chris’s hug. She had to be almost thirty, but Chris’s long blonde hair, nose ring, and impeccable taste in cardigans gave her some popularity with the students in the area. She moved her newest items from the box to spots along her section of the shop. “It’s been a while. How’s everything? Attie good? You’re not here to get me to crawl Corbyn over something, are ya?” She winked.

Mara laughed. “Fine, everyone’s fine, thanks. I’m actually here for a little business of my own.”

“That so?” Sophie wiped her hands on her jeans and turned to Mara. “Let’s see it then.”

Mara pulled the scarf from beneath her jacket and motioned to the counter. Sophie placed the box on the floor. “I know you like doing some metal work, so I figured you might be able to use this.” She unwrapped the scarf, revealing the gleaming slip of red metal.

Sophie bit her lip and squinted at the object. She crossed her arms and leaned over it. “I’ll admit it’s pretty. It’s got an interesting color to it, but most of the stuff I work with is a little bigger.” She shook her head. “I can’t think of anything I’d use it for.” She moved to place the scarf back over it.

Mara stepped forward. “But you could probably add it to something. The color alone is different from the normal rustic stuff you sell.”

“True,” Chris said, her voice offering no sound of interest. She glanced at Mara. “What’s got you into selling scrap now?”

Mara shrugged. “My bike’s a bit of a wreck right now. I figured I’d try to get it fixed before showing it to Corbyn. He’s so worried about the shop and everything right now...”

“Right, right,” Chris muttered. Mara jumped as Chris snapped her fingers with a loud *crack*. “Tell ya what, my buddy just across the store sells bookmarks, fancy little things made out of metal and whatnot. Maybe he could use it.” She smiled at Mara and stepped around the counter. “I’ll bring him back in just a sec,” she called over her shoulder before disappearing behind a pile of scarves.



Mara resisted the urge to cross her fingers behind her back. Even if it were a small amount, she would take it, anything to keep from having to show Corbyn the bike. He would replace it, sure, or go out of his way to drive her wherever, but she wanted him to focus on his new place and not worry about giving her a grand for a bike. And there was Attie to think about. Babies were the farthest things from living cheap.

The *clack* of Mara's boots soon returned. Following her was a tall man with silver hair, wrinkles stretching from his eyes and mouth. He looked over Mara and a somewhat displeased look came over his face. He snapped his gaze back to Chris and took extra care to stay on the opposite side of the counter from Mara.

Chris gestured to the object on the table. He glanced at it and looked back at Chris. "Naw, I can't do much with this."

"Dennis, we both know you wouldn't have walked over here if you weren't interested."

He shook his head. "Sorry, Chris, can't help with this one." He turned on his heel and headed back to his place, muttering under his breath. With her sensitive hearing, Mara was able to pick up every word he said.

"Ah, Dennis, just give it a sec—"

"Chris," Mara stepped forward, catching her arm. She shook her head. Chris looked after Dennis as Mara wrapped the piece in the scarf.

"He was so keen to get over here when I first mentioned it. I don't know what happened."

“Dunno.” Mara shrugged her shoulders. It was not much of a surprise to get that from people in Waco, especially someone around his age.

“Sorry, Mara. I’d help you out if I could, but you know how it is.”

“I do. It’s cool, Chris. Thanks for the help.” She tucked the bundle under her arm and went to the stairs. Dennis was behind his counter to her right, looking over his work at her. “Racist old bigot,” she muttered and went down the stairs. Even with twelve years of experience under her belt in the human world, that sort of treatment unsettled her every time. She shook her head and sighed. *But not everyone’s like that*, she reminded herself. Dennis and those like him were the reason that her kind thought what they did about humans, but she knew better. They were a poor representation of everyone else in the world.

She stopped for a moment by the door. The hooded figure from earlier was sitting on a bench to the side, looking off in the opposite direction. Mara pulled her hood closer to her face against the wind outside, not noticing that the hooded person followed her with his gaze as she left.

## CHAPTER FIVE

That night, Mara rolled away from Corbyn and opened her eyes. She thought the high noise was a part of her dream, but it was louder now that she was awake.

“Corbyn,” she whispered. She shoved his shoulder. “Corbyn, do you hear that?”

“Mmm, hear, hmm,” he rolled over, his voice trailing away as he fell back into a deep sleep. The noise was louder now, like a whistle that only dogs could hear. Mara kicked the covers away and grabbed the closest pair of pants. Hopping on one foot while shoving the other into her jeans, she stopped in the hall. The noise reverberated off the walls, giving no indication of a particular location. She opened Attie’s door. The noise muffled the moment she opened the door, as if a volume switch was turned down to warn her she was off. She closed the door. The sound picked up again, this time ringing so loudly that she stuck her fingers in her ears.

Mara stuck her head in her bedroom. “Corbyn, you don’t hear that?”

No response. Apparently she was the only one who could hear it. She walked down the hall, the sound growing louder between the kitchen and the living area. She rushed to the stove. The kettle was off to the side, and none of the burners were on. She ran her hand over the coffeepot. Everything was off, yet the noise only grew.

Her scarf. Mara lunged for her jacket and yanked it off the hook. The frayed edge was poking out of the pocket. Mara pulled. The scarf slipped from the pocket,

unrolling before she could catch it. The metal piece fell from the cloth and clattered on the floor.

It was like nails on a chalkboard, the sound of the object hitting the floor. Mara could not believe it. The shard was shrieking! The keening noise bounced around inside her skull, threatening to split her eardrums. Moving to open the door and throw the thing outside, Mara crouched and slapped her hand over the object.

It was like grabbing a red hot iron poker from the fireplace. Mara fell back to the floor, biting down on her tongue hard to stop the scream from escaping her throat. Using her left hand, she steadied her right hand in front of her, the burn coursing through her nerves and causing her whole body to tremble. A red circle burned like fire in the center of her palm. Mara gasped and closed her eyes as the circle burned white hot and disappeared with a flash.

The ringing stopped. The shivers faded away and left Mara in a cold sweat. She opened her eyes and examined her palm, tracing her finger over the deep red outline of the circle that was drawn over her hand. Confused, Mara sat up and looked around for the metal object.

It was no longer a sliver of metal. Instead, it had elongated and curved to form a circle like the one on her hand. It was larger, maybe six or so inches in diameter. Mara stretched out her hand and pinched it between her fingers. She turned the smooth object over in her hands. It was a circlet, like something a person could wear on their head. Her hands seemed to move for themselves as they held the circlet over her head and lowered it over her. The circlet tightened as it made contact with her forehead. She winced and closed her eyes tight, pushing to throw

the object off her head. She opened her eyes and was unable to hold back her cry of surprise.

The room around her was a shady concoction of smoke. Her hands before her were encased in flame, as if her body had become a torch. There was roaring in her ears, and her vision was like looking through black film. Mara crawled forward and placed her hand on the filmy form of the kitchen chair. It was there, substantial and smooth in feeling, but it rippled in blackness in her grasp, her fingers flashing and curling in orange and red swirls.

A shriek over the roar caught Mara's attention. She snapped her head up. The walls had disappeared from here. Instead, the endless expanse of the outside world stretched out before her. Through the smoke, she could just make out a figure. It was a mere speck from this distance, but she saw it turn towards her and raise its head. Its red eyes found hers, piercing through her and winding around her every thought. "Marzanna," it whispered, long and low. The roaring in her ears was flooded out by rushing wind, the distance between her and those red dots disappearing before her eyes. Mara forced her fingers between her head and the circlet and pushed with all her might to throw it from her.

The circlet fell to the floor, clanging against the tile. Mara gasped and looked about her. The kitchen was normal, the chairs pushed in to the table, three hand towels hanging by the sink. She inspected her hands. Any remnants of the fire were gone. Nothing but the circle on her palm remained to prove that something had just happened.

A light scratch at the door caught Mara's attention. Mara jumped to her feet. She peered through the eyehole. A dark hood leaned over the door handle. She could just make out a low whisper from the other side. She looked around for something to grab. Lunging for a drawer, she jerked it open and snatched a steak knife just as she heard the voice whisper, "*Aperio.*"

The door slid open. Mara stepped forward with the knife. The stranger waved his hand. "*Oppilo,*" he said. Like a swat knocking it from her grip, the knife flew from her hand and clattered to the floor. Mara grabbed for the drawer, but it refused to slide open. Horrified, she turned to the intruder.

She recognized him instantly. He was the same figure that had stood outside of Spice Village hours before. He was tall, almost a head taller than Mara's five feet and nine inches. His black hood was drawn tight about his face, his thin hands stretched out in front of him to her. "Calm down for a second," a dry voice said. "If it makes you feel better, take a knife, but try not to stab me with it."

That voice. She had heard it before. It struck a chord deep within her memory, a place that she had not recalled in ages. Mara pulled at the drawer. It slid open with ease. She retrieved another knife from the stack. "You've been following me." She did not bother asking. He made no excuse. Mara moved to the door, holding the knife aloft. The stranger stepped away from the door, his hands hanging loose by his sides. It was a position she recognized, as if he were assuring her that his empty hands would do her no harm. Mara pushed her right foot back until it jammed against the door. He was not going anywhere, not until she got some answers.

He lifted his open palms to his hood and pulled it away from his face. Mara's fingers slipped on the knife. She stared back at the face that she had forgotten, made herself forget, all those years ago. "Leto."

Leto blinked her violet eyes. Except for the crow's feet along her eyes, her face had not changed over the years. Her nose was sharp, her chin a perfect point to her diamond face, all complimentary to her Egyptian heritage. Her jet-black hair spilled from her hood, pulled back by the same long barrette she had worn years before. A thin scar from a battle long ago traced from her lip to her ear, which gave her almost a snarling sneer at all times.

"It has been a long time, Marzanna." Mara twitched at the use of her full name. "I know, it's Mara now, but forgive me my old habits." Leto opened her arms, as if she was expecting a hug.

Mara pointed the knife at her. "Did mother send you?"

"Of course not," Leto said, a sad look coming over her face. "Maeve has no idea I'm here. You made yourself very clear a long time ago."

Mara studied Leto. She looked at ease in her human garb. She pulled the zipper down a little from her throat, revealing the tops of her traditional Mage wrap. Mara took in the purple color against the silver cloth. "Still serving as mother's right hand man," Mara said.

Leto smiled. "That and everything else Consuls are required to do in this world."

"And some on the side." Mara smirked. She had never liked her mother and Leto's relationship. Romance so far up in the hierarchy always seemed out of place

to her. Not that it was truly romance; Mara was well aware of that now. Mages were incapable of such human feelings. Mara sighed and tossed the knife back into its drawer. "What do you want, Leto?"

"I think the answer to that is rather obvious." Leto nodded her head towards the kitchen table. The circlet was beneath the closest chair, the edge sticking out gleaming ruby red.

"Yeah, that's been a rather welcoming present so far," Mara snapped. "Thanks for sending that along."

"Oh, to be sure, I never would have sent it to you."

Mara looked at her, confused. "If it wasn't you, then who—"

"Looks to me like your sister panicked."

*Medea?* "What do you mean? Is she okay? What are you saying?"

"I see that your sisterly affections are still in touch." Leto smirked.

Mara dropped her hand and clenched her fists, forcing herself to get a grip.

"Not at all. Medea knew I wanted nothing to do with any of it anymore. I find it hard to believe she'd contact me."

"As would I, yet here we are." Leto crossed her arms over her chest, tilting her head to the side as she studied Mara.

Mara sighed. A wave of exhaustion rolled over her body, reminding her of the hours of sleep she had not managed to get in the past couple of nights. "Explain all of this," Mara said.

Leto held up her hand, her face alarmed. Mara heard it too. The heavy breathing from the back room had lightened. The sound of bare feet hitting the floor



alerted them that Corbyn was on his way to the kitchen. Mara wrenched the door open and urged Leto to go. Leto smiled and held up a finger to her lips. "*Obscuro*," she whispered. Her body disappeared.

Corbyn stepped from the bedroom, blinking down the hall at Mara. "You okay?" he said, his voice scratchy.

Mara swallowed and held her breath. Corbyn made his way down the hallway, walking past Leto's hiding place. She released her pent-up breath when he reached her. "Yeah, it's, uh," she licked her lips, "it's good. Raheem texted and asked if I could come in for his last couple of hours in a bit."

"Come back to bed. You've covered for him more times than I can count. Let him call somebody else." Corbyn reached out his hand for hers.

Mara lifted her face and kissed his cheek. "He's sick. I'm going to go in for him. You'd want the same thing if I was stuck there."

Corbyn frowned. "That's more than I'd do." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "The keys are by the door." Corbyn smiled and shuffled back down the hall.

Leto reappeared as the bedroom door clicked shut. "That was quite adorable," Leto said.

Mara rolled her eyes. That was just what she needed was for Leto to return and inform her mother of her relationship with Corbyn. Mara used the chair as balance and leaned down to pick up the circlet. Leto gasped as it made contact with Mara's hand. She stood up straight and held it out to Leto. "Here you go," she said.

Leto stepped forward and grabbed Mara's wrist, careful to not touch the circlet. She turned Mara's hand over and stared at the red circle on her palm.

"Impossible," Leto whispered. She traced her thumb over the circle.

Mara wrenched her hand away from her. "It leaves a nice burn, I know. If you would just take it back, that'd be great."

Leto shrugged her shoulders. "It's not that simple anymore, Marzanna. It's chosen you."

Mara blinked. Chosen? She had not been in contact with her powers in years. There was no way she was getting wrapped up in this. "Look, you showed up here after this, brought up Medea and all this crap—"

"Marzanna."

"—and now you're throwing around 'chosen,' and I'm not having it. Just take it and get out. Tell mother I said hi. Or don't, I don't care." She took a deep breath.

"And it's Mara now. No more of this 'Marzanna' garbage."

Leto sighed and stepped to the door. To Mara's surprise, she took the car keys down from the hook. "If you're asking for a ride, it's a hard no," Mara snapped.

Leto laughed. "Come get in the car, Marzanna." She tossed the keys to Mara.

Mara snatched them from the air, the sharp edges biting into her palm in her tight fist. "I don't want to go anywhere with you."

"Believe me, I've never wanted to get in one of those deathtraps before either. But you told your," she searched for a word, "him that you were leaving, so we might as well go."

Mara made no move for the door. Leto opened the door. The sharp gust of cold wind made Mara gasp. Leto smiled. "Would you rather walk?" She laughed at Mara's opposed look. "Let's get in the car then. I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay until he wakes up and asks more questions than you want answered. Trust me. And you have no hopes of forcing me out." She leveled her gaze at Mara, raising an arched eyebrow at her.

Mara lowered her gaze to the fresh mark on her hand. She could not deny that she wanted answers. The curiosity was burning at the bottom of her stomach. Medea had sent this to her. What if she was in trouble? Why else would she try to contact Mara?

Mara grabbed her jacket from the floor and shoved her arms through the holes. She stuck the circlet into her coat pocket. "Alright, I'll drive."

"Of course you will. I've never bothered to figure those stupid things out." Leto held the door open for Mara and let her pass by into the cold night.

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Mara crossed over the park bridge for the third time. She leaned over the wheel and took a glance at Leto. "Let me get this straight: the guard was killed and Medea sent it to me?"

"The Tutella, yes. I said that already," Leto muttered.

“Right. And the Ignis Sanctum was attacked—“

“Yep.”

“—and you were there, mother was killed, the guards were killed—“

“Yep.” Leto nodded along like a bobble head.

“—and I’m the one she chose to send the Talis to.” None of it made sense.

Why would Medea send it to her?

“Apparently so. The Sanctum was completely obliterated. It was swarming with avari when I awoke—sorry, humans,” she corrected herself with a sheepish smile.

Mara shrugged. “I don’t agree with the common Mage conception of humans, but be my guest.” Dennis’s face popped into her mind. She shoved him away. Not all humans were like that.

Leto scoffed. “Okay,” she snickered. “Anyway—“

“They’re really not,” Mara found herself countering. “Corbyn is the prime example of compassion and kindness and love, the opposite of everything I was ever taught about humans.” She turned a corner, jerking the wheel harder than was needed. “You can’t rope them all together.”

“History speaks differently, but I’ll give you the benefit of a doubt where your special human is concerned.” Leto pushed on a button and jumped when the car locks clicked. Mara snorted. Leto straightened in her seat. “As I was saying, there was no chance of looking over the Sanctum. It was rubble anyway. I don’t think there was the slightest chance anyone else was in there.” She looked at Mara, sadness pulling the corners of her mouth downward. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

Mara took a deep breath and nodded. It was strange, thinking that her mother was dead did not seem to faze her that much. She had sworn off ever seeing them again. But still, they were her family. She had at least known they were okay the entire time. “So what happened to Medea then?”

“Narcis took her with him, probably to figure out what happened to the Talis.”

Narcis. His face was fuzzy in her memory, but she remembered him. Pulled from her age group, Narcis was trained to be the head of their active forces. Skilled in fighting and brilliant with his use of magic from a young age, he was a promising contender for the top spot in battle. “Apparently his rank got to his head.”

“Something like that. He went off the map after being sent on a mission to the East almost a year ago. We thought he was killed. We’re not on the best of terms with them, as you know, but they said he left the day after he arrived, just as planned. Five months later, the Ventus Sanctum was attacked—“

“That’s the elves, right?”

“There were casualties,” she continued. “The elves accused us of sending our own to attack. Of course, Maeve never would have made such a call, but there were clear signs of a Mage at work.”

“So Narcis went after the Ventus Talis,” Mara concluded.

Leto nodded, her face grim. “He managed to take it too—eyes on the road,” Leto snapped, grabbing for her armrest.

“Sorry,” Mara returned her gaze to the road, shaking her head. “How on earth did he manage to get that from them?”

“Narcis has more than enough followers to help him out.” Leto relaxed her grip on the car. “He attacked with forces the second time and managed to take it. This time, there were numerous eyewitnesses.”

So the Mage’s leading fighter decided to turn on his own. Narcis was a skilled fighter, but only the leaders of each race knew how to wield the Tali. Narcis would not have a clue of what to do with a Talis. “I still don’t get why he would think it’s a good idea to take a Talis, let alone multiple. It takes years of preparation, teaching that only the Magister receives to use one of those things.”

Leto’s gaze was like stone, fixated straight ahead of her. Mara’s brain reeled. There was no way that was true. “You don’t mean that—no, come on—”

“It’s not like you were keen on taking the spot behind your sister,” Leto offered Mara a crooked grin. “Maeve didn’t have much of a choice.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Mara muttered. “You should understand that.”

Leto’s grin faded to a sad smile. “Emotions dictating action is a human fault.”

“And stomping out the humans is so much better.”

“It only serves to complicate the worst of situations. As a Mage, I choose to rise above that weakness.” Leto’s sigh fogged the glass in front of her. “And we don’t stomp them out, as you’re well aware. We’re not Narcis.” Her gaze was fierce now as she turned to Mara. “It’s the choice you have to make.” She leveled her eyes on Mara.

Mara resisted the urge to wriggle under her gaze. She did not cower years before; she was not going to now. “I made that choice long ago.”

“My words must have gone over your head. You *have* to make this choice. Tonight. Now.”

"I have no clue what you're talking about," Mara mumbled, turning around the park again.

Leto twisted to face Mara. "You have to return the Talis. You cannot keep it here; that would be utter foolishness since you can't protect it, and if you care about that avarus at all, you'll get it away from him immediately—"

"Slow down a sec," Mara threw out her hand in front of Leto. "I'm not going anywhere."

Leto snorted. "The Ignis Sanctum moves to Waco. Brilliant."

"Of course not. You'll take it back to Patrisym, the Council will pick a new hiding spot, and—"

"I can't take it away from Waco," Leto said.

"Sure you can," Mara piped. "Wrap it up in your tunic, do your little spinny, apparating thing and—Crap!"

Leto jerked the emergency break. The car screeched forward before jolting to a stop. Mara pushed away from the steering wheel, sparing her chest the impact. She rounded on Leto. "What the hell is the matter with you? No, let go!" Leto snatched at her right hand. Mara pulled away, struggling with her.

Leto snatched her right hand and pushed down on the small bones of Mara's wrist. She was too strong for Mara. All she could do was relent. "*Relaxo*," she muttered. Mara watched as her fingers uncurled from their fist. Leto stabbed her pointer finger into the center of Mara's palm. "This mark," Leto circled it, "this is the mark of a bearer. You touched the Talis and got this, yes?"

Mara gulped, her eyes flashing from the mark to Leto's gaze. "But I was not chosen. I can't possibly—I don't even practice anymore."

"Maeve chose the last guard for that position, true, but the Talis has overthrown that choice and chosen its own protector." Leto released her grip. "It has chosen you."

Mara took her hand back and rubbed at her sore wrist. She turned her palm over and studied the burn. The red was vibrant against her skin even in the darkness of the car. Mara looked up at Leto, her eyes wide, confused. "But it burned me when I touched it."

Leto held out her hand and waited. Mara withdrew the Talis from her pocket and handed it over. A sound like oil sizzling on a frying pan filled the car, and the stench of burning flesh wrinkled Mara's nose. Thick blisters covered Leto's fingers, the flesh bubbling red and black. Mara snatched the Talis from her hands, gasped, and looked down at the Talis in her grasp. It was cool to the touch, the metal smooth and icy beneath her fingers.

"*Sano*," Leto said through her teeth. She winced as the blisters disappeared and her skin repaired itself. "I think I proved my point."

Mara nodded. The Talis put up its defenses against Leto, but it was harmless in her hands. It was not hard to imagine that it would do the same to anyone else who touched it. "I'm guessing wrapping it for you isn't an option."

"The Talis would return to its guard, one way or another. Or it would end up in the wrong hands."

"So if I don't take it back..." she let her words hang in the air before them.



Leto nodded. "Narcis will most likely find it."

If he managed to take the Talis from the elves, there would probably be no stopping him from taking this one. Mara frowned. "But wouldn't the Talis defend itself against him?"

"His attack on the elves showed signs of new magic, things that Mages are not naturally capable of. And he managed to take that Talis."

"He's using different magic to take them."

"Exactly."

"But it would be so easy to defend against that. Fight back in the same way, no?" she trailed off as Leto shook her head.

"Dark magic is forbidden. Narcis is blinded by his greed and desire for power over everything." Leto shuddered. "No one in his right mind would tamper with such things."

Mara held the Talis up. "But isn't that what this Talis is? By me using it—"

"By no means are you supposed to use it! Fire cannot be controlled. That art was lost long ago, along with the dragons."

"Right," Mara muttered. She had heard that story before. Mara had never believed in the stories of the dragons, but she did not want to fight with Leto over that. Mara sighed. "Leto, I haven't used my powers in years, if I even have them anymore. I can't protect this. If we can't use the Talis, then what? Do we create another Sanctum for Narcis to destroy?"

"We cannot use the Talis. Its power is too strong for any of us to use." Leto stopped. A police car sped past them, honking as it went. The blue and red lights

disappeared around the corner. “Besides, putting it on would only make it easier for Narcis to locate it.”

The red eyes. Mara gulped as she recalled the vision she had seen while wearing the circlet. “It’s meant to be worn. The other Tali are used. It doesn’t make any sense to hide its power.”

“I’ve told you, we cannot wield it. The best thing we can do is return the Talis to Patrisym.”

“Not we. You,” Mara corrected her as another cop car whizzed by. The car turned in the same place. She could hear the sirens in front of them, but there were more coming from behind.

“What do you mean ‘not we’? Have you listened to anything I just said?”

“I have.” Mara turned back to face Leto. “I have a family here. I can’t just leave them without saying anything.”

Leto’s nostrils flared. “You *cannot* tell them anything about this.”

“And I have no desire to,” she cut in. “Corbyn knows nothing about any of this, and I’m going to keep it that way.” Leto’s eyes moved back and forth across Mara’s face. “What are you looking at?”

“Your eyes are red,” Leto said, a strange tone in her voice.

Mara wiped her eyes. “I haven’t had much sleep the past few days.”

“No, not that kind of red. They were brown earlier today, I know, but they’re violet now. I expected as much, what with the mark and all, but the red is odd.”

Leto’s brows furrowed, and her mouth curled into a puzzled frown.

Mara pulled the rearview mirror to face her. She gasped and lifted her hand to her face. The color of her eyes was no longer a muted brown but a violent magenta, neither red nor the normal violet of the Mages. "It must have happened when I put on the Talis," she whispered. Too late, she realized she had said the words aloud.

"You put it on?" Leto grabbed Mara's shoulder and twisted her around. "You put the Talis on?"

"Just before you came in, I don't know why I..."

Her words were lost in the screaming sirens around them. More cop cars swerved around the corner ahead, followed by ambulances and a fire truck.

"You entered the Ethereal Realm! He could know where you are! Don't you realize what this means?"

Mara looked from the street lamp at the corner to the bushes across from it, the same bushes the Talis had landed in the night before. "That's my street," Mara whispered.

"What? No, it's that—"

"That's my street!" Mara slammed the emergency break down and shoved the accelerator to the floor. The car lurched forward. The wheels squealed as she jerked around the corner. The cars were out of sight, but the lights reflected off the buildings before the curve, the curve just before her building.

Mara slammed on the breaks. She scrambled for the door handle, clawing to find it. Leto grabbed her arm. "Don't. You should wait."

Mara shoved the door open but found her leg frozen in midair. She tried to turn, but her body was stuck. “Let me go,” she uttered through her teeth.

“He could be here, Marzanna. It’s not safe, please.”

“Let. Me. Go.” Mara heard Leto sigh behind her, and the feeling in her limbs flooded back to the tips of her fingers. She threw the Talis from her pocket and jumped from the car.

The red and blue lights blinded the street. Neighbors poured from their homes, shielding their eyes to watch the chaos. Mara stubbed her toe and stumbled forward, her fingertips grazing the ground to catch her fall. Fragments of brick scattered the street. Mara pushed her way through the crowd and rounded the fire truck to get in sight of the building.

A crater indented the left side of the apartment building. Only the ground floor remained untouched. Sparks flew from shredded wire, and the water pipes burst from each story. Two firemen walked in front of her carrying the mangled remains of a bike rack, her twisted frame knotted in the middle of it. Mara scanned the crowd, searching in the blinking alert lights. She had not been gone long enough for this to happen. Surely they were here.

Red hair. Two paramedics carried a stretcher to the far ambulance. Mara ducked under the yellow tape and sped towards them, knocking an officer’s outstretched arm away. She was ten feet from the ambulance when a burly fireman stopped her in her tracks. “Ma’am, you’ll have to wait outside the area—”

“No! Let me throu—that’s my—no, no please,” she begged as the man passed her off to an officer. He gathered her to his side. Mara turned her head just in time to see Corbyn’s face before the medic lowered the sheet.

Her body was numb. It was as if Leto had frozen her again. But she put one foot in front of the other somehow. The officer led her outside of the tape before he stopped. “Ma’am, I’ll need to ask you a few questions.”

“I’m fine,” Mara said, her voice a steady drone.

“That’s good, that’s good,” the officer assured her. “I still need to ask you some questions if you don’t mind.”

Mara’s mind was reeling. There was undeniable trauma to his head, let alone to the rest of his body. She looked past the cop at the building. The impact looked as if it had centered on her apartment. The sheer force of the explosion would have killed anyone nearby. It was shocking that his body made it through it. There was no chance he would have survived that attack, and there was no way a child could make it through that, especially not one as small as Attie. They were dead, both of them. Gone.

The thought resounded in Mara’s head, but she was calm. The numbness buzzed through her body. She could not think about them. All she could think about was the red eyes. Narcis. He had seen her when she put the Talis on. He came to find her. She led him here. He did this.

Mara locked eyes with the cop. He was uncomfortable; it was written all over his face that he wanted to leave. Mara slipped a cold grin on her face. “I’m fine, really. I thought it was my building, but I live further down.” She stepped back from

him. "My mistake." The cop nodded. His radio blared on his shoulder. He held up his finger to her and turned to answer. A group of firemen passed between her and the cop. Mara fell into step with the group, sidestepped behind a car, and disappeared in the crowd.

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He stepped back as Mara brushed past him. He kept his gaze trained in front of him, watching her from his peripherals. She was the spitting image of Maeve. He would have recognized her anywhere.

A car was parked further up the street. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Mara dart from the edge of the spectators to the car. He focused on the vehicle, taking in the profile of the person sitting in the passenger seat. Leto. Of course she was here. She would make his job difficult. Difficult, but not impossible.

Although he viewed it as one of the weaker Tali, the Ventus Talis had served him well thus far. He marveled at the destruction of the building, smiling at the thought of the power he had in his grasp and the power he had yet to achieve. He turned and watched the taillights of the car brighten. He could stop them now. It would be too easy. But he had no desire to deal with all of the people. Even with the Talis, it would take a while to make sure that no one survived the occasion. Narcis's lip curled as the car pulled forward and disappeared from his line of sight.

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Mara sank into the driver's seat and slammed the door. She felt Leto's eyes on her, looking at her like a dog on the side of the road after being hit by a car. Mara gripped the steering wheel and drummed her fingers against it one at a time. Something hard pressed against her leg between her and the seat. She yanked it out from under her, holding the Talis in her hands. She pushed it inside her jacket, fitting it against her side. She threw the car into gear and hit the gas, leaving the lights behind them.

"There was nothing you could have done, Marzanna," Leto said, her tone low and careful. Funny, the sound of her full name no longer made her cringe. "He would've killed you as well. And he would've gotten away with the Talis. It's better that you weren't there."

"I need to know where I'm going," Mara said, her voice strong and even, depicting no hint of the pain burning low in her chest like cinders. The flame bursting over it, the scorch rising in her throat and thrumming in her ears, had nothing to do with the pain. She saw the shadow, those red eyes burning in the smoky haze. She felt Leto's gaze on her face. She glanced at her. "This thing chose me to take it back. I'm taking it back, I'll help my sister, and I'm doing whatever it takes

to get this psycho off the streets.” She stared straight ahead as the road lines flashed alongside her. “I’m tired of waiting for my past to find me.”

Leto opened her mouth but turned her face back to the road, choosing to not say anything. That was good. Mara did not want sympathy or empathy or anything else she had to offer. For the first time in twelve years, she was happy to call herself a Mage. It was the only thing that made her capable of turning off her emotions.

“Head west,” Leto said.

Mara signaled for the left lane. “I thought headquarters was up north.”

Leto laughed. “We can’t reach it by car, and I can’t use magic to get us both there. We need a plane.”

This presented a new problem. Mara had no way of getting on a plane. After revoking her magic, there was no way for her to forge all the documents required for human life. Sure, some of it was easy to bypass, at least easy enough to land a job at the library, but nothing good enough to get around airport security.

Leto laughed. “Relax, before you chew your lip off.” Mara retracted her teeth from her bottom lip. She never realized she was doing that. Leto pulled her jacket around her and leaned into her chair. “You know the way to Austin, I’m guessing.”

Mara snorted. “Straight down 35.”

“Good. Wake me up when we’re there.” Leto turned her head towards the window and settled against the armrest.

Mara drummed her fingers on the wheel. She reached to turn on the radio but brought her hands back to the wheel. She glanced at Leto. She doubted Leto wanted to listen to anything at the moment. Mara sighed and pinched her shoulder



blades together. Austin was a short trip, less than two hours at this time of night, but it was plenty of time for her mind to wander. The image of Corbyn's face, his red hair matted with blood, filled her mind. He was put away into an ambulance, probably carried off to a nearby morgue for Chris or another friend to identify. Mara pictured Attie's face, bruised and battered by the destruction around her. She wondered if they had managed to find her small body in the wreckage. Mara hoped they did. The thought of her buried beneath the bricks made her stomach churn.

"Marzanna," Leto muttered.

"Hmm?"

"I'm truly sorry, for all of this. They didn't deserve that. You didn't deserve that."

Mara buried the thoughts away into the recesses of her memory. There was no point in thinking about it. They were dead. Nothing could change that. All she could do was try to get the Talis back and help Medea. "So, do you have a plane hidden in Austin or a hovercraft buried in the hills?"

"Close," Leto said. To Mara's surprise, she continued. "An old friend lives there."

Mara perked up. "I never picked you as one to consort with humans." After all, it was against Mage law, and with Leto being Maeve's right-hand man, that was risky.

Leto craned her neck around to glance at Mara. "You didn't think you were the only Mage to ever jump ship, did you?" She turned back to the window.

Mara ran this information through her brain. A Mage was living in Austin; an ex-Mage, according to Leto. So Mara was not the only one who wanted nothing to do with the Mages. She found that somewhat comforting. It was nice to know that she was not the only one who chose a different path.

“Are there others? Others who quit, I mean.” Silence. But Leto’s breathing was not heavy. Mara was sure she was awake. “Leto?”

“Goodnight, Marzanna.” Mara rolled her eyes. Typical Leto. She was always a hard shell to crack. It did not look like that had changed in the years she had been gone

## CHAPTER SIX

In the years that Mara had spent in Waco, she had only made the trip to Austin's 6<sup>th</sup> Street once. The Dirty Sixth was a haven for the university students, as well as many of the locals. Mara swung her car door open, avoiding the shirtless girl in cornrows who rode by, dragging her pedicab full of passengers behind her. The two men in her cab whistled at Mara as they passed, watching her over their shoulders with glazed eyes.

Leto smiled as she watched the people meander by. "You can never tell what the weather is by a Texan's clothing," she said. Leto was on to something. Only a fraction of the people on the street were wearing pants, let alone jackets.

Mara zipped her jacket and hopped onto the sidewalk. "That's Austin for you." She fell into step with the crowd. "Everything's further down this way." Mara turned to find Leto in the same spot. She gestured to the building behind her. There was nothing in this section except a bare, red light bulb, not that Mara could see. The only sign in the vicinity read "Midnight Cowboy Modeling and Oriental Massage." Mara lifted an eyebrow. "You looking for a massage?"

Leto stepped under the sign. "You judge this place too quickly." Leto winked and pointed to a gray box on the wall. It was an intercom box with names such as Jack Burton, Plinio, and Bat Guano listed in barely legible font.

Mara glanced at Leto. "Are we ringing up Mr. Bat Feces?"

Leto smirked and pushed the button beside the name Harry Craddock. A ring from the other side answered her. "This place has more to offer than you think."

Mara could hear footsteps approaching the door. She backed away as they stopped, stepping behind Leto. A lock slid from its place, and the metal, barred door swung out.

A man snuck his head around the edge of the door. Mara looked down at him. His hair was short and thin, his goatee and mustache freshly trimmed. "Name," he said, his voice low and curt.

"Ulysses," Leto answered.

To Mara's surprise, the man seemed to recognize the name. She had doubted whether it was real for a second. His eyes widened, and he pulled the door closer to him. "There's no one here by that name, ma'am. I'm sorry, I can't let you—"

Leto stopped him from shutting the door. "*Resigno*," Mara heard her mutter. The man's brown eyes lightened as if a cloud were covering their surface. "Clever," Leto said, a snicker in her voice. "*Relevo*."

The man's eyes returned to brown. He shook his head and looked from Mara to Leto. "Name?" he repeated.

"Nobody," Leto said.

The man pushed the door open, revealing a long hallway behind him. "This way."

"That's a name," Mara commented. She stepped behind Leto through the doorway. The man snapped the door shut and took the lead. Mara took note of his

creased pants, shiny black vest, and brogue shoes. She felt slightly underdressed in her zip-up sweatshirt and jeans.

“He always had a sense of humor,” she heard Leto say before coming to a halt at the end of the hall. Mara stopped inches from her. Leto whipped around, her nose close to Mara’s. “Stay close behind me. Let me do the talking. Don’t speak unless spoken to, and even then, refer to me first.” Her eyes bore down into Mara.

Mara took a step back. “Back up, boss, I get it.” She tried to look around Leto, but Leto blocked her, forcing Mara to look her in the face. Mara sighed and threw her hands up. “I got it. I’ll stay behind you.”

“And?”

“And keep my mouth shut. Sure.”

“I remember you, Marzanna. I know how much that is to ask of you.” She turned but stopped short. “And whatever you do, don’t pull that out.” Leto nodded to the Talis in her pocket. She clutched the Talis in her fist and followed Leto around the corner.

The room was narrow, lined with plush leather booths with enough seating for four around a small table. Mirrors ran down either side at eye level while sitting, reflecting the faces of the people sipping on their cocktails. Iron lanterns fixed to the wall broke the mirror pattern, and the aged bulbs emitted a ghostly tint of yellow. The wallpaper above the mirrors to the left was a shade of black lighter than the leather booths. Yellow flowers covered the dark surface, a failed attempt at brightness in the room. The other wall was brick, brown, and chipped. A bar was smashed into the back right corner, the shelves stocked full of various amber

liquids. A man also dressed in a black vest pushed a cart topped with glasses past the bar, indicating that the room extended further back. They walked down the middle aisle. Mara zeroed in on a man close to the bar, tucked into the corner of a booth. He sat alone.

Their usher stopped in front of the booth. He leaned down to the man's ear and whispered something. The man waved his hand at him. The usher nodded to them and disappeared behind the bar.

Leto slid into the booth across from him. Mara remained standing and leaned against Leto's booth, getting her first look at the ex Mage.

At first glance, Mara thought this Nobody was albino. Everything except for his black eyebrows suggested it. Black eyelashes outlined his pale blue eyes, blue that was almost white. Mara imagined what he would have looked like with the standard violet eyes of a Mage. It would have been a sight.

"Getting in touch with your Greek roots, so I've heard," Leto said.

Lys leaned back against the cushion, his face impassive and bored. He was so high above the table that his waist was almost above its surface. "Let me guess, you picked the poor man's brain. You're so," he swirled his glass and took a sip of his drink, "unwelcome."

"I have a job for you." Leto went straight to the point.

Lys chuckled. "I only get this booth for two hours tops. Order a drink and be civil or get out." He snapped at a bartender and pointed at the table. The bartender hurried to his side, his rolling bar in tow. "Might I suggest a Joe Buck," he fluttered his eyelashes at Leto.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'll have the Alamagoozlum." The bartender nodded and got to work.

Lys let out a low whistle. "That's a big girl drink." He glanced at Mara. "You must have hoodwinked the doorman to get this child in. What'll it be, babydoll?" he addressed Mara.

Mara frowned at him. Babydoll? She was no child. "What's your suggestion?"

Lys drew his face into a concentrated frown. "Maybe a Courting Two Ladies." He leaned over to the bartender. "Easy on the absinthe," he whispered.

Mara looked over the bartender's shoulder and glanced at the menu on the table. "I'll take a Smoke and Mirrors," she said.

The bartender pulled an aged bottle from the bunch. Lys raised his glass to her and nodded. "The child knows what she wants." The bartender finished their drinks and disappeared. Lys lifted his glass. "Now we can enjoy our drinks," he tapped his glass against theirs in turn, "and act like we're friends." He knocked back the remainder of his drink and let out a satisfied sigh.

Mara lifted hers to her lips. The aged scotch nestled against the sides of her mouth like froth. A hint of orange spiced the back of her throat, the sip leaving a warm thickness like syrup on her tongue, but thin enough to be refreshing. Not too bad.

Leto left her glass on the table. "I'll rephrase my earlier comment. I have an, shall we call it, offer for you."

"Hell, I'll need more to drink before I talk business with you." He waved at the bartender.

Leto scoffed. "Ulysses, don't be ridiculous—"

"Don't call me that in here," he cut in. He wiggled his finger at his glass. "Bring me another one of these, or whatever the other one was."

"I'm sorry, sir," the bartender said. "I can't serve you more than two." He returned to the bar.

Lys threw his hands in the air and sunk into his seat. "I knew I never liked this place." He eyed Mara's drink. "You're taking a while on that." Mara held the glass out to him. He mouthed "thank you" as he snatched it, drinking the top half of the glass like it was his first refreshment in months.

Leto reached inside her jacket and slid a fat ruby onto the table. Lys forced himself to look away from it. "Ain't nothing that carries weight around here but gold and diamonds, sweetheart." Leto tossed a black bag onto the table. It landed with a heavy bang, the coins inside spreading the bag thin against the surface. Lys ran his tongue lightly against the inside of his lip. "I'm listening."

Leto withdrew her hand from her jacket. "We need a lift out of here."

Lys nodded, his eyes never leaving the bag. "That's a big job, and I'm not in that business much anymore. You see, flying planes is expensive. Somebody's got to house it for you, pay for the fuel and whatnot." Leto tossed another bag onto the table. Sharp points pushed their way through the fabric. Lys's breath whistled through his lips. "That's a big offer, that is," he whispered

Shrill ringing broke the eerie mood of the bar. Mara slapped her hand against her jeans pocket. Her phone was buzzing. Customers turned their heads to glare at her as she pulled it from her pocket. It was 4:00am, the time her alarm was set for in



case she slept through the last of her shift. She swiped the screen and closed the alarm out.

The usher appeared at her side. “Ma’am, there is a strict no phone policy in our establishment—”

“We’re very sorry,” Leto leaned forward and said, her voice thick and smooth. “It won’t happen again.”

The usher’s eyes glazed over. He shook his head, ridding himself of her influence. “I’m sorry, ma’am, we don’t offer warnings. I’ll have to ask you to leave. If you will please follow me—”

“Aw, come on, Archie.” Lys patted the usher’s arm. The usher pulled his arm away. “Give the poor girl another chance.”

At this point, everyone in the bar was turned in their direction, watching the loud spectacle. The usher’s nostrils flared. “It’s Arthur. All of you must follow me this instant or I’ll have to get the boss.”

“There’s no need for that,” Lys said. He put his hands up and scooted out of the booth. Leto stood with him. “See, we’ll follow you. Everything’s fine.” He turned to the onlookers. “Everything’s fine,” he whispered loud enough for everyone to hear. Several people snickered while others frowned. Lys waved his hands, ushering Mara and Leto forward. “Let’s go, ladies. Follow the nice doorman boy out of here.”

“Ulysses,” a voice growled over them.

Mara had not noticed the stairs winding along the front wall. The black iron was almost invisible against the brick. The stairs wound up to a dark platform. A door was the only thing at the top of the stairs. On the platform, a woman stood

looking over all of them. Her long honey hair waved to her hips. Her knee poked through the high slit of her green dress as she descended the stairs and approached them. Her eyes were narrowed on Lys. Everyone in the bar was watching them.

“Crap,” Lys muttered. He stuttered a laugh. “We were just leaving, Andy.” He glanced around at all of the people watching. “No reason to make a scene.”

“I’m almost positive I kicked you out of here last week.” She scowled at the doorman. He cowered under her gaze.

“It was quite clear, yes. My friends are from out of town, you see, and I figured there was no better place to introduce them to than your establishment.”

She was not buying it. “As luck would have it, it’s rather convenient you’re here. We have some business to discuss.”

Lys licked his lips. Mara felt Leto straighten beside her. “No can do tonight, friend. I need to return these ladies to their room.”

“That can wait. You’ve been dodging me.”

Mara caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Eight burly men poured from the back room and snuck along the wall, making their way around them. Mara squared her stance and lowered her fists to her sides. “Easy,” Leto whispered.

One of the men approached Andy. He was a head taller than her and at least two of her thick. She nodded. “Escort these good people upstairs.”

The man reached forward and placed his hand on Mara’s back. She did not mean for it to happen. The word escaped her throat and rose to her lips on instinct. “*Percutio*,” she said.

A jolt of lightning shot from her arm through the man's hand. He screamed and reeled away from her to the wall, holding his hand in front his widening eyes. Mara stared at him in shock. She could see his face through the smoke that rose from singed hole in his hand. The man fell to the floor in a faint.

"Duck," Leto ordered. Mara fell to the floor. Lys whipped a gun from his side and shot three times into the ceiling. People screamed and ducked beneath the tables. Leto kicked her leg out and swiped Andy's ankles. She fell to the floor hard, a mess of skirt and stiletto. Leto pulled Mara to her feet. "Stay close behind me," she said, sending one of the men to the ground with her elbow. Lys kicked a guard in the throat and stepped over him to punch the next man. The man's nose erupted in a spurt of blood. He swung wildly at them, snagging Lys in the shoulder. He staggered sideways into their booth. Lys swiped the bags from the table and stuffed them into his pockets while Leto finished the man with a smart kick of her heel.

Four of the men stood in front of them, the fifth pulled his boss from the middle of the room. Customers struggled their way through the guards. Using the distraction to her advantage, Leto jumped from the side of a booth and battered the man over the head with a glass in her hand. It shattered over him, and he slid to the floor. Lys tossed two drinks into the closest man's face and punched him. He swung with his other hand to fell the next one. He shook his fist out, his mouth grimaced in pain. Exasperated, he waved at Mara while Leto round kicked the last man. "Get moving, babydoll." He pushed her forward. Leto quickly followed, dodging around the wall as a shot from Andy chipped against the brick.

The mustached usher stood in front of the door, his arms extending over it. “I’ve called the police,” he said as they strode closer. “They’ll be here in seconds.”

“Empty threat, Archie. Your boss wants nothing to do with the police,” Lys called out.

“It’s Arthur,” the usher stuttered out. “And you’re not leaving.”

“Arthur, please get out of the way. We have nothing against you, if you’ll just move—”

A sharp bang cut Leto off. Mara covered her ears with her hands and ducked. Mara looked up, the ringing in her ears fading away. The usher eyes were glassy, his gaze on something far behind them. A dark hole was in the center of his forehead. A trickle of blood rolled between his eyes and down the bridge of his nose. He fell face-first to the floor after it.

Leto sighed. “This is why I wasn’t sad to see you leave. That was so unnecessary.”

“Save the lecture for later, sister,” Lys said. The far off sound of sirens hit their ears as he opened the door. He glanced at Mara’s car on the curb. “I hope that’s your beater.” Mara nodded and jumped past him. “Praise the good lord,” he muttered and followed her and Leto to the car.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Mara's old Honda guzzled and clattered as they rolled to the entrance of the airway. It was a small, private airport. The only building in sight was a long metal shop on the edge of an expanse of concrete that extended into a runway beyond it.

"We'll leave the car here," Lys said from the back seat. He leaned forward between their chairs. "If anyone's here, they've probably already heard us."

Mara frowned. "I'd be willing to guess that this car hasn't hit that kind of speed in over a decade or two." She winced at the engine's wine and snatched the keys from the ignition.

"It wouldn't have been necessary if it weren't for that escapade back there." Leto turned on Mara. "I told you to do nothing. Do you call boring a hole through a man's hand nothing?"

"Babydoll's got some zap," Lys smiled. "Talk her down later, Leto. We may just need a little bit of that here."

The building was maybe a hundred yards away. There was one gravel drive that led to the concrete slab. The place looked abandoned. Mara would not be surprised if Lys's plane was the only one here.

"Showtime, ladies." Lys slid from the back of the car. Mara closed the front door and patted the handle. This was more than likely goodbye to her trusty beater. "Mine's in the third bunker," he said. He took the lead down the drive.

Leto waited for Mara to follow him. "I can keep my eyes on you back here," she said. Mara rolled her eyes but followed Lys.

Lys stopped in front of the third shop. He stuffed his hands deep into his pants pocket. "Got the key here somewhere," he mumbled.

"Please, take your time," Leto said.

Lys pulled the keys out and shook them at her. He knelt down to insert the key into the lock at the bottom of the door and froze. They all heard it, the crunch of wheels turning on gravel. Someone was pulling up the drive.

Headlights beamed on Lys' figure. Leto jerked Mara's arm and pulled her out of the line of light. She pushed her against the side of the building. Lys faced the light and put his hands out close to his sides. Mara could see the butt of his gun at his waist. "Around the back," he muttered, trying to keep his lips still, "there's a split in the metal. Sneak through that way."

"Like rats," Leto muttered.

Lys's mouth twitched upward. "No worries, friend. We'll leave in style." He jerked his head slightly. Leto pulled Mara's arm and lead the way around the building. Lys stepped forward to greet the car. "Fella's," she heard him call out. "Top of the morning to you."

"He'll get himself shot in no time," Leto said. She pulled at a loose piece of metal attached to a support stud. The metal screeched under her hands. Leto cringed and stopped, holding the metal away from the building just wide enough for them to slip through. "Keep the door open," Leto said.

Mara racked her brains for the right word to use. If she was off, she could end up blowing it to bits. "I'm cutting my fingers here," Leto grunted.

"Got it," Mara said. She hoped this worked. Mara lifted her right hand to the door. She only needed it to stay in the same spot. "*Glacio*," she said.

Leto removed her hands from the metal. It remained frozen in its place. "Perfect," Leto said. Mara grinned. "Let's go." Leto ducked through the space. Mara followed on her back.

Mara stifled a laugh when she got a look at the plane. "You find something funny?" Leto snapped.

Mara walked alongside the aircraft. "This thing is old school," she said, patting the sides. She had seen this plane in a book before. If she was right, it was probably built some time in the 1960s, made to carry loads for shorter distances. "We'll be lucky to make it out on this thing."

"We don't have time for luck." Leto peeked out of the window at the front of the shop. Mara peered around her. Lys was surrounded by four men, waving his hands like a cartoon character as he talked. "He'll get himself shot," Leto repeated.

"He can handle it," Mara said, making an attempt at confidence. One of the men laughed at something Lys said. The others nodded their heads along. The laughing man held up his hand and pulled a phone from his pocket. The smile dropped from his face. He shoved the phone back into his pocket and reached around to his back. He nodded at the men with him.

"Here we go," Leto said. The men retrieved guns from their sides and pointed them at Lys.

Mara watched as the men took a step back from Lys, all of their barrels trained on him. "He's got a quick hand. He can get out of it." Mara cringed. The man closest to Lys slapped his elbow out of the way and took the gun from his side. She turned to Leto. "We have to help him."

Leto shook her head. "Too risky. I can't get them all at once." She sighed. "He's got to get himself out of it."

Mara turned away from the scene outside and studied the plane. It was a Bristol Freighter, a little smaller than what she remembered. It should be simple enough to figure out. Nothing in the books she had read described this as a complicated plane. It was meant for multiple people to be able to hop into and fly. Granted, they were usually trained pilots, but how hard could it be?

Mara moved around the plane and stepped onto the wing by the pilot's side. She smiled. It was a standard control board. It looked just like the one from the book. This would be simple.

"I don't like that look on your face," Leto said from the ground.

Mara hopped down from the plane and looked along its side, the grin on her face widening. "I can fly this."

"Sure you can," Leto scoffed. "I'd forgotten about your military service as a fighter pilot."

Mara shook her head. "I've read about these. They're pretty simple."

"You've read about them."

Mara nodded. "I think I can get this thing into the air."



“Marzanna, I don’t think—” They froze as something shook the door outside. The sound of someone pulling at the handle rippled through the metal building. “You think or you can?” Leto hissed.

“I can,” Mara said, managing to keep her voice even.

“Okay then,” Leto said and hopped around to the other side of the plane. She frowned. “There’s no door. How the hell do you get in this thing?”

Mara shuffled to the front. “If I’m not mistaken,” she ran her hand along the underside of the nose, “it should be right,” her hand wrapped around a handle, “here.” She twisted the handle and pulled. The hatch dropped open, revealing a small opening for them to crawl into. She grinned at Leto, hooked her toe into the first hold, and hoisted herself up.

Leto stuffed herself into the space behind Mara. The nose area was skinny but tall, leaving just enough room for them to sandwich themselves into it and stand. Mara reached down to close the nose hatch, but on second thought she left it open. “This is cozy,” Leto said.

Mara felt around the walls, wishing she had a light. The cockpit was overhead, but they had to find a way to get up there. Her hands ran over what felt like a rope. It connected to others, piecing together a sort of makeshift ladder. Mara wound her hands into it and hooked her foot into the ladder. “Wait here,” she said and made her way up.

Almost five feet up, Mara’s head skimmed the top of the hatch. She ran her hand over the metal and found a similar handle to the outside. She twisted this and the door to the cockpit fell open. “Brilliant,” Leto said below. Mara felt the ladder

shake as Leto stepped onto it. Mara pulled herself through the opening and into the pilot's seat.

Leto hauled herself into the seat beside Mara. "Alright," she sighed. She looked at Mara puzzled. "Let's go," she urged.

"One second." Mara ran her hands over the control panel. There were two T-shaped throttles to her right, green for left and red for right. There was a switch just behind the wheel. Mara recognized it as the Autopilot control. A row of switches extended to her right. Mara ignored those. The throttles were on her right, the engine switch just beside her right knee. She just had to find the brakes.

"Do we have a problem?" Leto asked as Mara ducked down to look by her feet. She knew the brake would not be down there, but she did not know where else to look.

"Where the hell is the brake in this thing?" Mara muttered, running her hands over all of the switches. It would not be a switch. It had to be much bigger than that.

"Those are kind of important," Leto said. "Hurry, Marzanna." She nodded towards the door. From the cockpit, Mara could see out of the door's windows and to the ground. The men held Lys at gunpoint. He knelt beside the door, fitting keys into the lock one by one as if he did not know which one to use.

"He's buying us time," Mara said. She grabbed the wheel to help her stay upright and reached far to the right. Her middle finger caught what felt like a hook behind the wheel. Mara slipped her fingers over it and sat up. She reached her right hand around the wheel and found the same hook on that side as well. She smiled.

The brakes were on the steering wheel, just like riding a bike. “Got ‘em,” she confirmed.

“Start this thing up,” Leto said.

Mara moved her hand to the engine switch and waited. Leto looked from the door to her, her eyes wide. “Flip it already,” she ordered.

“Just a second,” Mara muttered. She watched the door in front of them shudder and inch upward.

“Now, Marzanna,” Leto ordered.

“Almost there,” Mara said. She could see the men’s waists now. Once it cleared them, she would start the engine. Lys pushed the door open the remaining few feet and locked eyes with her. His grin split from ear to ear across his face.

“Now!” Mara flipped the switch. The engine roared to life. Startled, one of the men dropped his gun. He stooped over while the others stared with wide eyes at the spinning rotor. The man grabbed his gun from the ground and pointed it in their direction. Mara twitched as the bullet deflected off one of the rotors.

“Go, Marzanna, go!” Mara grabbed the throttles with her right hand and shoved them forward. The plane lurched, and the steering wheel pulled hard under her left hand. She released the throttle and gripped hard on the wheel, activating every muscle in her arm to keep it steady. Inch by inch, the plane rolled towards them. The men fired shot after shot. Leto shrieked as the glass cracked under a bullet’s force. “You’re going to hit him!” Leto called out as Mara ran the nose directly over Lys. The men scattered. The plane rolled out of the building onto the concrete.

“Pull the right throttle in to turn,” she heard Lys’s distant voice from below. Mara pulled the right throttle back and pushed the green forward. The plane responded and jerked hard to the right. “Straighten them back out,” he called up to her. Mara pushed the red one even with the green and pointed the nose of the plane directly down the runway. She heard the nose hatch door slam shut. Mara shoved her hand against the throttles and pushed them all the way forward.

The plane shot forward. Mara’s fingers were white around the steering wheel. With every roll of the wheels, the plane attempted to lurch to the left. Mara held on with all her might, concentrating hard on keeping the nose pointed straight ahead.

Panting, Lys’s head appeared through the floor hatch between their seats. “Nice of you to join us,” Leto snapped.

Lys smiled. “You’re doing great, babydoll. Keep her rolling straight. Geez, where’d you learn to fly?” He clung to the side of Leto’s seat as the plane lurched left again. “Straight,” he repeated.

Mara glanced at him with wide eyes. “I don’t think I can keep my hold on it,” she said. The steering wheel was pulling with what seemed to be all the force the plane could muster. Her arms were on fire. She could barely feel her fingers on the wheel.

“You’re fine. Just keep her going and she’ll pull herself into the air,” Lys assured her. Mara gasped as the wheels left the ground for a split second and the steering wheel dropped. “You ever done this before?” Lys’s smile was a little smaller

on his face. Mara shook her head. “Dammit,” he muttered. “Just pull up on the wheel—”

“Pull up?”

“Yes, and keep it straight. That’s it,” he said. Mara pulled up on the steering wheel. Her stomach flipped as a feeling of weightlessness came over her body. The wheels beneath them left the ground and remained in the air this time.

“Pull up, pull up, pull up,” Lys repeated beside her. Leto broke out into a strangled laugh from the passenger’s seat. A grin broke across Mara’s face. The wheel stopped jerking beneath her hands and steadied. This was not difficult. It was the most natural feeling in the world. Mara laughed and pulled the wheel, steering the plane up into early morning sky. A moment later, she relaxed her arms and the wheel returned to its original position. The nose lowered, and the plane continued on straight.

Lys whooped. “They don’t teach you that in books, babydoll.” Lys pulled himself from the hatch and shut the door. “I’ll take over from here.” He patted her shoulder as she moved from the seat. He grabbed the wheel and settled in, his fingers flying over the switches and panels she had ignored earlier. Finally, he leaned back and wiped his forehead. He leaned over and tapped Leto on the knee. “Told you we’d leave in style.” Mara stifled a laugh.

Leto rolled her eyes and stood up. “If you need me, I’ll be taking a nap.”

Lys winked at Mara and patted the passenger seat. He fiddled with the throttles, bringing the plane to a coasting speed as she sat down beside him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Mara's knees ached and the bottom half of her legs was asleep from her curled position. It would be better if she could sleep, but Mara stared out of the glass, watching the morning sky pass by. The clouds were pink and orange behind them, but the sky in front of them was waking up. It was like the plane was dragging the morning light across the land, as if they were the carriers of the dawn.

"Sky's pretty at this time," Lys commented.

Mara sighed. "Sure is," she said.

"Here I am talking about the weather," Lys muttered. "I've got several other things on my mind at the moment." when Mara did not reply, he stared pointedly at her palm "Starting with that, for instance."

Mara squeezed her hand into a fist. "I'm not sure if know how to explain it."

Lys snorted. "I know what it is. Goodness, I haven't forgotten everything. You've been out of the game longer than me, and I doubt you've forgotten."

Mara turned her body away from the window. "But Leto made it sound like you dropped out a long time ago."

Lys snorted. "If you call five years a long time. Or six, I don't remember. Don't get me off subject." He nodded to her hand. "I doubt you were able to leave with that when you did."

Mara stared out of the window. She traced the mark with her thumb. She left the Mage life before him, years before him. He was not as old as she thought, but it was always hard to tell with a Mage. "Why'd you leave?" she asked.

"I'm asking the questions here," he retorted.

Mara smirked at him. "I have yet to hear one."

He rolled his eyes. "Alright, smarty-pants, *how* did you end up with it?"

Mara weighed her response in her mind. How much could she tell him? He knew everything she did, probably more. It might help her to give a little, make him feel comfortable telling her things as well. "It was sent to me," she said.

"And?" he urged.

She sighed. "*And* my sister was attacked. She must have panicked and sent it to me." Mara's stomach flipped at the thought of Medea. Mara had not thought of her for years, not since she had met Corbyn. Why Medea would think of her in those seconds of panic, she had no idea.

"Sounds fishy," Lys said. "Maybe your sister was trying to rope you back in."

"I doubt it," she said.

"I find it hard to believe Maeve would let her child go so easily." Mara jumped and looked at him. How did he know? "I was there when you were, babydoll. I'd be an idiot to not know who you are."

Mara shrugged. "Mother-daughter ties aren't exactly a thing for us."

He snorted. "Or anyone else in that world. With humans, it makes sense. It's a choice to have one, something you create between you and that person." Numbness flowed through Mara's veins. She shoved their faces from her thoughts. "Magic is all

power-based. There's no feeling involved, not that Mage's are really capable of that," Lys spat. "They use the excuse of 'the greater good of the universe' and point to the mistakes of humans for everything. If there's one thing a Mage can't do, it's feel sorry for something, or apologize for being wrong, for that matter."

Mara studied his face, watching as his mouth turned into a straight line. His gaze was distant. She wondered what memory played in his mind at that moment, wondered what had happened to make him say those words.

Lys sighed and broke his gaze from the window. He grinned at her. "So, you're returning to the Mage life to save us all from Narcis."

"You know of him?"

"Know of him, know him, whatever," he adjusted the throttle and flipped a few of the switches down. "We worked together for a while."

Her eyebrows shot up on her forehead. "You were in the Praelia."

"For a time, yes. That was all Leto's doing, actually; most of all of this is," Lys said, his words a weighted hint.

Mara looked at him, confused. "But Leto's just the Magister's confidant, like her connoisseur or whatever." Lys looked down at her from the corner of his eye. "No?"

He shook his head. "She was that, sure. But Leto was always the first to tell Maeve who should fight, where they should fight. All of that was up to her. Even who was appointed to Duxpraelia was really her decision," Leto smirked.

Mara's thoughts were spinning in a giant circle. Leto told her hours before that her mother was the one who did all of that work, that she was the one who



chose to appoint Narcis. Was that not the case? “You’re suggesting that Leto was the one who chose to—”

“Please tell me we’re close.” Mara turned. Leto leaned over her shoulder. “I hate traveling like this.”

Lys studied the panel in front of him. “Maybe an hour, probably less.”

“Great,” she said and slapped Mara on the shoulders. Mara jumped and turned to look up at her. “Come on. This will be a fun distraction for us both.”

Mara rose from her seat and moved to leave the Talis in the chair. “Don’t leave that out, not even here,” Leto said. “We need a better place for it anyway.” She waved for Mara to move. Leto pulled up on the door and opened the hatch. “There’s a roomy spot down here, correct?”

“Yes,” Mara and Lys said.

“Perfect,” Leto said. She dropped through the hatch.

Lys winked at Mara. “Best of luck, babydoll.”

Mara tightened her grip on the Talis and stepped through the hatch.

## CHAPTER NINE

Leto waited at the bottom. She had found the handle to the storage compartment's door. Mara looked through it into the expanse of space that extended towards the back of the plane. A few storage boxes were scattered about the room, but most of the space was empty. "After you," Leto said.

Mara stepped through the door. Leto left the door open behind them. Mara held up the Talis. "What should I do with this?"

"Hold it out in front of you and imagine molding it into the form you found it in."

Mara held the Talis in front of her. She pictured the thin sliver of metal she had found. "Got it," she said.

"Move your hands like so," Leto moved her hands together, her right hand on top of her left, right pinky to left thumb, "and say '*revert*.'"

Mara moved her hands on the Talis. "*Revert*," she said. The Talis slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. She stooped and picked it up. "Sorry," she muttered.

"Concentrate on its essence, not just its physical form. Imagine folding the magic within as well as its outer shell," Leto explained.

Mara closed her eyes and pictured the Talis, trying to hone in on the image of its magic within. She pictured it like fire, flowing hot and red within its form. She moved her hands against the circlet of fire. "*Revert*," she whispered and moved her

hands together. The fire molded to her hands with ease, aligning in a straight line between her fingers. Mara opened her eyes to find the Talis in its original shape in her hands.

“Very good,” Leto said. “Now place it along your forearm.” Mara laid it along the inside of her left arm. “Now, say “*inligo*.”

“*Inligo*,” Mara repeated. She cringed as the Talis burned against her flesh. It only took a split second for the Talis to attach, adhering to her like a second skin. Mara flapped her arm. The Talis remained in place.

Leto clapped her hands and rubbed her palms together. “Let’s give ourselves some room.” Mara helped her push the boxes to the walls. They were surprisingly heavy, the items within fit so snugly that nothing moved within. When they finished, there was a long strip of space extending from the door to Mara. Mara was glad for her enhanced vision. There was only a shred of light seeping through the hatch and a few seams of the plane. Leto’s form was dark against the light of the door. Her teeth flashed white. “Let’s begin. *Ensis*.”

Leto whipped her arm to her side. Mara jumped as the motion emitted a loud crack. Leto now held what looked like a sword. Its surface was rippling amber. The curved blade hooked into a sharp tip that Mara imagined could pierce through even the sides of the plane with no struggle. Leto swished the sword around her. The glowing blade blurred with the motion, creating a streak of yellow in front of Leto’s figure.

A stomp echoed from above. “Don’t kill the poor girl,” Lys called down to them.

Leto smiled. "If you had stayed just a while longer, you would have learned this," she twirled her sword. "The Ensis is only an art taught to a Mage who requires such a weapon: Magisters, Praelia, Tutella," she nodded to Mara. "Whatever defenses you desire of it, it will give you. You just have to know what defense to give it." Leto lowered her weapon and nodded to Mara.

Mara frowned. "How can I choose how it will act?"

"The Ensis's true form does not exist in the Corporeal Realm. Drawing its essence from the Ethereal Realm creates the Ensis. Shape and color are dictated by whatever corporeal form you decide to give it. The Ensis's power, however, already exists in the Ethereal. That is drawn upon, based on the power and ability of the user."

Mara balled her hands into fists and closed her eyes. "Feel your magic within you, that core of existence at your very center," Leto instructed.

All she could focus on was the back of her eyelids. It had been so long since she did this, she doubted whether it was even possible. Mara sighed. "This is stupid."

"Concentrate. Draw your gaze inward and find it. Force yourself, if you must."

Mara nodded, closed her eyes, and tried to ignore the light seeping through her lids and focus.

Her heartbeat drummed in her ears. Mara gasped. The burned ring on her hand was a buzzing beacon of energy, pulsating in her hand and up her arm in tendrils. The tendrils extended throughout her limbs, pulsing with magic. All the extensions ran back to the core. It was like a small sun radiating in the center of her chest, there for her to access and use. Mara concentrated on the core and followed it

from the center, through her shoulder, down her arm, and to the tips of every individual finger on her hand. She bent her arm in front of her and swung, whipping her arm from the elbow and wrist. "*Ensis!*" A *crack* cut through the air. She opened her eyes.

The blade was straight, stretching almost four feet to a point so sharp it seemed invisible. Mara turned it over in her hand. It was almost weightless, like an extension of her fingers. The ebony surface rippled with deep burgundy red, like molten lava running beneath black rock. She grinned and swung the *Ensis* in front of her. Its sharp edge whistled as it cut through the air, a streak of black and red.

A streak of amber cut in front of her and crashed against her *Ensis*. The impact vibrated up her arm and clattered her teeth together. She tightened her jaw and locked eyes on Leto's face, the yellow and black-red light reflecting off her skin. Leto withdrew her sword and extended her hand. A yellow ball of energy shot from her hand and shattered against Mara's *Ensis*. The force sent Mara flying backward. She gasped as her back hit the wall hard. She was surprised to find the *Ensis* still in her hand. "Defend your *Ensis!*" Leto thundered from across the room. Another crash of magic assaulted Mara as she wracked her brains to find the right words.

"*Contego!*" The word slipped off her tongue without her brain registering it. The magic pulsed from her body through the *Ensis*. Leto attacked again. The *Ensis* blocked it like a shield, the impact coursing through Mara's body instead of just her arm. "*Sorbeo,*" she said, getting the word out just before the next burst. The force felt like a tap on the hand, her arm hardly recognizing it. The *Ensis* absorbed the assault.

They continued sparring in this manner, Leto finding a new way to attack Mara, forcing her to recall the words as they moved. They were coming to her faster, each new defense springing from her mouth with more ease than the last until she felt that her Ensis must be invincible.

Another strike from Leto sent Mara reeling back into the boxes. She crashed against them. Her arm felt as if it was shattered. She looked at Leto, and the sight of her smile sent anger sparking like a shot through Mara's body. Like fuel on a bonfire, the Talis on her arm burned with a fury, and her Ensis radiated with the new energy coursing through her arm. Mara jumped forward and moved to strike Leto's chest.

"No!" Leto lifted her hand and shouted, "*Oblittero!*"

The Ensis shattered in Mara's hand. Mara's eyes widened. "What the hell am I supposed to do now?" She turned to Leto, outraged.

"You were drawing on the Talis for help! You cannot do that! No matter what, you are never to use the Talis, only protect it."

"I know, I know," Mara sighed. It had felt so natural, like she had not even noticed it was happening. The Talis had reacted like a reflex. Mara shook her head and looked down at her empty hand. "What do I do?"

"You call it back from the Ethereal Realm, the same as before," Leto answered.

Mara glanced at the Talis on her arm. "*Ensis*," she said. The Ensis extended from her fingers, drawing the magic along her arm and elongating to its original form. Mara marveled at it. It looked exactly the same. "I don't understand," Mara said. "You destroyed it."

“I merely wrecked its corporeal image,” Leto said. “The Ensis is not an object of its own. It is mostly an extension of the person who wields it. You are the one, the only one, who can create that Ensis,” she pointed at the sword in Mara’s hand. “It’s an extension of yourself. You are the one who brings it into existence. It thrives off of you.”

Another stomp echoed above them. Leto and Mara looked up. Lys’s muffled voice floated through the open hatch. “Y’all might want to get back up here.”

## CHAPTER TEN

“System started going wonky a couple of minutes ago. It always does that,” he said in response to Leto’s startled look. “Has something to do with the magic interfering with the technology. They never could just get along.” He shook his head and fiddled with the switches.

Mara looked at the ground below them. They were descending, the details of the land below slowly popping out of the green mass, but besides the treetops and patches of grass, there was nothing else in sight. “But surely they’ve upped the barriers around the place after what happened,” she said, looking back and forth at the two of them.

Leto frowned. “Security is going to be maxed out plus some now, Lys.”

“Relax,” he said and pressed his three middle fingers against a blank spot on the dash. The outline of a square appeared traced in bright blue, and the piece fell away in his hand, revealing a number panel behind it.

“That’s quite archaic,” Leto snorted.

“You would know,” Lys said. The buttons clicked away under his fingertips as he typed in a code, his gaze firm on the approaching ground. With the last button pressed, he sat up and smiled satisfactorily at their shocked faces. “But it gets the job done.”

For a moment, Mara thought it had to be visible wind flowing against the glass. She blinked, but the effect was still there. The ground was rippling. The grass,



the trees, bushes, mere rock were all rippling like a wave of the ocean. Slowly, the colors of the earth faded away, revealing Patrisym miles beneath the plane.

*It's a false image*, Mara thought. "Of course it is," Leto said. Mara jumped, not realizing she had said the thought aloud. "We have to think of some way to keep planes and what not from getting too close, else they—"

"—Would crash," Mara finished for her, recalling the beeps and blurred numbers on the control panel. She had left Patrisym so many times, but she had never experienced entering the city in this way. Guards only ever reentered the area through a specific location within the walls using magic. Patrisym had no need for planes or anything of the sort, only a clever barrier to keep them away. "Can you land without your controls working?"

As if in answer, the plane lurched as if a hand from below had grabbed the belly and pulled it to the side. Mara grabbed for the back of Lys's seat as she felt their descent steadily speeding up. Lys released the steering wheel and folded his hands behind his head, watching as the panels around him fuzzed and went blank. "No need for any effort," Lys said. "By typing in the code, the barrier not only opens, but it pulls us through a specific spot in the force."

"Like its own gravitational pull," Mara said. It was strange, how everything now was pulling her back to this place. Patrisym was dragging her back into its hold. The very thing that she had fought and run away from so long ago was happening, dragging her through the sky to its heart. She knew she had chosen this, even though the Talis had practically fallen into her lap, but she had to wonder, would it ever let her go again?

They were almost to the landing spot now. Mara could see the marks on the ground just below. She could tell that this was one of the far sides of Patrisym, not an area that she recalled anyone ever bothering to go to. The training grounds and living quarters were on the opposite side, facing the sunrise. It was high now, far past the horizon line, shining in their faces. As they passed into the shadow of Patrisym, she wondered if they were awake yet. Maybe the Mages watched the barrier open and the plane descend through the space. They were probably expecting them now, but as far as she could tell, no one was in sight. Leto, too, scanned the area, and Mara wondered if she was looking for the same thing. Would anyone welcome them, or were they preparing for a much less welcome greeting?

With the ground nearly ten feet below them, something struck the top of the plane. The clatter rang in Mara's ears. Lys yelped and grabbed for the steering wheel, but there was nothing to do now. The plane smashed to the concrete below, and Mara grimaced as a crunch echoed from somewhere in the plane. Lys cursed and pushed past her, muttering about what he was probably going to have to fix now. She looked around to Leto, expecting instruction, but she was not standing next to her any longer. Leto crouched beside the window, craning her head to get a better look above. Mara stepped toward her. "Guess they aren't very happy about our entrance," she muttered as she turned her head to follow Leto's gaze.

"Move!" Leto pushed her to the floor. Mara stretched her hands out in front of her, just managing to avoid striking her head against the dash. The glass dug into her palms, and Mara shook her head to send the shards in her hair about her. She whipped her head around just in time to see Leto's figure fly through the broken

windshield. Mara paused for a moment to watch Leto sink her foot deep into the chest of a man on the nose of the plane and send him flying before she launched herself outside.

“Stay with me!” Leto called out and dropped to the ground. Mara followed her, and as she fell, she felt her muscles ripple throughout her body, the blood surge through her legs and arms as she landed like a cat. She stretched her fingers wide and clenched them into fists. The rush of energy sharpened her mind. Her eyes were unblinking, taking in every detail at ten times the speed as before.

Her gaze snapped to the man Leto had knocked from the plane. She did not recognize him, but she knew by his black uniform and violet eyes that he was a Mage. He shook his head, and Mara used the time it took for this motion to pass to pounce on him. She used the moment she was in the air between them to take in the fine silver and gold details of his shirt that told her he was Praelia. His eyes fell on her, and he moved his arms with lightning speed to swipe her legs before her feet could touch him. But it was like she was moving in slow motion. She stayed focused on him, even as she felt herself flipping over backwards. She saw him lifting his hands towards her, but she was faster. “*Iacio!*” She had not even thought the word, but it was out of her mouth in an instant. The man launched backwards with the force of her magic, out of sight, as she landed on the balls of her feet. The muscles in her back rippled. She could feel every inch of her body as if she were poised to move everything in an instant. Sparring with Leto just moments before had been so difficult. Even the slightest progress had taken all of her concentration. But this, this was easy.

Leto was just a few feet in front of her. Two guards in similar uniform were fighting against her, but they were no match for her. Leto blocked their magic with ease and caught them with blow after blow. As she blocked one of them and twisted his arm in front of her, Mara saw a flash of light slice in Leto's direction. In an instant, Mara launched herself through the space and flipped over the guard's head. Her arm curled under his chin and pressed into his throat. She wrenched him off of his feet and slammed him to the ground in front of her. The Ensis in his hand disappeared as his back smashed into the ground, knocking the breath out of him.

"Mara!" She whipped around at the sound of Leto's warning. More guards were circling around them. Lys stood on the nose of his plane with what looked like a gun in his hand, shooting balls of green light at their attackers. But the Praelia were too fast for him, dodging the attacks with ease. Mara gasped and spun out of the way as what felt like a hammer collided with her shoulder. She rolled it and shook off the pain, focusing on the approaching attack around her. Where there were only three before, there were five times that many now. It was as if they were falling out of the sky, as if they had been waiting for them to show up. And then the idea went off like a light bulb in her brain just as she blasted two of them away from her. What if these guards were not from Patrisym? What if they had gotten through the barrier with the plane?

Mara stepped towards the guard closest to her, but stopped at the touch of Leto's hand on her back. "Wait," she said. But Mara did not want to wait. These guards were traitors, she was sure of it now. She scanned them all, taking in the

details of their faces, but did not find Narcis among them. *Coward*, she thought. He could not even show up for his own fight.

A burst of magic caught Mara in the back. Her feet left the ground and she flew forward. She tucked her shoulder and rolled, managing to give herself a solid bruise rather than taking the skin off of her arm. The attack had caught Leto off guard too. Mara watched as Leto raised herself to her knees, but she could see Leto's chest heaving as she moved, and her head hung forward as she tried to catch her breath. Mara felt something burn white hot against her arm as anger surged inside her. She turned her head towards Patrisym, and the rage in her chest ripped through her throat as she looked over the empty wall, knowing that someone was just on the other side. "Help us!" she tried to yell out, but the words were caught in her throat, and she ducked low to the ground as another attack passed over her head.

A loud voice echoed across the space. Mara could not make out the words, but she rolled to the side as a figure fell to the ground just where she had been before. It was one of the guards. Surprised, Mara lifted her head.

A man in billowing robes of blue stood in front of the wall of Patrisym. His brown hair whipped about his face as he approached, his hands flashing to simultaneously attack and block the magic cast in his direction. Other figures snapped into view behind him. They rushed forward, throwing themselves into the fight. A wave of relief passed over Mara as she saw the man rush to Leto's side and help her to her feet. The guards were disappearing one by one, vanishing on the spot to get away from the sudden onslaught.

Mara flinched as something burned against her forearm. Thinking that someone had managed to burn her, she pulled her sleeve up, but her fingers met the cool surface of the Talis. She had forgotten it was there. It was cool to the touch, but it burned against her arm. Another rush of magic went by her, but it merely brushed past her cheek, as if it was only beckoning her to turn around. She turned her head, just in time to catch a glimpse of a figure in black coming towards her.

Mara ducked. She felt the person's knee clip the top of her head. The spot throbbed as Mara got to her feet. Her attacker slid across the ground and turned his face towards her. A mask covered his face, a thin layer of black that only allowed his bright violet eyes to be seen. Black clad his figure from head to toe. Even his hands were covered in gloves, but Mara knew that this would not stop him from being able to use magic, and as she finished the thought, an Ensis of purple, stretched into the long shape of a sword, sparked in his hands. A strange feeling of recognition went through her, but she had no time to pause. The figure raised his Ensis before him, and a glint of blue caught Mara's eye. A ring rested on his right, gloved pointer finger. It was a delicate thing, with tiny pieces of overlapping silver passing over the top of a sky blue stone to hold it in place. Mara immediately recalled one of the books from her mother's shelf bearing a similar form on its cover. It was a Talis, she was sure of it. Fear settled like a small pebble in her chest, but it was still there, fully aware of the fact that if he used that against her, she probably would not stand a chance. And if this was in fact Narcis, he most certainly would.

*"Ensis,"* Mara said, and the Talis on her arm burned red and hot. The circle on her palm flashed with heat, and a sword of similar shape appeared in her hands.

Like an imprint of the Talis on her arm, it glowed red and black. The Talis burst with heat again, and the Ensis rippled. She could feel heat soaking into her arm from the Talis and flowing to her palm and around the circle it had burned there. She squeezed the Ensis until her fingers turned white, and the mark on her palm pounded against the handle. Leto had told her not to use the Talis, but it was as if she and it were one, its power merged with hers to form into one being. She could not separate it.

With a flash, the gold Ensis was upon her. Mara pushed it away with her own, surprised at how light the blow felt against her arm. She did not have to utter the words aloud to prepare her Ensis. She could feel the magic coursing through her and pouring into the sword to its tip. It was a constant flow of energy, bursting from her center, through the Talis, and into her hand. It required no thought or effort. Her Ensis was indestructible, all-powerful and unyielding in her hands.

She slashed her sword through the air, striking her attacker. The figure staggered back and Mara smiled. His Talis was no match for the Ignis. He could not possibly fend her off. Mara leapt towards him and cut down towards his head. He lifted his sword and blocked her, holding the handle with both hands. The force of her attack brought him to one knee, and Mara noticed the cracks in the concrete beneath him. The distant sound of someone's voice passed over her, but she could not distinguish the words through the roar in her ears. The thought of taking the Talis from him lit up like a flame within her, and even as she felt the tip of his sword slice the side of her leg, she knew she could do it. He was fast, but she could be faster.

Mara swung her Ensis around her head and swung at his side. He blocked it, but in an instant, she swung at the opposite side. He blocked this blow as well, but she did not have to see his face to know that worry was pulling at the corner of his mouth. It was in his eyes, and every time the blood red of her Ensis struck down upon him, the attack in his gaze faltered, and a look of a terrified child stared back at Mara through the mask.

The figure just managed to block her sword again, and he threw himself away from her. Mara heard the word “*eo*” pass from his lips, and the magic in her chest burst with fury. She ignored the voice calling to her, this time fully aware of Leto’s yell telling her to stop, and rushed her attacker. His body spun, his feet left the ground and smeared into a black blur. With one last slice, Mara narrowed her gaze on the figure’s hand and swung with all her might. The figure disappeared before her, and the faint echo of a high scream echoed around Mara like a rush of wind. Cursing, Mara moved to turn away from the spot, but saw something fall to the ground in front of her. Horrified, she stepped back. It was a finger, still covered in the black glove that her attacker had worn. She had managed to cut it from his hand, but the Talis was nowhere to be seen. She tore her gaze from the severed finger and rolled her foot to pivot, feeling something small and hard beneath her boot. She lifted her foot and gasped. It was the Talis, sparkling silver and blue against the concrete.

“Marzanna!” Leto called out again. Mara snatched the ring from the ground just as Leto’s hand came down on her shoulder. She pocketed the ring and turned to



her. Leto's eyes were wide, her face white. "Marzanna, are you alright? Your nose, are you—how on earth you managed to—of all the stupid things—"

"It doesn't look like you've lost your touch at all," a man's voice said. Mara looked behind Leto to find the man in blue behind her. His face was no longer firm and angry, and she instantly recognized the smile stretching across face.

"It's good to see you, Pythias," Mara said, returning his smile.

"Likewise," he said and clapped his hand on her arm with a warm grip. "I'd love to stay here and chat, but we're in a little bit of trouble with them back there," he nodded his head at the group of people watching them, their gazes like stone. "They're not too happy about any of this."

"But they helped us fight them off," Mara said. "They saw all of it."

"They did, but they still want explanations, for, well, this and that and many other things," Pythias explained and led her and Leto towards them. Mara paused for a moment, watching Leto and Pythias take the lead. She dipped her hand into her pocket and felt the Talis there. It vibrated against her fingertips as if greeting her. She wondered if she should tell Leto about it, but decided against it. She could figure it out on her own. She followed behind them.

The group in front of the door split to allow them through. Mara met each of their gazes, refusing to look away. Three of them wore the robes of Council members; the other four wore the black uniforms of guards. The last man held her gaze the longest before she passed by. He wore a black uniform as well, but the gold and silver on his collar distinguished him as Praelia. There was red on his uniform as well, which Mara recognized as meaning that he was one of the Praelia in charge

here. It was the uniform she would have worn if she had stayed any longer. His mouth twitched with anger, pulling at a scar on his chin. She turned away from him as the hidden doorway in the wall opened.

“That was completely against your orders, Pythias,” the man snarled at him.

“Orders to let them potentially die right in front of us? Yes, I ignored those,” Pythias said. Mara held back her laugh at the sound of the smile in his voice.

“Those were orders of the Council.”

“And who, I wonder, told them to make that call?”

“That was the order, maybe,” a woman said to Mara’s left, wearing the green Council robes, “but orders change depending on the situation.”

“That defeats the purpose of them in the first place,” Antaeus snapped.

Ass, Mara thought. They were not even inside, and she already dreaded having to deal with him.

“Either way, the other Council members will want to hear all of this,” another man said, waving them forward. “We must convene to the others immediately.

Mara stopped in the doorway and looked around at everyone. Lys’s face was missing from the group. Where was he? Mara quickly glanced over the space behind them, but he was nowhere in sight. *They took him*, a panicked voice said in her head, *or he’s hurt*. “Move along,” Antaeus muttered at her.

“Lys is missing,” Mara said, catching at Leto’s arm. Leto frowned and turned to look towards the plane.

“Right here, sweetheart.” Lys pushed through the group to stand beside her. Relieved, Mara smiled at him, happy to see that he looked completely unharmed. He winked at her. “That was some flashy swordplay back there,” he said.

“Who the hell is this?” Antaeus thundered, looking to Pythias, outraged. He rounded on Leto. “You dare to bring an avarus along with you? This is out of the question.”

“He is a friend, Praelia, and you would do well to remember that you are speaking to the Consul,” Leto said, meeting his gaze. Leto was taller than the man, and Mara could tell by the way he was refusing to look up at her that he did not like that very much.

“I know just as much magic as you do, Bud,” Lys said through his smile.

Antaeus looked Lys up and down, his gaze skeptical. “I sincerely doubt that,” he sneered.

“Try me,” Lys teased.

“Antaeus!” Pythias held his hand out, no sign of patience on his face. “He’s a Mage. Don’t start with this.”

“Not any more, but thanks.” Lys nodded to Pythias and turned his head to Antaeus with a wide grin.

“You keep quite the company of traitors, *Consul*,” Antaeus smirked. He turned to the other guards. “Stay with him,” he ordered them. The four immediately moved to obey, each of them stepping to a side around Lys. The guard that stepped behind Lys wiped at his face, and Mara noticed the dark stain of a fresh bruise above his left brow. She had a sick feeling that Antaeus was the one that put it there. She opened

her mouth to say something, but she saw Leto make the smallest of shakes with her head out of the corner of her mouth. She snapped her mouth shut and glared at him instead, feeling her rage ignite in the Talis on her arm.

Lys rolled his eyes. "An escort, how flattering," he said. "Don't get to close, now. I have no problem sticking this where the sun don't shine on any of you." He waved his gun at them.

"Hand it over!" Antaeus ordered.

Lys looked at him with one eyebrow raised, amused. "Honestly, I'm harmless," he said and shrugged his shoulders. "They would know otherwise by now," he muttered to Mara. She snickered.

"Lys," Leto snapped.

Lys sighed and held the weapon out, but before Antaeus could move, Pythias snatched it from his hand and looked at Antaeus as if daring him to say a word. Antaeus's eyes narrowed into slits. "Let's move along," Pythias said, and he led them through the doorway.

"I would've gotten in more trouble for hanging onto it anyway," Lys mumbled and stepped in front of Mara with his entourage. Antaeus waited for Mara to pass him before following the group, holding Mara's gaze until she was forced to turn her head to the hall.

The hallway beyond the doors extended in front of them. Mara studied the dark walls, flashes of memories twisting their way past her mind's eye. She had not been down this way too often, but she knew the entirety of this place better than

anyone. She rounded the corner behind the others and stopped for a moment, blinking in the bright light of the Atrius.

It was the center of the complex, hallways branching off in various directions on every side. The circular room was as bright as day, due to the glass dome above that allowed the early morning sunlight through. The crystal walls shimmered and sparkled under the sun's rays, casting everything in a glittering light. The light blue floor beneath Mara's feet seemed to ripple like water as the light reflected off its surface. Nine columns spaced out evenly between the hallways pushed out from the walls in jagged shards of royal blue crystal and stretched high above them to the edges of the dome above.

They stopped just outside the doors. Mara could hear voices on the other side, but the sound was muffled. Her throat tightened and her stomach flipped. She had not seen any of the Council in years, and the last time...

Mara's eyes found Leto's, her anxiety written all over her face. "It'll be fine," Leto assured her. "They just want to know what happened."

"Yes," Antaeus hissed, "we're just dying to hear your excuses."

"Enough," Pythias cut in. Mara twitched as his hand touched her shoulder, and he immediately dropped it to his side. "Wait here with the guard. We'll call you in just a moment." He waved his hand before the doors, and a shaking whisper echoed through the Atrius as they moved to open. He motioned Leto through first.

Antaeus followed him but paused at the door. "Do not move from his side," he warned the other guards. He glanced threateningly at Lys and Mara once more, and closed the door behind him.

Mara stood frozen, staring at the closed doors, her eyes roaming over the seam between the curled handles. So many things were flying through her head at once, and she could not seem to grasp on to one coherent thought. Part of her wanted to wrench the doors open and listen to Leto's explanation. She had given her one before, but what was she telling them now? It all had to do with her anyway; her mother and sister were the ones dead and missing; her hand was the one now marked; her life was the one they were probably discussing in the next few moments, if not right then.

Lys stepped to the wall, and three of the guards mirrored his step. "Honestly," Lys sighed, shaking his head, and sat down on the floor. The guards looked at each other before taking up similar positions along the wall.

"You might as well take a seat," a soft voice beside her said. Mara turned to find the last guard there, his face half hidden by his hand, but she could see a small smile on his face as he waved at a spot on the floor beside her. "You can't get in right now anyway."

Mara sank to the floor and leaned back against the wall, let her head fall back, closed her eyes, and sighed. "I remember how it works, thanks," she said.

The guard laughed. Mara opened one eye just in time to see the guard move his hand from his face. She studied the guard's curved jawline and sharp nose, taking in the soft features of the face, the long, dark red hair tucked in the shirt, and pairing them with the voice that had spoken. "You're a girl," she said.

"So?" the guard snapped, her tone sharp and defensive.

Mara shrugged. “Nothing,” she said, smiling. “Sorry about your eye. Antaeus did that, didn’t he?”

The guard nodded. “He’s really nice with his reprimands.”

Mara wrinkled her nose and winced at the sudden sharp pain the motion caused. She wiped her hand across it, sending a burn through her nostrils and marveled at the specks of dried blood on the back of her hand. Leto had said something about her nose. “You tried to help us.”

The guard laughed softly beside her. “It’s not the smartest idea, going against his orders, but all of you were surrounded and the Council members jumped to help...” She snorted as she dabbed at her eye once more, winced at the tender spot, and dropped her hand to her lap. “He’s enjoys the power too much.”

“I bet,” Mara murmured and closed her eyes again. She could feel the girl’s gaze studying her face.

“I’m surprised Antaeus didn’t remember you,” the guard said. Mara remained motionless, hearing the guard shift beside her. “I was younger then, but I remember seeing you in training, with the others. Even Narcis didn’t stand a chance against you.” Mara could hear the awe in her voice, and it sent a strange feeling through her. Mara opened her eyes, amused, and watched her. She glanced back down at Mara, sudden embarrassment blushing over her face, and offered a shy smile. “Sorry, I didn’t—ah, I sound like an idiot now,” she laughed. Mara could not help but smile too. “I just would remember somebody who had flattened everyone that many times.”

Mara laughed. "But someone put him in charge. He must be pretty good now." She wracked her brains, trying to remember Antaeus's face from the training field. *He must have been younger*, she decided. It made sense; after all, she had been gone for years.

The guard shook her head. "He's just interim Dux until they decide on a permanent replacement for Narcis." The girl's face hardened. "He has competition, but not much now that Narcis..." she stopped, not sure of what word to use for him. Mara wondered if any of them knew exactly what had happened yet or if all of this was just as new as it was for her.

Mara sighed and glanced back at the doors. There was no movement yet and no sound of voices from the other side. They were probably still questioning Leto and would come for her in a moment. Her stomach flipped again at the thought. "Hopefully they will find someone else to take over soon," Mara said.

"Now that you're back, I think the decision will be pretty easy," the guard said.

Mara turned away from the door, taking in what she had just said. Would they expect her to lead now and become the Duxpraelia, or even the Magister? Would they even trust her with that position again? Mara shook her head. "I'm not here for any of that," she said quietly.

A gust of air blew past as the doors shifted open. Mara jumped to her feet and stepped to the side, allowing the doors to slowly swing open. She picked up her foot to step in front of the opening, knowing that she would immediately face everyone inside. Lys stepped around the other side, winked at her, and walked through the



open doors. She paused and turned back to the guard still sitting on the bench. "Nice talking to you, umm..."

"Phoenix," the guard answered, smiling. "Good luck."

One side of Mara's mouth slid up in a smile. She wiped her finger under her nose, smudging away a bit of the dried blood. She took a deep breath and stepped around the door into the opening.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mara could not help but pause in the doorway. She had only been in this room once, but it was not the fondest of memories. Only meetings of high importance happened in the front of the entire Council, and Mara had not been betting on this to happen this morning.

The walls were made of gleaming white stones, stones that shimmered under the multicolored light of the bronze torches, as Mara recalled, but for now the room was purely lit by the sun shining through the ceiling windows. She had stood in the center of this room, years before, alone, speaking to many of the same people, she would imagine; but she could not make out their faces yet. The light shining from the windows at the top of the back wall blinded her view.

Lys waited just inside the door for Mara. The sound of someone's throat clearing echoed through the room.

"Come forward, Marzanna," a low, female voice said. "Ulysses, you may remain outside."

"Wonderful," Lys piped. "They look happy to see you," he whispered before he stepped back through the doors, and they swung closed behind him.

Mara's gaze fell on Ulysses and Leto to her right, sitting on a bench close to the wall. Ulysses waved her forward, his face eager, but Leto looked much more reserved and no smile was on her face. Mara nodded and slowly walked forward into the room. She tugged at the ends of her sleeves, making sure that no one would

see the Talis on her arm, and slid her hands over her pockets, feeling the other Talis hidden there. Her eyes focused on a familiar section of floor before them. Once there, she looked up at the people in front of her.

Mara had counted the chairs of the Council before, so it did not take long to notice that all of them were full. All thirty-seven of the Council members looked down on her, wearing bright green robes with gold details about their shoulders. Well, almost all of the chairs were full. The furthest middle chair that sat far above all of their heads, the Magister's chair, was empty. Mara swallowed hard. All of them looking at her had recently heard that their leader, her mother, was dead; and the last time Mara had stood in this room, she had left them. *No wonder Leto looks like that*, Mara thought. The Council members' faces looked harder than the stone walls around them. Mara inhaled sharply, planted her feet shoulder width apart, and dropped her hands to her side. Mages liked to be able to see each other's hands.

The Councila who had spoken sat directly in the middle. Her short, black hair just brushed the tops of her robes; her violet eyes were bright and wide as they stared down her hawk-like nose at Mara. Mara recognized the woman from before sitting just to the center's right. Her face was much less severe than the others, and Mara thought she detected something of a smile at the corner of her lips. Hopefully she was still on her side. The other two men from before were towards the center of the Council members. In that moment, Mara wished she had actually gotten to know some of them before. Maeve had suggested it several times, seeing as Mara was set to become the next Duxpraelia, but she had never bothered attending any of the Council meetings before, except for her own hearing. Looking at their faces now, she

could tell they all recalled that meeting. Mara forced herself to not shuffle and keep her feet planted.

“We have heard the accounts from the Consul,” the Councila began, “concerning the events that occurred the night of the second of November, as well as those that followed the night of the third of November. The events that transpired are as follows: That the former Praelia and potential Duxpraelia, Marzanna, received the Ignis Talis by use of magical transportation from the Haeres, who at the time was under attack by the traitor Duxpraelia, Narcis, and three followers, along with the Consul, Magister, Haeres, and Tutella; that the Duxpraelia and followers did slay the Magister and Tutella, failed to slay the Consul, and took the Haeres and Tutella with him after the Talis was sent—”

“Yes, but—”

“—That the Consul,” the Councila continued over her, “connecting the former relationship between the Haeres and Marzanna, found her and the Talis and attempted to convince her to return; that the traitor Duxpraelia destroyed Marzanna’s home, thus slaying the two Avari within the household. Are all of these events correct?”

The Councila had not taken a single breath during any of this. Mara felt the need to gasp simply from listening to it. “Yes,” Marzanna answered.

“You did, in fact, receive the Ignis Talis on the night of the Second of November?”

“Yes, I—”

“You did try to rid yourself of the Talis after its reception?”

“I...not really? I didn’t—”

“The Consul did find you within your home and convince you to accompany her here?”

“I didn’t want to at first, but I—”

The woman beside her cut in, her warm voice offering a slight relief from the other Councila’s bark.

“Has the Ignis Talis chosen you as its Tutella?”

The center Councila sat up straighter. “Agna,” she said, and Mara took this as the other Councila’s introduction.

Aгна smiled. “Thank you, Zenith.”

Mara looked over at Leto. She nodded to Mara, encouraging her on. Antaeus glared at her and crossed his arms over his chest, as if he did not believe this could possibly be true. Mara returned her gaze to the Councila and took a deep breath. Agna smiled softly. “Yes,” she said, relieved that her voice sounded strong and did not reflect the sickening flips and twists of her stomach at that moment, “it has.”

The center Councila, Zenith, leaned forward, her hair flipping over her shoulders with the sudden movement. “Show us the Insigne,” she demanded.

Mara lifted her palm to them, making sure to keep her sleeve to her wrist. Mara knew that Leto had already explained this to them, but the Councila sat back with a gasp, her eyes wide. She was not the only one who reacted this way. A murmur buzzed across the Council members. Some of them nodded, and the cold looks on their faces seemed to lighten slightly, but the others were as stony faced as ever and looked about as happy as Antaeus at the sight of the burn on her palm. She

lowered her hand to her side and pulled at her sleeve, balling both of her hands into fists.

The sound of a complaint earned the attention of a few of the members. “Nothing can be done about it now,” one of the men that had helped earlier said. That was the stance Leto had immediately taken when she saw the Insigne. Mara rubbed her thumb over the mark. They could not do anything about it.

“I know this isn’t the usual process for choosing a Tutella,” Mara began, “but I am willing to accept my role and continue my training.” Even as a few *harumphs* escaped the members, Mara was surprised at the truthfulness of her words. She had not thought about it past helping her sister, but she knew this was so. The Talis had chosen her, and she was positive that the one in her pocket would react to her in the same way. The feint tingling of the Ignis on her arm caught her attention. It was oddly warm and soothing against her arm, a strange reassurance that all of this would work out in the end. The Ignis had helped her before, she was sure of it.

Mara held Zenith’s gaze. Her eyes were starting to burn and itch, but she could not look away. Not now. “My sister sent the Talis to me for a reason. I do not know why, but I’m sure that she did it at least because she thought that I could help her.” She pictured Medea’s face, the last time she had seen her so many years ago. There was Corbyn as well, his face lit by a smile he had always had for her, and there was Attie, the two she could not help. She felt the familiar burn behind her eyes and pushed the thought of them away. Mara took a deep breath. “I will not stand by and allow Narcis to harm her. I will save my family, no matter what it takes.”

The Councila stared at her for a moment longer before lifting her hooked nose and giving a firm nod. Slowly, the other members followed suit. Agna smiled at her, but Mara kept her eyes on Zenith. "Consul." Zenith turned her gaze to Leto. "You have agreed to provide Marzanna's training as a Tutella."

"I have."

"Then it is agreed that Marzanna will begin training as a Tutella, as well as return to her training as a Praelia."

"That would be under my supervision," Antaeus cut in.

"Ah, yes, we are well aware," Zenith continued. Mara was happy to hear the sound of annoyance in her voice when addressing him. "However, Leto shall have final say in all areas of Mara's training. Does the Council make itself clear?" Zenith's gaze over her long nose was enough to frighten anyone. Her eyebrows flashed high onto her forehead, and the other Council members looked to Antaeus for his response. He shut his mouth, and Mara thought he must not be as stupid as he seemed for not saying anything. He nodded and looked from Leto to Mara with pure hatred in his eyes. Mara imagined blowing a kiss at him and wondered if she could possibly make him look any angrier.

Zenith gave a fierce nod and continued. "Now, we are under the impression that another is waiting outside?"

"He would prefer to leave Patrisym immediately, I believe."

"This man used to be a part of our community, did he not?"

"Yes, but he has not been with us for years now."

“And he no longer practices magic? You’re very sure of this?” Honestly, Mara almost wished she could steal the woman’s nose. Her stare was so intimidating.

Leto nodded. “I’m sure of it.”

“Interesting,” Zenith muttered loud enough for everyone to hear. It was obvious from many of the other’s faces that they thought the same thing. “With Narcis’s followers, according to you lead by his second of sorts, waiting just outside for a chance to attack, his departure from us will not be possible. He must remain in our company until this issue is handled.” Zenith pushed away from her place and stood, and the Council members all followed her leave. Mara paused for a moment, waiting to see if anyone had anything left to say to her, but no one looked her way.

“That went well,” Leto said happily as she approached Mara, Pythias at her side. “Lys won’t be too happy, but that can’t be helped.”

Antaeus walked towards the doors but paused long enough to give Mara one last disdainful look. “I’ll see you soon,” he said and followed the Councilmembers out. Mara watched the guards outside follow after him, and Lys quickly appeared in the doorway.

“He can’t do anything about it,” Pythias said, shaking his head after Antaeus. “He might think he has the run of the place, but it’s not quite certain yet.” He beamed at Mara.

Mara shifted uncomfortably and watched Lys approach. Phoenix was right. All of them assumed that she would resume her former run as the Dux. Sure, it made sense, but did she want to stick around for that? *I can’t think of that right now*, she



decided. All that was important at the moment was getting Medea back. She would figure the rest of it out later.

“So!” Lys clapped his hands together and stopped beside them. “I’ve been informed that I’ll be sticking around for some good ol’ bonding time with my old pals. That’s just peachy.”

“You knew they weren’t going to clear you after what happened earlier,” Mara said. They walked together out into the Atrius.

“Probably wanna run their hands all over my plane too,” Lys grumbled. “I’ll have to make sure none of them get into it. Hey!” They turned back, finding that Pythias and Leto had remained behind. Zenith had returned to the room and was speaking to them. Leto held up one finger to them, continuing to talk. “Bah,” Lys scoffed and walked towards one of the halls. “Someone here has to know where we’re gonna sleep.”

“I can find it,” Mara said and led the way down a hall to their left. It was all coming back to her now. It was a short way down the hall before they reached the stairs. Continuing straight, the hall would go to the dining hall, and beyond that the training grounds. Up the stairs were the living quarters for all of the Council members and working Mages, while below was where the ones in training found their beds. “This way,” Mara said and turned down the familiar path downstairs.

Below ground, the walls faded to a deep blue that was lit by flameless torches along the walls. The ceiling above mimicked the time of day, following the pattern of the sun. The combination of the blue light bouncing off of the indigo walls with sky overhead gave the impression that one was underwater while in the downstairs

area of Patrisym. Mara continued from the stairs, down the hall, and continued on to the right. There she stopped dead in her tracks. Lys cursed as he bounced off of her back. "What's the matter?"

She did not answer. The room was so familiar. There was not much to any of the Mage's rooms, merely blank blue walls and their beds, but she knew every inch of this room. She had slept every night of her life that she could remember before she left within these walls. She ran her hand over the doorway, recalling how high she used to feel when she would scale her way up the opening as a small child.

"This one's my sleeping area." Mara jumped at the sound of someone's voice behind her. Phoenix slid her way past them into the room. "The one just across from me is open," she said pointing to it. "The others gave me this end of the hall to myself, so it's rather quiet down this way." She offered them a small wave before falling into her bed. She seemed to pass out the moment her head hit the pillow.

"Isn't that one of the guards?" Lys whispered.

Mara stepped away from the room and turned into the one Phoenix had pointed out. It was a larger room with two beds, the common standard of the place, but it would suit them for the time being.

"Phoenix is fine," Mara said. She laughed at Lys's sickened face. "She thinks Antaeus is a nimrod."

"Ah, well in that case, we'll be best friends in no time." Mara laughed and flopped down onto the bed closest to the door. Lys settled on the other one and nestled his head into the pillow. "I don't suppose we get anything else here, you

think? I wouldn't mind another set of clothes or something to eat." He smacked his lips and groaned. "But maybe later," he mumbled.

Mara leaned back and tried to relax, but she found herself staring at the ceiling. It was hard to believe that the last place she slept was in her bed back in Waco. Mara imagined the feel of that mattress against her back, so much softer than the one she was on now, and the warmth of Corbyn's body against her side. She thought of listening to Attie's quiet breathing from the room across the hall, such a different sound than that of Phoenix's and Lys's breathing. She folded her arms across her chest and rubbed her hands over her arms. She felt empty, as if someone had come in and ripped everything out of her and left her with a hollow core. But it was better than feeling, and she was glad of that. She could not feel the weight of everything that had happened the day before right then. She would not be able to breathe if she did, let alone focus on anything.

She sat up on the bed and leaned back against the wall. There was nothing to focus on here except for the empty walls. She wondered what would have happened if Medea had never sent her the Talis. Would she have ever returned? As she ran her hand over the Ignis, the thought slid into her mind that she would have anyway, and it seemed to stick. Something would have pulled her back eventually. But that did not mean that she had to stay forever. She would stay long enough to make sure that Medea was fine and that Antaeus would not be the next Dux. She grinned at the thought of seeing Antaeus's reaction to this. She would make sure of it once Medea was rescued. It would be her only request before leaving. And she would leave. She was positive of that. Once they were safe, she knew they could find another person

to take over as Tutella. She would do that, give the other Talis back, and be on her way. Maybe she could even keep Lys company on her way back. Mara frowned at this thought. Where would she return to? She had no home in Waco, not anymore. She did not want to ever go back there. *Maybe Lys could give me something to do*, she thought. Either that, or she would find something else. Anything, even remaining at Patrisym, would be better than going back.

Mara ran her hands over her legs and flicked away the dirt that rolled under her fingers. They would have to find some other clothes while residing there. If they had left everything alone, she would be able to find them what they needed easily. She pushed herself off of the bed, too antsy to remain there any longer. "I'll be back," she muttered. Lys grunted a response, already halfway off to sleep.

Mara made her way back down the hall and to the staircase. If she remembered it correctly, most of the extra clothes and laundry were left in a storage room on the landing between the ground and second floor. Mara skipped the steps two at a time, grinning at the memory of hopping these same steps in that pattern years before. She caught the railing and swung around the wall, finding herself just outside of the storage closet. The door was slightly open, so Mara only had to slip through the opening to get inside.

A single torch by the door lit the room, but the bright blue flame within was enough to cast a light to every corner. Sure enough, stacks of extra linens, towels, and clothing were folded away onto various shelves lining the wall. Mara went to the clothes first, and after a few minutes thought that she found something that would work for both herself and Lys. They were Praelia tunics, and she could not

stop a snort from escaping her at the thought of Antaeus seeing Lys in those. There were multiple pairs of boots lined up across the floor, so she pulled a pair on and decided to take those as well. Lys could wait for those; she had no idea what size he wore. Bundling these all into her arms, she snagged a couple of towels from the top of a pile and reached her foot out to kick open the door just as she heard someone say her name in the hallway.

“...But Mara deserves a shot,” she heard Pythias’s voice accompanied by his footsteps on the stairs. “I think she deserves to be a part of this.”

“You’re not seeing the big picture.” Mara huddled further behind the door at the sound of Leto’s voice. “If we allow her to just go, it’s too risky. We’d get them both back, but would she stay?”

“You shouldn’t deny her that just because you think that.”

“Not think, I know. Mara will help her sister, find a way to pass on the Talis, and leave. If we wait just a bit longer to do the mission, let her have a chance at training, let her see just how awful things will be with Antaeus in charge, she’ll feel responsible. She’ll stay.” Leto paused for a moment, and all Mara could hear was the sound of their ascent up the stairs. Mara moved closer to the door as their voices faded, careful to keep her feet silent. “Besides, Lys is stuck here for the time being. She likes him, and I think she’ll be easy about staying around so long as he’s here, at least to make sure he’s okay.”

“Maybe so,” Pythias offered. “She might dislike Antaeus, but you might be overestimating just how far the feeling goes.”

“But I was under the impression that everyone hated him.” They laughed at this comment, and Mara heard their footsteps above as they turned off to the upstairs hallway.

They were not planning to let her help with the mission. Mara leaned back and bumped her head against the wall, closing her eyes in frustration. They were letting her train just to pacify her for the time being, as if she was a child who needed to feel important. Anger rolled thick and hot in her veins, remembering Leto’s words from moments before. So she thought keeping her here for longer would get her to stay forever? Leto was using her! Did she really think her plan was going to work, that Mara was never going to catch on? Did she think she was stupid?

Mara took the towels from the top of her stack and tossed them back into their place. They would not need those any longer. If Leto wanted to play this game with her, she was going to get out before it could begin. She would not be used. She had trusted Leto, allowed herself to be enticed into the Mage world again, a world that she had sworn off long before, and she felt stupid for doing it. She pulled her bundle tighter against her, carefully pulled the door open with her toe, and quickly made her way back down the stairs.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard," Lys spat, his feet pounding against the floor as he paced back and forth across the tiny room.

"That's everything I heard," Mara said. She pulled on the new clothes and tossed her old ones under the bed. "We can't trust her, none of them. They're not going to tell us the truth about anything." She pulled and stomped her way into the new boots. The tight leather instantly molded to the shape of her foot, and she instinctively wrapped the bindings around her ankles. She tossed the other clothes onto Lys's bed. "You should change before we go."

"Go?" He stopped his pacing and faced her. "What do you mean 'go'?" We're stuck here!" He threw his hands in the air.

Mara stood up and smashed her heel into the other boot. "I am not stuck here. I'm getting out."

"Oh really?" Lys laughed. "And how do you plan on doing that, babydoll?"

"Everyone will be asleep in a few hours. We'll go back to the plane and go right back out the way we came. No one will be there to stop us." Mara stopped in the doorway and looked up and down the hallway before turning back to the room. "No one would ever suspect we would do it."

Doubt was written all over Lys's face. "You really don't think that anyone is watching the plane?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but even if they are, we can take care of that."

A voice from outside the room made them both jump.

"I can take care of it."

Shocked, Mara turned from Lys and stepped into the hallway. Taking two steps across the hall, she looked around edge of the doorway into the room there. Phoenix sat up on her bed, wide awake. Mara was sure she had been asleep moments before, but she must have been listening the entire time. "You heard everything," Mara whispered.

"I heard enough," Phoenix answered, twisting her legs over the side of the bed. "I'm actually on watch for the first night shift tonight for the plane. Antaeus will check that I'm there at first, but he'll leave and won't be back for the rest of the night." Phoenix laughed softly. "He doesn't like missing out on his beauty sleep."

"No kidding," Lys said from behind Mara. He pulled her around to face him. "You're sure we can trust her?"

"Not meaning to intrude, but I can answer for myself," Phoenix said. "I hate Antaeus. I would love nothing more than to see him gone. Maybe she won't be taking his place," she looked at Mara for a moment, "but I doubt the Council will be very happy if he lets you escape under his watch." She smiled a wide grin, her face practically glowing with happiness. "It's as good as getting him fired."

Mara felt a smile spreading across her face. Lys pursed his lips and stared at Phoenix for a moment more before slowly nodding. "That sounds pretty good to me," he decided.

Mara stepped around him and returned to her room. She pulled her sleeve away from her arm and stared at the Ignis there. She had only had the vision once,



just the first time when the Ignis had marked her, but she wondered if it could happen again. Before, he had managed to locate her through her use of it, but this time she was well aware that he knew where she was. She was not hiding. She was looking for him, and he was well aware of the fact that they were. "*Abjungo*," she muttered, her hand fastened hard over the Ignis. She winced at the burn, but it immediately subsided as the Talis fell away from her arm into her hand. Her palm tingled and the Talis seemed to buzz with life as she held it in both of her hands. Without a word, the Talis elongated between her fingers, rounding out its corners to connect into a perfect, seamless circlet. Holding it delicately between her fingers, she lifted it above her and pulled it down onto her head.

The room around her faded into a fiery haze. She turned to see Lys's form standing in what she knew was the doorway, but he was nothing but a column of smoke. Beyond him, she could see him. His figure was far off in the distance, nothing but a black smudge and two red dots that she knew were his eyes trying to locate her. She focused in on him and saw the streets beyond him, the tracings of snow on the ground, and saw through the mirage of destruction hidden there. No one could see the building that still stood there, but the Ignis Talis showed her straight through the manipulation. She smiled and pulled the Talis from her head.

"What did you see?" Lys stood in the doorway. He had never looked at her as he did now. His eyes were wide, and he did not move an inch as he waited for her answer.

"I've only worn it once before," Mara admitted, "but I saw something the last time. I thought I might be able to find him this way."

“And did you?” She nodded. He sighed, relieved, and leaned against the doorframe. “That makes our job about a hundred times easier. Where are we headed to?”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was well past two in the morning before Mara and Lys left their room. Phoenix had told them everything would clear after midnight, but the extra two hours made them feel much better about their chances. The waning moon hanging in the sky dimly lit the Atrius, but the halls were almost pitch black but for the faintest of glows that resided in every other torch.

Mara led the way towards the plane. Her legs stretched out as far as she could stride, keeping her feet low to reduce the noise. Her hand stayed at her side, pressing into the Talis in her pocket. She had reattached the Ignis to her arm earlier, and its constant warm presence was well missed against her skin. The hall ahead was empty, just as Phoenix said it would be. She had said she would wander a bit from her post to keep an eye out for anything suspicious, but she repeated multiple times that nothing would happen. Still, Mara was vigilantly aware of the silence around them, the emptiness that echoed in whispers under their feet.

They rounded the last corner and the wall came into view. The door was cleverly concealed both outside and within, and it took Mara a few passes with her hand around the area to find the latch. She slid it from its place, the hiss of metal causing her to grit her teeth. She pushed it open, and the crisp night air greeted them, sending shivers up her spine.

The plane was just where they had left. Lys moved to go around it, but Mara tugged at his sleeve. "There's no time," she whispered and urged him to the plane.

It was easier to just climb through the broken windshield than through the hatch, so Lys pulled himself onto the nose and held out a hand to help her. With a single bound, she hopped onto the plane with ease and stepped down into the cockpit. "Showoff," he muttered, and gingerly stepped through the window, avoiding the jagged pieces of glass that had refused to budge from their places. He settled in his seat and looked over everything. "This'll be fun flying with that air in our faces," he said.

"*Reverto*," Mara whispered and moved her hand across the panel. Even the finest of broken pieces floated through the air and returned to the window, filling in the cracks like grains of sand between the shards. Her work finished, she smiled at Lys and buckled herself in beside him.

Lys took a deep breath. "Here goes nothing." He reached forward and turned the plane on.

Mara jumped at the roar of the plane. The engine was ten times as loud as she remembered it being, shattering the night's silence. Panicked, Mara looked over Patrisym, waiting to see someone rushing out for them after hearing the racket. Mara bit her lip hard. The area was too large for her to do much about, but what if she only encased the plane? Closing her eyes, Mara pictured something like a bubble forming around the plane to encase them in silence. She moved her hands as if a large ball rested between them, the words sliding over her tongue with ease.

"*Circumda nos!*" Immediately, the noise around her faded as if she were listening to something through a pillow. Leto whistled, impressed, and she opened her eyes. She could barely see it, but it looked as if a sheer cloud of purple smoke was surrounding

the plane. The ends converged in front of the nose, and the cloud vanished from sight. "That should stay until we land," Mara said. She glanced over the area once more before Lys turned the nose of the plane away. "Hopefully no one heard us."

Lys shoved the accelerators forward, and the plane lurched forward in response. "We'll be long gone before they can do anything."

The landing sight was far behind them now. Mara looked back at it in the distance. How could they not be in the air already? Lys pulled at the steering column hard. Mara felt the wheels leave the ground beneath them, but they touched down after only a second. "What's the matter with it?"

"Could have been from the earlier impact," Lys grunted. As if in answer, a loud keening screech ripped beneath them, and the plane fell to the right. Mara looked up at Lys from her slightly lower position, her jaw hanging in alarm. He did not look much happier than her, but he continued to pull. "Come on, baby. Come on, come on, come on," he urged, but the plane hopped hopelessly along the endless lane.

Mara did not know what else to do. She yanked the Talis from her pocket and jerked it onto her finger, desperately hoping it would work. Her mouth popped open in alarm. A feeling of weightlessness went through her body. She grabbed at the seat around her, but she could feel that it was still beneath her. It was as if gravity did not exist. She weighed nothing! Slowly, she felt the air around her pulling at her body, and the sense of the floor beneath her returned to her feet. With no thought to how much magic she was about to try and pull off, Mara shouted the first word that popped into her head. "*Levo!*"

The response was instant. The wheels left the ground, and the plane soared straight up rather than continuing forward. The engine coughed, and Lys quickly adjusted some of his controls. The plane leveled, and the wind caught beneath its wings. Lys smiled as he turned the plane around with ease. "Good thing we didn't hit a wall," Lys said and typed in the code for the opening. "West coast, here we come," and he whistled a tune as he flew through the barrier.

Mara laughed and pulled the ring from her finger. It was the Ventus Talis. She had not thought of it before, but the Ventus had not burned her or anything upon her touching, and she was certain that the Corporeal Realm had remained in sight upon wearing it. Only the weightlessness, the feeling that she could soar like a bird through the air and never come down, had happened.

She sank back into the seat. All of the Tali except for the Ignis were perfectly manageable for their wearers to control. Maybe this one would not be so bad for her to have at her disposal. Mara studied the ring, running her fingers over the intricate silver design over the stone. It had worked just fine for her, and she could imagine several scenarios that it would come in handy for later on. She was going to keep it. Mara took the ring in her left hand and slid it back onto her right pointer finger, but stopped. She thought she had seen something there, but she could not tell in the darkness. She moved her hand closer to her face and turned to the light of the moon coming through the window. Sure enough, there was a mark on her finger. The Ventus had left its Insigne in the form of a silver ring on her finger, just as intricate in detail as the setting of the stone. The silver wasn't bright though and shined against her dark skin like a faded tattoo. Mara slid the ring into place over the

Insigne. She was now the bearer of two Tali. The thought echoed through her head. Two of the seven most powerful objects in the world now belonged to her. She thought of Narcis and his plan to gain all of the Tali. Now that she had experienced both of them, she could not help but see a bit of his side. The power was unimaginable, and she had not even fully used the Ignis Talis. A sick feeling settled in her stomach. How was she possibly thinking of Narcis like this? Maybe Leto was right, and she was not meant to use any of the Tali. *You're nothing like him*, she told herself. *You would never use the Tali as he wants. He's a murderer.*

The last thought rang through her head and gave her focus. He would be there when they landed, she was sure of it. With two of the Tali on her side, would she possibly have the chance of defeating him? *One Talis*, she reminded herself. She couldn't use the Ignis, but still. She had only thought of this as a rescue mission for Medea, but what if she could stop him to? Wouldn't it be worth the try?

"You're awfully quiet over there," Lys startled her from her thoughts.

Mara smiled. "Just sleepy," she said and gave a deep sigh before settling into the seat.

"Better shake that off soon," he warned. "It won't take us long to get there."

No, it would not. She was anything but close to sleep at that moment. She possibly had never felt more awake than now. Both of the Tali were warm against her skin, and she spun the Vertus on her finger over and over. The person she fought the day before would most likely be there as well. Mara grinned at the thought. She would love to see that person, fresh from the loss of a finger, take her on again. She would relish it, getting to dispose of the person who probably had a hand in all of

this. The happiness at the thought of killing the person surprised her, but she could not deny it. She wanted to get rid of him. He would be the step before Narcis, and she just might do anything to get to him.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It seemed as if only minutes had passed before Lys pulled the plane into its descent. Mara looked down far below and zeroed in on the warehouse. "It's over in that cluster of buildings," she said. "There's a big open space not far from it."

"I see it," he said and turned the plane that way.

"We shouldn't make any noise." She was not sure if she was saying that more for him or herself, but he nodded anyway. Mara focused on the approaching ground and found it a soothing way to keep her thoughts under control. They were here. They could do this.

A loud *crack* rang out as the plane touched down. Mara fell against the side window and Lys fought for his seat as the plane fell to the right. She could feel the body of the plane dragging against the ground. "One of the wheels must've snapped off!" The plane lurched to a stop, and a ripping noise that echoed from the wing like a low grunt through the plane seemed to mirror his alarm.

Lys climbed down from the plane and looked it over, cursing under his breath. "You think you can fix this?" Lys waved his hand over the mess of a plane before them. Mara gave no response. If Medea was in any shape to help, maybe they would be able to mend it, but even that was a long shot, at least not in the short amount of time they were bound to have to get out of there later.

“Well,” Mara sighed, “it’s no matter now. Let’s get moving.” Lys looked at her back incredulously and glanced forlornly once more at his plane before following her.

The space where the warehouse once stood was a hundred yards across the gravel field. They walked in silence. Mara heard nothing but the crunch of gravel and snow under their feet. She roamed her eyes over the crumbling buildings for any signs of movement, but there was nothing. She thought of all the signals and traps he could have out as they approached, but she sensed no magical interference around them. With the ruin of the warehouse only a few yards away, she waved her hand in front of it and whispered, “*Revelo*.” The illusion of destruction melted away, and the warehouse reappeared into view.

“Now, that makes more sense,” Lys whispered.

She had to admit that it was a clever illusion. Leto had told her that Narcis had obliterated the Sanctum, but he had only used his powers to make it look as if he did. No one would have ever known that it still existed after seeing that wreckage happen. She could almost picture the explosion happening, the fire blazing against the white of the snow around it, and she wondered how he had pulled off such a façade. He was clever, she knew, and worry dropped like a stone in her stomach as they stepped under the fall of the building’s shadow.

Mara looked over the building. The back wall was facing them, and there were no obvious points of entry. The main door, she knew, was on the opposite side, but there could be a door or reachable window through one of the alleyways. Mara rounded the corner and slipped quietly between the buildings. There in the middle

of the wall was a thick, iron door. Its hinges and lock were covered with rust, and it did not look like it had been used in ages. "This is probably our best bet," she whispered. She turned to face Lys. "Stay close behind me. We have no idea of knowing how many people are on the other side of this door."

"Goodness, babydoll, you act like I've never done this before," he teased, but he relinquished under her hard gaze. "Alright, yes, I'm ready," and he wiggled the gun in his hand before her.

She smiled. "How on earth did you get that back?"

"I was there not that long ago. I remember where they hid everything."

She snickered and turned back to the lock. It did not seem to have anything else protecting it. "*Aperio*." The lock did nothing. Mara bit her lip and thought hard for another word. "*Relevo*?" It was as lifeless as ever in her palm. Frustrated, she pulled at the lock. The Ignis burned at the snapping motion of her arm, and the obvious answer was on the tip of her tongue in an instant. "*Resigno*," she murmured. The lock snapped open and the door swung open, leaving an inch of space for an opening. "Let's go," she whispered, and opened the door.

There was no one on the other side. Mara felt Lys close to her back, and she stepped through the doorway. The bottom floor was empty, the staircase within plain sight. Mara rushed for the stairs and made her way up them, waiting for someone to appear at any moment. It made no sense for it to be this empty. Why would no one be waiting for them? Mara rushed up the steps and down the walkway, marveling at the fact that it seemed to be only her and Lys in the building, as well as the person she knew would be on the other side of the upstairs door.

The walkway led to only one door. It was thick, metal, and unyielding, but Mara approached it and demanded that it opened. It swung open for her with ease, revealing her sister on the other side.

“Marzanna!” Medea jumped up and rushed to her. Mara was still reeling over their entrance and jumped at the sight of her sister, even though she had expected to see her. *He’s not here*, she thought bitterly as Medea wrapped her arms around her. It had been years since they had seen each other, but Medea was just the same as ever. She was smaller than Mara, but she had always had a way of squeezing the life out of her during a hug. She released Mara with a breathless laugh, looked to Lys with wide, happy eyes, and smiled at them. “I—just—thank you,” she breathed out. “I don’t know what I would’ve done a moment longer.”

“I’m glad to see you too, but let’s get out of here before any more reunions,” Lys cut in over Mara’s shoulder. “I don’t like any of this,” and he turned from her to the walkway.

Mara gave her sister a sort of smile and urged her to come with them. “Is it usually this empty?” she asked her.

Medea shrugged her shoulders. “I never knew what they were up to out here. It’s not very large, so maybe they can’t sleep here, or there’ another location...”

Their whispers died away as they descended the stairs and headed for the door. Mara stepped ahead of Lys and reached to grab the door and swing it closed behind them, but the heavy metal moved away from her hand. Mara lunged forward, but her fingertips grazed helplessly against the back of the door. It slammed shut,

the sound of hissing air passing through the cracks ceased, and a cool voice behind them put the hairs on Mara's neck on end. "Leaving without saying goodbye?"

Slowly, Mara turned around. There on the steps was Narcis, his gloating grin gleaming in the low light. Eight Mages were spaced out across the floor on either side. "Knew I didn't like this," Lys muttered. Mara's heart sank. How could she have been so stupid as to think that they would not be covered by magic?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The ring glowed on Mara's finger as she slashed her hand through the air. The Mages were mowed over by the force of the wind she created, but Narcis rolled the force up like a cloth in his hands and sent it bursting through the sidewall. The wall ripped away as if a tornado had sucked it into its grasp. Mara tried to swallow the trickle of fear that burned in her throat. He could control the force of the Talis. Narcis smiled at her distress and pushed his hand in her direction. She blocked the blow, but it sent her staggering back into Lys. He pushed her forward. "We need a plan," he whispered.

"I've been waiting for you to come back, Marzanna. What's it been, ten years? I feel like an old friend just showed up for the reunion," he smiled. As if on cue, the Mages around him laughed.

Mara looked around the room. It was all open space, and the Mages were spread out evenly in front of them. There was not much that could be done. "Take down the Mages," she whispered to them both. Medea gave the slightest nod, and she felt Lys's gun press into her back. "I'll worry about Narcis. Head for the hole—"

"For those of you who didn't know, Marzanna was the only one who ever gave me any kind of competition in the old days. Ah, those were sweet," Narcis continued. "But she was not willing to go as far as I was."

“—And get to the plane as fast as you can.” It was the only plan she could think of. Narcis would not try to kill her, she was sure, and she was almost certain that she could defend herself. She just had to decide when to go.

“I have pushed magic further than any Mage has ever tried.” Narcis held out his hands as if expecting applause. “Even with your Tali, no one could possibly defeat—”

*“Iacio!”* Mara yelled. The force of her attack sent Narcis flying through the staircase. Shocked, the Mages paused just long enough to let her leap forward and get a solid hit against the side of the closest one’s neck. Immediately, three Mages were on her. Mara fought faster than she ever had in her life, kicking right and left and punching over and over again, using magic when she had the chance to add the thought in. She could see the others between hits, Medea fighting the same as she was, and none of them dared to get too close to Lys with that gun in his hand. He fired away from his spot, but the Mages were quick enough to block this. “Duck!” She heard Lys yell, and she hit the floor hard. One of the Mages attacking her blasted away from Lys’s shot. She jumped to her feet and continued the fight.

A blast in the back sent her rolling across the room. Narcis stood on the opposite side of the room. He leaned against the wall with his foot crossed over the other, watching the fight like it was a spectacle made for him. Mara rolled again as he sent another burst of magic her way. Then the Mages were upon her. Every so often, Narcis sent another blow in her direction, and she was forced to sacrifice a hit to block it. He was only paying any attention to her. Her limbs ached, and her legs

felt as if they would give out at any second. Lys got another shot in, making the fight her against two instead. Medea continued on against the three on the other side.

“You cannot defeat me, Marzanna!” Narcis called out to her as he attacked her again. Mara blocked it but took a solid foot to the gut for it. She smashed her elbow into that Mage’s face and slashed her hand in Narcis’s direction. He blocked it with ease. He was toying with her. Mara’s vision blurred as anger swept over her entire body, flooding her limbs with more energy. The Talis burned so hot on her arm that she had the sudden desire to rip it away, but she let it burn, feeling the energy course through her hand. She turned to find Narcis, but he had moved. She looked over the Mages, trying to get a glimpse of him. One of the Mages went low and took her legs out from under her. She slammed hard into the ground, the air whooshing from her lungs on impact. Just as she managed to gasp, a blur of red light slashed through the air towards her face. Mara put her hands over her head and shouted the first thing that came to mind. “*Ensis!*” Her sword shot from her hand, and Narcis’s blade stopped mere inches from her face, but it was not the familiar deep red glow of her Ensis that stopped him. It was gold.

Furious, Narcis turned his gaze from Mara to Leto. The Consul pushed Narcis off of Marzanna. Lys reached forward to help her up and pulled her to the side. The other Mages stopped to watch Narcis and Leto circle each other.

Leto waited Narcis out. He sprung forward, his Ensis high over his head for the strike. She blocked him and swung around, almost catching him in the back. The two separated again before pulling together like magnets. Their Ensi were a blur of red and gold. Mara could hardly tell who was who, the fight was so close. They



wrapped around each other as if in a deadly dance, stabbing this way and that at a chance to take the other down. Leto swiped at Narcis's head, just grazing his left ear. With a fearsome shriek, Narcis swiped across her front, but she just managed to block it. As she blocked another blow on her right, Mara noticed something else appear in the fight. A separate glow of red light burst from Narcis's left hand. Too late to yell a warning to Leto, Narcis stabbed under their crossed blades and sunk his Ensis deep into Leto's stomach.

Leto's eyes widened as she looked at Narcis. The amber glow of her Ensis disappeared, and Mara watched in horror as Leto's knees hit the ground and she fell to her side. Narcis stepped over her, his smile stretching wide across his face as he held his Ensis aloft, preparing to bring it down over her head.

Mara could not stop herself. She felt Lys pull at her sides, but she broke through his hold and jumped forward. Her Ensis appeared, red and black, in her hands, sparking with the force of her anger. With a loud cry, Mara hurled herself through the air and aimed to stab her blade straight through Narcis's neck. Her Ensis was knocked away from her hand and shattered to the side of her, the force of her jump stopped by Narcis hand at her throat. Her eyes bulged as he squeezed down on her neck, her feet kicking violently a foot off of the ground. "Enough," he spat. She felt his fingers close over her neck and saw his lips move once more before everything went black.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Marzanna.” The sound of her name echoed through her head. She felt as if someone were beating drumsticks against her brain. *Maybe I’m dead*, she thought. The blackness around her swirled with blue and red. Realization seeped as slow as syrup that she was staring at the back of her eyelids, but the effort to open them seemed too much. The hardness of the surface she laid upon pressed into her back, and the sound of someone breathing beside her head was loud and clear. “Marzanna!” they shouted again.

It was as if someone ripped earplugs from her ears. The noise rang like a gunshot in her ears. Her eyes shot open, and her gaze reached through the blur of the room to focus on a single dot high above her on the roof. Gasping for air, she sat up too fast, sending the room spinning around her. Hands held her steady and she coughed and sputtered for a breath. The air was sharp and burned down her throat, like she was swallowing a bag of nails. She put her hand to her throat and felt the finger-shaped whelps there, wincing at her touch. All at once, the bruises covering her body throbbed, and she became aware of every bump and sore across every inch of her. “Ouch,” she managed to growl.

She felt herself being dragged across the floor. The wall touched against her back, and she leaned against it for support. She looked up to catch Lys’s gaze, finding his bright blue eyes full of worry just above her. “Thanks,” she mumbled, and then

coughed. The word felt like sandpaper coming out of her mouth, and she was surprised by how hoarse and wheezy her voice sounded.

Lys smiled and held her shoulder steady as she coughed, each cough ripping through her throat and body like a fresh blow. “Easy there,” he muttered. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

The coughs died away, allowing her to lean back against the wall to catch her breath. She tilted her head back to meet their gazes. “What happened?”

“After he knocked you out, he locked us up here. We haven’t seen him for a few hours,” Medea answered.

Mara looked around the room but saw no sign of anyone else. “Leto,” she whispered and caught Lys’s eye. He shook his head. Mara squeezed her eyelids tightly shut, fighting back the burn that threatened to spill from her eyes. “It’s my fault,” she said through clenched teeth.

“No,” Lys said. “Leto knew what she was doing and had just as good of a chance at fighting him as anyone else.”

Mara shook her head. “She would’ve never come this way if I hadn’t lead her.”

“We would’ve never survived if you hadn’t,” Medea countered. “Narcis had every intention of attacking all of you at Patrisym. You all had no chance against him unprepared.”

Mara almost felt the urge to snort. “We’re not getting away from here.” She rubbed her hand over the swollen spot on her elbow and stopped. She tore her sleeve away from her arm, shocked to find that the Talis was still there, adhered to her skin. “He didn’t take it,” she said.

"He didn't even try," Medea said.

"Why?" It would have been so easy to take it and dispose of her. Even the Ventus Talis was still on her finger. Why did he not just take them?

"I think he wants you to hand them over."

Mara did snort this time. "Why on earth would he expect me to do that?"

Lys mirrored her confused look. Medea looked uncomfortable for a moment, as if she were focusing hard on what to say. "I think he wants you to join him."

Lys provided the laugh for her, saving her the pain of it. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," Mara said. She looked at Lys, worried. He was laughing too hard, she thought, and too long. He wiped at his eyes and sat down against the wall beside her. Mara stared at the ring on her finger and turned it over and over. "Why would he ever assume I'd agree to that? He killed my family!"

Medea frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Just a few nights ago, Medea! Who's home did you think he blew up? Mine! That was my family, my child, that he destroyed!" Mara rubbed her hand over the Insis, feeling the burn through the cloth of her shirt. Medea still looked confused. "Oh, come on, what did you think happened?" Mara snapped at her.

Medea, astonished, looked around the room before answering her.

"Marzanna..." she faltered.

"What?" Mara demanded. "What else could he possibly have managed to do in the past couple of days? Spill it."

Medea closed her lips tight and shook her head. She looked at Mara straight on, her eyes full of sadness. "He didn't do that."

It was like a kick to the stomach. Mara could not find the breath to react. Her brain was frozen, circling around the words that Medea had just said. *He didn't do that.* What did she mean he didn't? Who else could have possibly blasted her home away into bits?

The words came back to her like a dream. *If we wait just a bit longer...she'll feel responsible. She'll stay.* But surely it was not true. After everything that had happened the past few days, it could not be true, but the look on Medea's face seemed to confirm it. "Say it, " Mara demanded.

Medea shook her head. "They wanted you back, Marzanna. She suggested it months ago. Mother would have never approved it, but with her out of the way..."

"She suggested it," Mara repeated. Medea nodded. "Leto."

"Yes."

Mara rocked her head side-to-side and choked. She felt her body convulsing, the shaking in her heads spreading to every part of her body, but she could not stop it. The laughter tore from her throat, shrill, maniacal cackles that made her ears ring. She'd never seen such a shocked look come across Medea's face. Mara wiped the tears of laughter from her face, the laughs ceasing to complete silence. She lowered her forehead to her knees.

"Marzanna," she heard Medea say hesitantly and felt her hand at her shoulder. Mara shook it off. "Marzanna, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry?" She lifted her head to stare at her. She laughed again. "What the hell good does that do! *You're sorry.* Leto was sorry too. She was there! How I could

have—" she broke off and shook her head. She closed her eyes and tapped the back of her head against the wall. She could not trust anyone.

But she had known that. Mages would sink to anything to get their way. She knew this. It was why she had left all those years ago. There were too many massacres, too many times that the Mage way needed to run over the life of someone else. Her family was just another instance of that truth, and she had not seen it. She had gotten roped into the mission instead, letting herself go back on everything else. Mara thought of the man who had said such horrible things about her that day in Spice Village; she thought of Leto telling her mother to blow up her home; she thought of Narcis downstairs and the plans he had rolling about his head for his own glory. She had witnessed it herself. There had been such brutal fighting all those years ago, such horror between all of the races just to have their way. So many tragedies caused by selfish people not getting what they wanted.

Mara looked around the room, picturing the events that had happened there just a few nights before. It would have never worked, the peace thing. There were too many people that would want to have the power, the control that the Talis offered. Someone would have come after it. Eventually, someone would have gotten all of them and done as he or she pleased. Mara ran her hand over the Ignis, a tingle running through her arm at its warmth. No one could be trusted with it. She could not give it up. It would only lead to more of this. She had to put a stop to it.

Sliding her fingers over the Ignis, she latched on to its edges. "*Abjungo*," she whispered. She let the Talis burn against her hand as it formed again into its circlet.

Medea looked at her, startled. "What are you doing?" Mara poised the Ignis over her head and lowered it, feeling it tighten snugly on her forehead.

The world around her burned in a cloud of smoke. Medea's figure waved in front of her like the remains of a furnace, her eyes bright in the shadowy haze. Mara looked below and saw Lys's form shimmering there. Mara turned from them and stretched her fiery fingers in front of her. "*Reverto*," she whispered. The smoke around her faded with the wave of her hand, and the Ethereal Realm returned to the Corporeal.

Medea's face cleared in front of her, looking at Mara in awe. Mara looked at her fingers and gasped. Her body was like a glass case holding in a fire. It looked like lava was running beneath her transparent skin. "The Red Mage," Medea whispered. Mara turned her head to Lys, her hair curling and flowing around her face in spirals of flame. There was a look of horror and wonder on Lys's face as he watched the light and sparks flow throughout her body. Mara closed her eyes and focused on her corporeal form. "*Reverto*," she repeated. She opened her eyes to find her body back in its original state, but the Ignis's fire still burned beneath her skin.

"We're going to stop them," Mara said and rose to her feet. "All of them; Narcis, Patrisym, and everyone else. I'm not allowing anyone to threaten us with this again." Mara looked at Medea and then at Lys. "I'm done running, trying to cover my back wherever I go. No one is hunting me down anymore."

Mara jumped as Lys tossed his head back and laughed. "Ah, that's hilarious," he wiped at the corners of his eyes. "I thought I heard you say 'we'," he chuckled.

"We need to go, Lys. Now, before Narcis comes back."

"I'll be happy to never lay eyes on that nut again," he muttered.

"You don't understand," Mara pleaded. "With the Talis, I can defeat him. He doesn't have a chance."

"I didn't sign up for this, babydoll," he cut in. "Leto hired me to bring you here and that's it. The way I see it, I've done that and more, a lot more than I wanted to do." He settled back against the wall. "Go have your little fight with the world. I'll wait for you to finish, go back to my plane, and leave."

Mara stepped towards him and lowered her hand to Lys's shoulder. He flinched at the heat, keeping his eyes forward. "You're a Mage, Ulysses," she said. He looked up at her, shocked at the use of his full name. "You can't ignore that forever."

Lys's jaw tightened, and he turned away from her. Mara walked to the door and placed her hand over the locked handle.

"Mara." Mara jerked her head around. His face was turned away from hers. He looked older, hardened, as if the wear of what he had seen and done in his life was making its way to the surface. "I hope you're proud of what you become," he said.

Mara turned away from him. She was making the right decision. There was no normal world for him to return to if she did not do this. She and she alone would make it safe for him to leave, to go about his life as he wished. She heard Medea's footsteps behind her. Mara turned back to the room and faced the wall behind Lys. She pictured the wall melting away, and it disappeared before her eyes. Shocked, Lys lurched forward to keep himself from falling. He looked out and saw his plane waiting there in the distance. "*Reverto*," Mara whispered, feeling the magic of the



Ignis surge within her. They watched as the plane rocked from its tilted position, now standing level and straight as if nothing had happened. "*Pendeo.*" Mara lifted Lys from the ground. He struggled against her grasp, but could not return himself to the ground. "You're free to leave, Lys." She pushed him out over the open air. "Be my guest." She lowered him down until she heard the soft crunch of his feet against the snow. She reached for the door handle, and it melted away under her palm, swinging open with ease.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Narcis heard the creak of the door above. So she had found a way to open it, had she? He smiled as he watched their friend disappear around the other side of his plane. It was only Marzanna to deal with now.

“Would you like to sit down and have a nice chat or would you rather a repeat?” Narcis called out from below the stairs before stepping out. He turned to look up at where he knew she was standing on the floor above, but a burst of light blinded him. He moved to block it, but it did not attack. He looked around in wonder at the column of fire that encircled him.

Mara smiled from above him. The power flowing through her was indescribable. Dealing with Narcis would take hardly any effort from her. She leapt from the walkway and landed softly on the ground below.

Medea rushed after her. “Marzanna,” she said, her voice shaking. Mara turned at the strange falter in her voice. Medea’s eyes were large and worried, glancing between her and the fire. “Is this really the only way? We don’t have to kill him. We could take him back to the others.”

“This is the only way,” Mara said and turned back to the fire. With a swipe of her hand, the column ascended and engulfed the walls. The entire room was like the inside of a furnace. Mara smiled. She could not feel the heat of the fire, but she could imagine how uncomfortable it was for Narcis at that moment. With a twist of her

hand, the column of fire exploded, engulfing the entirety of the room in flames except for the spot where she and Medea stood.

Something smashed hard into her back. Mara's chin collided with the floor, clacking her teeth together, sending her sliding forward on her stomach. The fire split for her, refusing to engulf its creator. Mara got to her knees just in time to be flipped over. Her back slammed into the ground, knocking the last breath from her before fingers closed around her throat. Medea's face filled her vision.

"Marzanna, listen to me! Listen!" Medea shouted over the flames. Mara clawed at her hands and bucked, trying to throw her off of her. Mara's back collided with the floor, but her lungs filled with air as Medea's weight flew off of her. Mara looked about wildly, trying to find Narcis and just managed to get a glimpse of Lys lowering his gun from the far side of the room before the flames blocked her view.

"We don't have to kill him." Mara turned around to lock eyes on Medea. She glanced wildly around her and caught sight of Narcis's figure on the ground behind Medea's legs. She smiled at the sight of his curled up body, fighting to breath in the flames. He had managed to keep himself from getting burned, but that did not help with the lack of air. "You don't have to do this."

Mara's red eyes flashed as she looked at Medea. Was she protecting Narcis? She looked at the way Medea stood in front of him, holding her hands out to Mara as if holding her back from him. Mara's gaze latched onto Medea's hand. It looked strange through the flame, as if one of her fingers was not visible through the smoke. Mara gasped as Medea flexed her hand. Her finger was gone, the same finger Mara had cut away to get the Ventus Talis.

She looked from Medea's hand to her face. "It was you!" Mara thundered at her. "You sent me the Talis to lead me here to him."

"Marzanna, please," Medea pleaded. "Just listen to his plan. He has everything worked out for us, Marzanna. Just listen to him."

Mara threw her head back and laughed. "Liar!" She screeched through her cackle. "You don't even know what that means! How dare you? How dare..." Fury rose white hot in her chest. None of this would have happened if Medea had not sent her the Talis. It was her fault, Narcis's fault, Leto's fault, for all of this happening to her. With a cry, Mara's Ensis appeared in her hand, burning with a fury that even the fire could not muster. She threw it with all her might at Medea, watching as it sunk deep into her chest. Shocked, Medea tried to grasp the blade, but it disappeared as she fell into the flames.

Without a second glance, Mara pushed her way through the fire and stepped through the shredded wall. She waved her arm over the building and it exploded, pieces of brick and glass flew into the sky, and the windows on either side of the building shattered, the force of the explosion sending cracks through their walls as well. As the sound of sirens wailing grew louder and louder, Mara's feet left the ground as her body twisted in the air and disappeared without a trace.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *One Year Later*

The streets were empty at this time of the afternoon. The Texas sun was too hot, even for the locals. Lys did not blame them. His shirt was soaked against his chest, the back of it clinging to his skin. He felt a drop of sweat dripping from his knee. Texas summer was the only time that he was thankful to be a Mage. His skin glowed white under the beams, but it thankfully never burned.

He was not sure that he had made the right decision to come to Waco. He had left this area long ago. He had nothing to do with Mages now. No Mages, no dwarves, no elves, no magical beings whatsoever. But that had all changed a week ago when a Mage appeared at his front door with tales of a Red Mage gone rogue, who had taken control of all of the Tali and was wreaking havoc over them all. The Mage's were moving underground, he had said. They had no way to defeat someone like that. They had to keep their numbers somehow, had to hide to survive against this force. Lys knew Mara was behind it. There was no other answer for a Red Mage.

Lys stepped through the gates of the playground. Some parents had braved the heat and mingled about the park benches, fanning themselves and chugging water while their kids ran about. Lys wondered if the playground was hot under the children's fingers and feet, but they did not seem to mind.

A stream of red hair caught his eye at the top of a slide. Lys watched as the child slid from the top to her father's arms. She squealed as he caught her at the

bottom. The mother waved them down from a picnic table. He carried the child over. The mother stood the child on the bench and lathered sunscreen over her face and arms. She screeched in protest. Lys would have figured this necessary for a red head, of all children. They tended to scorch in the bright sun, but this child's skin was not pale and freckled. It was smooth and tanned, not as dark as her parents' but much more so than the other children running about.

Lys made his way to a bench and watched the child run. She had the same curls, but her hair was fiery red instead of black. Could that be the child?

As if she could feel his gaze, the child turned her head and locked eyes with Lys. He gasped. Her skin was tanned and freckled, her hair a different color, but he knew that face. That was Mara's face in miniature.

The parents called the child back over to them. It was time to head home. She dragged her feet behind them as they walked. When they rounded the corner, Lys stood from the bench and followed. The house was a short distance from the park. He remained on the opposite street corner as they walked up the stairs. The red curls disappeared through the door. Lys glanced at the number: 602 Austin Ave. Lys took note of the for sale signs outside of the ragged houses down the street. Maybe Waco would grow on him in the future. Only time would tell.

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