



MAGI RISING — BOOK ONE

BETRAYED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RAYE WAGNER

BETRAYED

Magi Rising Book I



RAYE WAGNER

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Note to the Reader](#)

[Preface](#)

1. [Three Years Ago](#)
2. [Today](#)
3. [Three Years Ago](#)
4. [Today](#)
5. [Three Years Ago](#)
6. [Today](#)
7. [Three Years Ago](#)
8. [Today](#)
9. [Three Years Ago](#)
10. [Today](#)
11. [Two and one half years ago](#)
12. [Two years ago](#)
13. [Two Years Ago](#)
14. [Two Years Ago](#)
15. [Today](#)
16. [Today](#)
17. [Two Years Ago](#)
18. [Today](#)
19. [Today](#)
20. [Today](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Raye Wagner:](#)

Betrayed
by Raye Wagner
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Thanks to God for inspiration, insight, and nudges. There is truly joy in creation, and I hope I can live up to the measure of my being.

To my parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins, and extended family... I'm glad that most of you don't run away when you see me coming (except for you-know-who-you-are). I'm glad you don't mind my crazy... much.

To my bestie pals: Kate, Alli, Annie, Cassy, Kathy, and Melissa (the #6 who almost threw one of the other 5 out). Thanks for being bestie pals with me even though I miss 30%. But I'm 100% with what I get. 100% I'm tellin' ya!

Amanda at Smoking Hot Covers has outdone herself on the cover (seriously, I'm so excited about this pretty).

And Kel, you're a dear, dear friend who can see inside my head and explain the madness to another in a way that makes sense. I'm certain you greatly aided the final product with your mad communication skillz.

Kelly, you're still my Drae-bae, and you continue to be one of the bestest friends in the entire readerly universe.

And my other bookish besties: Melissa, Meg, Leia, Kim, Lela, Dawn, Kristin, Alisha and more I'm probably forgetting because I'm tired and sleep-

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To my Beta team: A million times thank you... and then a million more. Ashley Russell, Katie Shea, Kim Messer, Theresa Scerbo, Andrea Peel, Venus Dye, Jacqui Smith, Susan Gonzalez, Roeshell Arjin, Mersadies Smith, and Arceli Firage I really appreciate your willingness to be of service. When we meet face-to-face remind me I owe you a drink. ;)

To my PA Joy, you help keep me sane and on task, both of which are a challenge. Thank you for keeping things together. I adore you!

NOTE TO THE READER

Betrayed started as a novella for a cross-promotion but the beginning of Dîsa's story grew quickly, and I discovered there was no way to contain all of the events leading up to the series in only twenty-five thousand words.

I had a hard look at the story and made a compromise. Fallen was the prequel I used for the cross-promotion, a twenty-two thousand word excerpt of Betrayed—essentially all of the story from “Three Years Ago.”

My intention was to release Betrayed after Illusions, but when my editor, and dear friend, Krystal read the story, she insisted this was book one. I had a marvelous Beta-team who'd already read Stolen, and I had them read both Betrayed and Illusions and weigh in on the reading order. Unanimously, they agreed that Betrayed should be read before Illusions's release, and the recommended reading order should be Betrayed, Stolen, and then Illusions. The last month has been a whirlwind to be able to make that happen.

The “Today” portions are the precipitating events to the totality of the series. It was because Dîsa came back to Yândarî when she did, that the rest of the series unfolds the way it does. And truthfully, the story of “Today” is my favorite part of Betrayed.

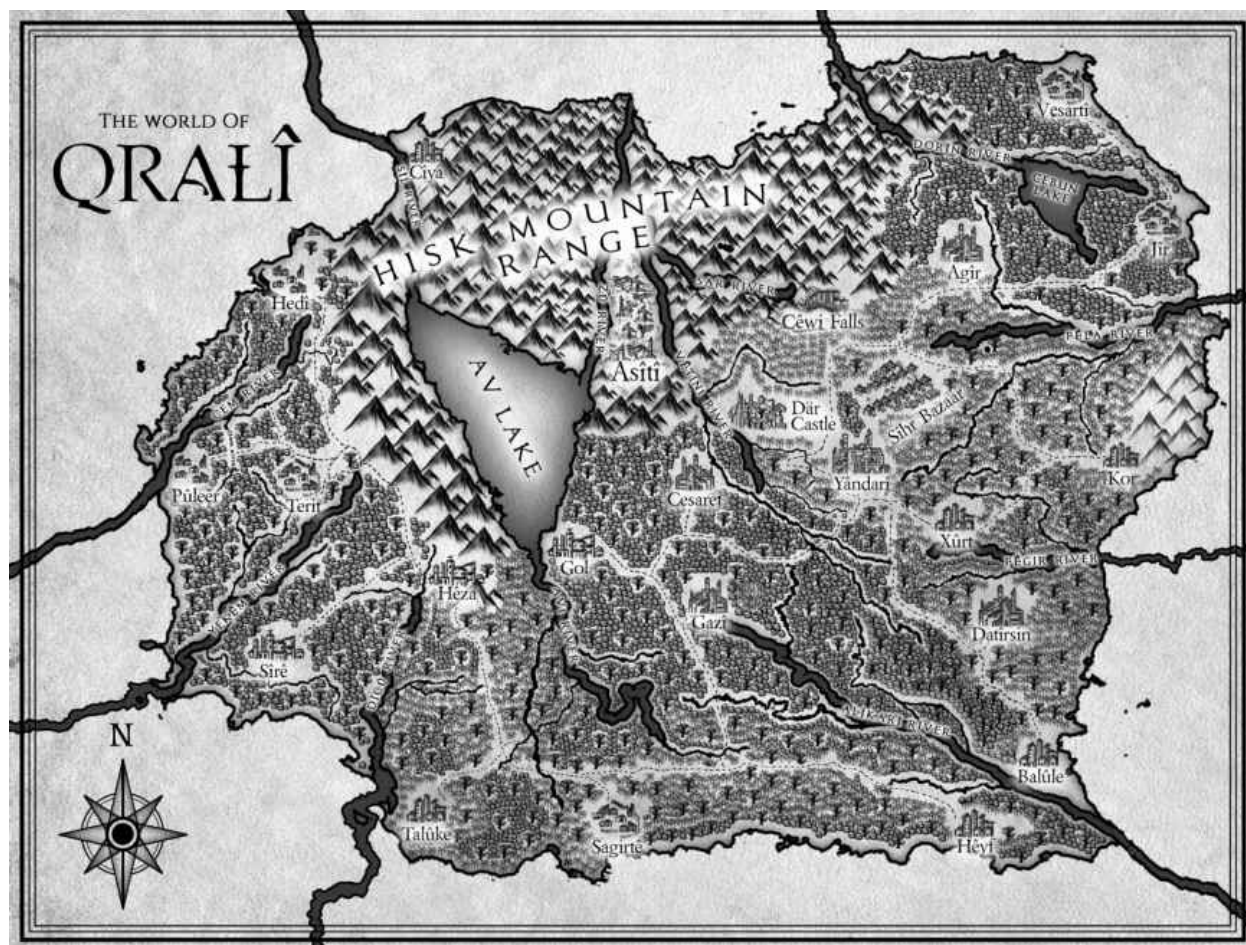
I hope you enjoy the beginning of Dîsa's story.

As always, thank you for taking the time to read one of my books, and if you decide to review it—I offer you my most heartfelt appreciation.

All the best and happy reading,

Raye

*There is magîk inside you.
I hope you find it.*



PREFACE

The magî have a very distinctive language system which ties back to their magîk as well as the world they emigrated from, Kânkarä.

All of the special characters (the hats and dots on the vowels) indicate a significant level or type of power. The distinction was granted to an individual by the kümdâr (king).

The kümdâr was always meant to be the most powerful magî, but like many countries, Qralî eventually adopted the pattern that the right to rule passed from father to eldest son.

The kirinî is a trial of magîk performed by a newly anointed kümdâr to select the most powerful magî to be his guards (Serîk). The Serîk have a hat over a vowel in their name to distinguish them.

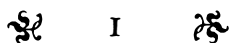
Traditionally, the kümdâr had one Serîk closest to him who was his beta—noted by the changing of his name to begin with a B. Example: Bîcav was Cav before he became a beta and Bêrde was Erde. Zerôn made all his Serîk betas.

Zetas are the most powerful magî, and their names are also changed to begin with a Z. The kümdâr and his bandmate would always be zetas. The changing of names was left to the kümdâr who would mark and bind them (with a magical bond) to him. Examples: Zîvrünê was Rünê before becoming a zeta, and his brother Zerôn was Erôn. The strongest magî, regardless of gender, have the double dots over a vowel in their name as is used in the word kümdâr (king) and Kânkarä (realm the magî originated from).

I hope this clears up the confusion regarding the special characters.

Clearly, I have hard time following the norm. Or maybe I just like to

make up my own rules. I hope you enjoy the story! ;)



THREE YEARS AGO

“**T**ell me the first time you knew you were in love with Zîvrünê.” My sister twirled, making her orchid-pink skirt lift and flutter in the humid air and her hair swing in a wide, golden arc. She laughed and held her arms out, stumbling and breathless from the frenetic spinning on the uneven floor. Out in the jungle, a kookaburra echoed her laugh, the two of them mocking me.

At almost-eighteen, Anâ—no, *Zîyanâ* now that she’d received magî Zeta marks— was everything I wanted to be: beautiful, beloved, and so happy. Still smiling, she fixed me with her golden gaze and demanded, “Tell me.”

My face tightened, and her smile widened, crinkling the dark paint around her eyes. I wished the grin would split her beautiful face in two. Fighting the glare that her teasing provoked, I merely shook my head at my older sister. “I hope he never finds out about you and Zerôn.”

“Oh, stop being such a night parrot, Dîsa,” she said with a wave of her hand.

Because me pointing out her infidelity was akin to stupidity.

She stepped to the far corner of the single-room dwelling, pulled out the seat to the once-polished vanity, and then patted the chair. “Sit down. I’ll do your hair while you talk. Then I’ll help you get dressed. Zerôn bought me a dozen new bandeau tops with matching sarongs—oh-oh, I have a pretty green set that will fit you *perfectly*. We’ll paint your eyes, too.”

The offer was tempting, but I refused. What I wore wouldn’t make me beautiful. “You shouldn’t let Zerôn buy you things like that. It isn’t right. You’ll be indebted.”

“Why do you dislike him so much?” she asked with a huff.

Besides the fact that he was sleeping with her? The list was long and dated back to my first memory of the prince.

“He stabbed me in the leg with a knife.” And because that wasn’t enough, I inhaled and continued ticking reasons off with my fingers. “He kills animals, he’s greedy, he’s always insulting Zîvrünê—”

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes, but then her gaze stayed up on the leaking roof of our crumbling home on the outskirts of Yândarî. Frowning, her expression tightened.

“He hasn’t hurt anything since we were kids. You’re always offended on behalf of Zîvrünê, even when he isn’t. Zerôn might not be as *nice*, but he’s far more intelligent.” She returned her attention to me. “And he makes things happen.”

She waved at the thatched covering which hadn’t been repaired since *before* our parents left for a visit with the kümdâr four years ago. They’d never arrived and never returned.

At twelve, I didn’t understand why we hadn’t fixed the roof when it started leaking. And while my mother and father often said *everything has a cost*, it wasn’t until *after* they’d died that I understood. *After*, we’d traded our possessions for magîk, labor, and occasionally, resources while Anâ honed her magîk. And the sacrifices paid off, just like she’d said they would, when she became Zîyanâ.

Footsteps thudded on the roof, indicating a magî had arrived to fix the holes. But the repair wasn’t because of the younger prince, and we both knew it.

“The sooner we can get out of here *permanently*, the better.” She pointed at the seat. “Now, come on, let’s see what we can do to make you pretty.”

Irritated with the not too subtle reminder, I didn’t budge. My plan was to spend the day in the jungle, tracking panthera.

When I was younger, maybe four or five, I’d spotted one of the great cats on the edge of the market, crouched in the dense foliage. The melanistic rarity observed the crowd as if he didn’t wish to make a meal but rather satiate his curiosity. He’d met my gaze and held it, watching me until my sister pulled me away. But I’d felt a connection to the solitary creature, and ever since, my interest in the apex animal led me to find solace in the jungle.

But Zîyanâ had other plans. She crossed the dirt floor of our home in three strides, grabbed my wrist, and yanked me off the single cot we shared,

dropping my arm as soon as I was upright. She skipped back to the vanity, trilling a tune as she went, oblivious as always.

When she arrived and saw I hadn't followed, she put her hands on her hips and her smile slipped. "We're supposed to meet them in an hour, and you *can't* go looking like that," she grumbled. "The Zîv likes it better when your hair is up, and you won't be a sub that much longer."

Not true. I narrowed my eyes, further irritated by her blatant attempt at manipulation. I'd be a subadult for two and a half more years. She was the one getting ready to cross into full-fledged magî. And she'd only brought *him* up to get a reaction. "Zîvrünê doesn't like to be called that."

"Don't tell me what I already know," she said with a smirk. She patted the back of the seat again, making the three remaining wooden dowels wobble, and then leaned forward just enough to haul me the last couple of feet to her. After pushing me into the seat, she sighed and rested her chin on my head, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

"Come on," she said. "Tell me the first time you fell in love with him."

"I don't want to," I muttered, embarrassed to tell her something so personal.

Anâ grabbed her brushes and kohl, and I closed my eyes while she applied the makeup. When I felt her shift, I forced my attention to the mirror just to make sure she hadn't made me ridiculous. But the lines were straight and sure, the design around my eyes intricate—beautiful. She grabbed a brush and rounded the chair, starting on my hair. After shaking out the locks, still damp from my bath, the weight fell almost to the small of my back. Humming to herself, Zîyanâ worked deftly, plaiting several small braids before nudging me again.

"Tell me the first time you thought you and Zîvrünê were soul mates." She stumbled over the last words, and her eyes lost the earnestness as she batted her lashes. "Tell me how you knew..."

My reticence had nothing to do with the subject but, rather, my audience. "You'll only laugh at me—just like your comment about soul mates."

"I wasn't laughing." Zîyanâ rested her hands on my shoulders and shook her head. Crouching, she whispered in my ear, "I promise. I won't laugh at you. I just wish..." She frowned, her perfectly arched eyebrows pulling together. "Please? I really want to know."

"Really?" I breathed with disbelief. "You always laugh at me when I talk about him."

“No,” she retorted, straightening. “I don’t *always* laugh at you. We’re family, and if you needed something, I’d be there for you. Just like I’ve done the last four years.”

I pursed my lips, stopping my retort and the subsequent argument. Because instead of reassuring me of her loyalty, my sister’s words filled me with defensiveness. But there was no way to win that argument; she had sacrificed a lot for me. I shifted in my chair, shoving away my emotions, and closed my eyes, letting the memory of Rünê surface.

“The first time I knew I loved Zîvrünê was when I was seven,” I said. “I was in the market and *someone* pushed me down.” Anâ and I both knew Zerôn, then still Erôn, was the culprit. The younger prince had made me his victim for as long as I could remember, with the exception of a couple years when the boys weren’t allowed to associate with us. “Rünê saw, and instead of *pretending* to not see what had happened, he came over and helped me up.”

He’d wiped away my tears while telling me how bullies always got their just desserts, and then he bought me a snack. I smiled at the memory of his kindness—even if he was wrong about his brother getting justice. Zerôn skirted consequences like caiman stealing goats from the river’s edge. Neither ever got caught.

Zîyanâ barked a short laugh without mirth. “And then the prince took you to get a pastry. I remember—”

“You remember?” I asked, my eyes popping open with surprise. How did she recall the details of an event eight years ago? One she played almost no role in?

“No,” she said, correcting me. Her expression flattened as she continued. “Not that day. Just the story. Mom used to go on and on. Like it was going to help *me* fall in love with *him* when he was helping *you*.” She patted my shoulder and then stepped back from the chair. “There. All done. Now, get dressed.”

I frowned at my reflection in the mirror. Not that I didn’t look good. Zîyanâ was amazing with hair and fashion, although neither mattered much outside the capital. But my sister had so many talents; it wasn’t fair.

“Here, put this dress on.” She held out a silky-soft, green bandeau and matching sarong. “It will look good against your skin.”

I accepted the garments with mixed feelings. The fabric was beautiful and definitely softer than anything I’d ever owned, but the thought that Zerôn had

purchased it made my stomach sour. No, the gift was to Zîyanâ, not me. I simultaneously pulled the wrap tight with the hidden bindings while rationalizing that if I owed anyone, it would be my sister, not Zerôn. I turned and faced her. “What do you think?”

“You’re almost pretty,” Zîyanâ said, scrutinizing me. Her frown deepened. “Hopefully, you’ll grow into your features.” She huffed and then snapped, “Let’s go.”

Without another word, she stormed out of the hovel.

I winced, feeling guilty again, only this time there was nothing I could do to fix her feelings. Of course she’d feel resentful for all she’d sacrificed for me. And with useless magîk, if I couldn’t be made to look pretty, I might be a burden to her forever.

We hadn’t always been poor. As children, we’d attended the same private training as the two princes even, but *after* our parents died, we had little to rely on. Charity might happen in the outposts, but here in Yândarî, we all knew a handout led to laziness. There was no such thing as a gift—except within families. Otherwise, all transactions were to be mutually beneficial.

Anâ and I did the best we could, eking out our survival by collecting from the jungle or trading illegally because subadults weren’t allowed to trade in magîk. Their control was considered unpredictable, which was true for most. But for as long as I could remember, I’d been able to see the souls of dead animals if they’d recently passed. After a period of time, seconds or minutes, the soul disappeared, likely into another body being born somewhere else in Qralî. There hadn’t been anything unpredictable about my magîk, just useless, until the last month.

I pushed the waves and braids back over my shoulder and paused for one last glance in the cracked mirror at my reflection. Zîyanâ was right; the pale green contrasted nicely against my golden skin. The intricate braids pulled the locks away from my face, and while I wasn’t pretty, the awkward, knobby in-between of my thirteenth and fourteenth annum had finally passed.

My hair was darker than Zîyanâ’s, at least at the roots; the sun had bleached my waves blending rich gold and deep auburn. Still, it was probably my best feature. My eyes were too wide, my nose too sloped, and my lips too uneven. I sighed and dropped my gaze. At least I had breasts and hips now. Sort of.

Zîyanâ said the barely there curves would be more noticeable if I ate more and didn’t spend so much time running around the jungle. As if that

would be enough motivation to make me stop.

What she didn't understand—couldn't understand—and I would never tell her now was I'd started seeing magî souls. Fewer of them appeared in the jungle than the crowded marketplace, so I'd taken to haunting the woods, usually by the Cewi waterfall.

"Come on, Dîsa," Zîyanâ called before poking her head back into our home. "Wouldn't you rather see Zîvrünê instead of trying to track one of your precious panthera? Or are you going to sit and gape at yourself in the mirror?"

Taking a deep breath, I forced my lips upward, but I couldn't stop the irritation with how she used her knowledge of me against me. As if the things that made me who I was were laughable. "Maybe I'll ask him to come with me."

"You and the Zîv roaming the jungle?" She laughed as she waved my words away. "Stop being ridiculous and hurry up."

I stopped to slip on my boots, the one gift I'd accepted because the foot protection made my wanderings in the jungle possible. Zîvrünê had his guard, Bîcav, deliver the gift, saying I could repay when my magîk was mature. I wondered what, if anything, Bîcav told his master about my magîk. Maybe that was why he'd stopped coming by.

The thought made my chest tight. *Doesn't matter.* All of Yândarî knew Zîvrünê and Zîyanâ would bond and that it was just a matter of time before the official announcements went out through Qralî. I lied to myself and said if he was happy, I'd be happy for him. *And I'll still get to see him, like today.*

Zîyanâ and I wound through the tangle of foliage surrounding our hovel and out toward the Rê, the main road surrounding Yândarî, Qralî's capital. The wall of growth on either side of the path was about twelve feet high, a mixture of plants that stayed relatively close to the ground in the rainforest.

Above the lower canopy was another layer, the upper canopy, trees extending from twenty to a hundred feet up. At this elevation, the sun's, moon's, and star's rays dappled our world with their light through the foliage. I'd spent my entire life in Yândarî, but there were other outposts where the mountains climbed past the trees or others where the clouds blocked the celestial lights. But without the upper canopy, those areas grew cold and dry depending on the season. I loved the warmth and life here. And the magî. Especially the magî.

I ran my hand over the plants, tugging on the tip of the large *aleph-ear*

leaf—bigger than a supper plate—and then let it slap back into place with a spray of dew. Overhead, the rumble of thunder promised rain, more moisture that would trickle through the leaves above, keeping everything alive. And a bit of rain never stopped us from hiking.

“Where are we going today?” I asked, smiling with the thought of a good walk. The clean smell of verdant growth was layered with the pungent orchids and hints of decomposing mulch from beneath our feet. “To Cewi falls?”

Zîyanâ snorted. “You’re the only one who likes that place. It’s tucked so far back, away from *everything*, it’s almost like nothing else exists when you’re there.”

“You don’t like that?” The seclusion was one of my favorite things about that particular area. “It’s peaceful, relaxing. And there aren’t any caiman.”

“Only you would still be afraid of an animal from the outposts. Next, you’re going to say you want to go to the fort in the trees. Those places are for *children*, Dîsa. They’re suffocating and small. I’d much rather climb mountains or even trees and see everything below. Plus, when you’re elevated, *you* can be seen.”

“Unless the clouds hide you,” I retorted, offended by the slights. The fort in the large banyan tree had been Zîvrünê’s favorite haunt when we were younger; the falls were still mine. “Clouds are suffocating.”

She held in her response, her pinched expression reminding me of our mother’s frustration when she believed us to be silly children unable to listen to reason. As we stepped onto the Rê, Zîyanâ stopped and pulled off her sash. She wiped the moisture and spatters of mud from her legs, taking several seconds to inspect the result before straightening. “Here,” she said, thrusting the muddy fabric at me. “You should wipe off, too.”

“I don’t care,” I replied, waving away the proffered rag. “No one is going to be looking at me.”

“Just do it so you don’t embarrass me.”

I shrugged and acquiesced. When I was done, she threw the muddy cloth onto the trail.

“We can pick it up on our way back,” she said and waved her hand. Immediately, a vibrant shoot erupted from the dark soil, climbing until it was chest high. The soiled rag hung wedged between a leaf and the stalk. “There.” She grinned at me. “Now you won’t forget.”

With a deep breath, I bit my tongue, exhausted with the tug-of-war. I

should be proud of her and happy for her. Zîyanâ's power was really strong. Her magîk over the land had kept us fed when there was nothing else. And more than just a strong green thumb, our sovereign believed she could fix the land and rid the realm of the bûyî.

When she went through her assessment last year, her power was so strong she earned coveted zeta markings, and her name changed from Anâ to Zîyanâ. All that power was how she'd caught the attention and approval of the kümdâr—and his sons' public notice—once again.

I ran my hand down the rippled glass window, frowning at the empty path leading out of Heza, the only way in or out of the distant outpost at the base of the Hîsk mountain range. Two years had passed since I'd left Yândarî, but trepidation crawled through me *now*—reminiscent of *then*. Blinking hard, I turned my back on the window and the Little Rê, frustrated with my growing sense of ignorance and impotence. Even if something had gone wrong with the group of magî while they were in the capital, there was nothing I could do... not from Heza, a two-week journey on foot.

Which is probably why I was sent away.

Only I wasn't naïve anymore.

I trudged down the stairs of the hewn stone inn and then plunked into a chair at the long table, my stomach churning. The heat from the fire billowed out of the hearth, gobbling up the residual morning chill of the dry season and leaving the smell of cinders behind. There was no reason for me to care, not this much, but the innkeeper and her family felt like... *family*? I pursed my lips, searching for a better word. *Friends*? Both made me grimace, and I shoved the memories bubbling up—now soured and bitter—back. I'd feel bad if something happened to them.

"Dostane?" I called out to the owner. "Are you busy?"

After six months, I knew better than to go into her kitchen unless expressly invited—which never happened.

"Be there in a minute," she said, leaning out the arched doorway and disappearing just as fast, nothing more than a streak of brown hair.

I waited, my gaze drawn back toward the window like a magnet, and

forced my attention to the knotted grain of the table instead. Worrying was a waste of time and energy. Too bad my mind didn't know it.

Eventually, I *should* go back to Yândarî, but the longing to return had evaporated months, maybe even a year ago, much like the residual moisture on the leaves after a mid-morning rainstorm. My immature, *naïve*, infatuation with Zîvrünê had eroded with separation and time, and even my conviction of needing to fix whatever was wrong had waned into indifference—at least on most days. I no longer tried to convince magî that Zîvrünê was going to do anything about his brother, and I'd stopped warning them about the kümdâr's guards or explaining all the reason to hide our magîk. To convince anyone of something I no longer believed in was impossible.

The problem was I didn't *know* what had happened in the capital or why Zîvrünê hadn't sent for me. I didn't know why he'd sent me away. I didn't know *anything*.

And for the last two days, I couldn't even pretend to *not* hear the whispered rumors about magî disappearing at the market. What if the reports were true? Knowing Zerôn, they *could* be true, but in two years I'd seen no evidence. Yes, there had been a kirinî after the new kümdâr began his rule, but the magîk tournament was a part of every new kümdâr's rising to power. The idea that he was still taking magî, and worse, killing the best and strongest magî—was preposterous. And while I used to believe Zerôn was why Zîvrünê and my sister had sent me away in such a panic, the fact that neither had ever bothered to contact me made me doubt a lot of what I thought I knew. Loyalty, like friends and family were supposed to have for one another, meant one wouldn't forget. After two years, I knew they'd forgotten or deliberately gotten rid of me.

Shame still burned through me when I recalled how I'd zealously warned magî in the outposts to hide for the entire first year I'd been gone. I'd been such a fool.

A twinge of guilt nagged with the introspection, and I traced the grain of the table while waiting for Dostane to appear. Taking a deep breath, I pushed against the morose thoughts. If the magî of the outpost believed me then, at sixteen, surely they would know better now. As for Zîvrünê and Zîyanâ... I didn't need them. The fact made all the more clear after two years without them in my life.

I'd been in Heza, an outpost tucked away on a plateau in the Navendi mountain range, for eight months. And in all the time I'd been here, the

kümdâr's Serîk hadn't come to take magî for the kirinî. Not once. And the bûyî, the deadly bog that had taken my parents and the previous kümdâr and his bondmate, had yet to make its terrible presence known here. Maybe Zîyanâ really did heal the land of the death-trap. Good-o on her.

At least I didn't have to live in her shadow now. My home was the solitary inn of Heza, not the whole inn, but the middle of three adjoining rooms that Dostane rented to travelers passing through, although the other two had remained empty the entire time I'd lived here. All of Qralî could have fallen or forgotten about this outpost and we'd be *contentedly* ignorant—which was how it had always been.

Heza was one of the few outposts where a natural resource was more valuable than most of the resident magî's abilities. The realm of Qralî traded in magîk, but Heza exported beautiful stones to the capital—small trinkets to be admired—and the gems served as an equalizer for those with lesser magîk, *worthless* magîk, because they had to be mined by hand. I'd never heard of a magî with the ability to mine, and I'd traveled all over Qralî after the new kümdâr and my sister bound their magîk. Family support and all that.

Memories continued washing over me, and I shuddered, letting my attention return to the window—and today. The rippled glass distorted the view, but the early afternoon sun streamed through the distant top layer of the jungle canopy. At this elevation, light bathed the orange brick buildings and reflected off the windows, leaving prisms dancing on the walls. The canopy's growth, prolific in the lower basins of the jungle, was much sparser here. What survived the relative cold dry season was stout and hearty—much like the magî of Heza.

"Fried pîderîne?" Dostane asked, stepping out of the kitchen. She approached, her soft tread and the rustle of fabric growing louder, and added, "Or are you wanting something different? I've got flatbread ready to fry, too, if you'd like."

"Whatever you have is fine," I replied with a shrug. All of her food was delicious—the closest I'd found to the chefs' in the castle in Yândarî. Pulling my attention away from the path outside the window, I asked, "Do you think they'll be back today?"

Dostane's wearied features softened, but the fine lines around her hazel eyes deepened, and new ones materialized around her mouth as she frowned. Even so, she appeared far less than her thirty-eight years. "Every day I wake up hopeful. They've been gone ten weeks, today."

Of course she'd anticipated my question. I'd asked it at least a dozen times every day for a dozen days. The trek from Heza to Yândarî normally took three weeks. Although, the mines' yield was exceptionally plentiful, and the mules were heavily laden when the group of male magî left for the capital over two months ago. And even after accounting for extra travel time and additional time to sell the increased quantity of stones, the company of magî should've been back by now.

I opened my mouth, but she rapped on the table.

"I'll be right back with something for you to eat," she said, cutting off my next question. Then, after exhaling, she added, "No, I don't know when they'll be back, but I do know you're losing weight, Dîsa. And no magî from Heza wants to see his partner, or future partner, scrawny."

She stepped away from the table and my sputtering protests, continuing to speak until she disappeared into the kitchen, her words floating out to me.

"It implies incompetence."

Snapping my mouth shut, I glared at the now empty doorway. "No one would ever think Mar incompetent," I muttered after her. Then I raised my voice and added, "And nothing is going to happen with me and him!"

Mar, her eldest, was tall, thick, strong, and the epitome of his deceased father. What Mar lacked in magîk, he more than made up for in work ethic and strength. He was loyal, reliable, and kind. I liked him, but I didn't love him. And I *definitely* had no intention of partnering with him, or anyone else for that matter. Love made one stupid and gullible, and I had no intention of being either ever again.

The back door slammed shut, and Doli, Dostane's daughter, yelled, "They're back."

With the excitement in her voice, relief flooded me. My neck and shoulders dropped, and I sucked a deep breath in through my nose. But the air tasted wrong on the back of my tongue, and a stone settled in my stomach, my skin crawling with unease. I stood so suddenly the chair tipped back and fell to the stone floor with a clatter. Clenching my hands, I tried to reign in my racing heart as the feeling of dread grew, unfolding like a poisonous blossom.

"What the rot? Are you okay?" Doli exclaimed as she entered the dining room. She met my gaze and tittered with nervous laughter. "You scared me, Dîsa."

I stared at her—her wide eyes so like her mother's—and the ball of

darkness swelled, filling my entire abdomen and pushing into my chest. My mouth dried, and the yeasty scent of fry bread made my stomach turn.

“What’s wrong?” Doli hurried to my side. “You look sick. Mom!”

Forcing my lips open, I inhaled, and the rancid taste of death coated my tongue like old, putrid oil. My eyes widened with horrific understanding, and the air seemed to charge. Death was here; it was coming for us. I grabbed Doli’s hand, yanking her along behind me as I darted to the kitchen, screaming, “Dostane.”

Doli squealed and flailed, unsteady on her feet, and a moment later she crashed into me. We stumbled forward with the momentum, through the arched doorway separating the two rooms. We tumbled to the floor, and she landed on top of me, forcing the air from my lungs.

“What the fetid—”

Her exclamation disappeared into an explosion of rock and splintering wood, pieces raining through the open doorway and pelting us with hard, uneven fragments. My ears rang, a high-pitched bell, and I was deaf to everything else. Doli scrambled off me, and I jumped to my feet. Dostane stood rigidly, her mouth unhinged, staring at the doorway now billowing with dust and smoke.

Rot. Smoke—a lot of smoke. *Magîk* smoke. The air singed the inside of my nose with the acrid stench.

My eyes burned and heart raced. The smell grew, and I grabbed for the other two magî. The three of us knocked into each other on the way out the back door, stumbling into Dostane’s garden—the only way out. The saturated haze of a greedy, belching flame covered the expanse, and the shapes of the plants were distinguishable only at close range. Every time I opened my mouth, I tasted death. I scanned the area, unable to see anyone, but with all the smoke, that didn’t mean we were alone.

The garden backed to a sparse copse of trees and a rocky slope which disappeared into the sheer face of the mountain—which meant no one would need to stand guard out here; there was nowhere for us to go. A gust of breeze shifted the curtain of smoke and confirmed our lack of company. At least for now.

“What’s happening?” Doli cried, her voice muffled by the residual tinnitus.

“No idea,” I huffed, not sure what to say, or if she could even hear me. But my magîk was never wrong, which meant death was here in Heza. A lot

of it. “We need to hide.” I glanced to Dostane, hoping for a miracle.

Her pupils were dilated, but her jaw no longer gaped. She nodded once and then inclined her head toward the scraggly trees clinging to the rocky slope. The wind shifted and smoke swelled and thickened, and suddenly the muffled screams of magî bounced through the cloud of ash.

“We can’t. There’s nothing there,” I said. Gritting my teeth, I wondered if there was a way to sneak through whomever was waiting in front.

Dostane’s eyes filled with tears, and she pulled Doli close. Only then did I notice the young woman was not only shaking but crying. Holding her daughter tight, Dostane raised her voice just enough for me to hear. “Come with me. I can hide us.”

She started walking toward the dead end.

As soon as that cloud cleared, Serîk would be on the other side. Even if I didn’t know who was leading the charge, magî with that amount of power would certainly be Serîk which meant Zerôn was here, or he’d sent his men. But then why? Why attack an outpost in your own realm? Especially one with no significant magîk.

“Hurry!”

Dostane’s voice yanked me back to the present, and a cacophony of magî voices filtered through the smoke, a terrifying mixture of panic and brutality. Were they alive or dead? I glanced at the billowing mass of soot and ash now being fed by several fires and then back to Dostane, barely visible through the haze, before chasing after her.

If we didn’t get out of here, we’d be trapped and either the Serîk or the smoke would kill us. I darted around the thick trunks and increased my speed to a full-out sprint.

Fetid rot.

I skidded to a stop, stumbling on the last few steps, just as Dostane and Doli disappeared—right into the rock.

“**Y**ou look...” Bîcav pursed his lips, as though considering his words, and waved his hand up and down in the air at me.

My stomach fluttered and churned while I waited, hoping he wouldn’t embarrass me. I dared a peek at Zîvrünê who was walking on the other side of his guard. Zîyanâ was talking with Zerôn, and his guard Basvîk stood, silent and alone, a dozen paces up the trail. Two brothers to guard two princes, fitting that Zîvrünê got bound to the nicer of the two.

Although one wouldn’t know Bîcav’s kindness just by looking. He was as tall as a panthera standing upright and just as thick and muscular as the predator. He had rich-golden hair and pale-blue eyes, which were arresting with his bronzed skin. After watching him train on occasion over the past year, I knew he was just as fierce as he appeared.

Zerôn coughed, and his lip pulled into a sneer as he said, “You look like a scrawny child playing dress up.”

I glared at him, wishing there was a way for me to return the insult without paying for it later with Zîyanâ.

She snickered. “No, she looks at least twelve with the makeup.”

“But no one wants to bed a twelve-year-old,” Zerôn said with a shake of his head. “We want curves, right *brother*?”

“Don’t listen to him,” Bîcav said. “You look lovely, Dîsa.” And then he added, “Almost completely grown up.”

I frowned at the *almost*. Was he trying to appease the kümdâr or me?

Rünê’s guard laughed. “I would never waste my breath with appeasement.”

“In some of the posts, the magî are already bonded by fifteen,” I grumbled, glancing at my sister. There was no difference between our bodies—well, except she had bigger breasts and her arms were banded, but still.

“Foolish to bond or band before your magîk is fully developed,” Zîvrûnê said, head down like he was talking to the rocks. He kicked the ground, sending several stones over the edge. “So much foolishness.”

I kicked another loose pebble from the path, listening to the rock clink and rustle its way down the edge of the mountain. The dense lower canopy thinned as we ascended the path into the Hisk foothills just outside of Yândarî, shifting from rainforest to cloud forest as we climbed. The foliage was proportionally less, but each leaf, branch, and trunk was hearty here.

The view from the top of this hike was amazing on a clear day, but those days were extremely rare—as in magîk-induced rare. Normally, like now, the humidity was thick and the interwoven trees of the dripped water. Zerôn glanced our way and muttered something under his breath about fools, his lip curling into a sneer. The tension between the royal brothers weighed more than all the water in the air, and I almost wished I hadn’t come.

As if to reinforce my point, Zerôn marched away. As he passed his guard, the prince raised his fist. Basvîk flinched, and Zerôn laughed before muttering something too low for me to hear. Then Zerôn punched his man twice, two small pops on the arm, but the wary look on Basvîk’s face reinforced my belief in the prince’s cruelty.

Giggling as she ran, Zîyanâ chased after the younger prince, followed by his guard.

I turned my glare on Zîvrûnê and said, “You think it’s foolishness to bond or to band early? What about punching people?”

Shaking his head, the older prince said, “That’s a game we’ve played forever: Two for flinching. But bonding and banding aren’t games, Dîsa.”

A spark of indignation flared, and I said, “I know. But perhaps they grow up together in the outposts and just accept their differences: magîk as well as other strengths. *No one* can be and do it all.”

He frowned and then his features softened, the furrow dissolving into a half-smile as he focused on me. “Truer words were never spoken. But there does have to be a meeting of the minds and souls to make a bond work well, and being unequally yoked can lead to resentment.”

He raised his eyebrows, asking a question, but I struggled to interpret the meaning. Was he asking if I agreed? Or was he just stating his own personal

beliefs?

“That might be true for oxen—when you’re talking about the physical strength of both animals—but for magî?” His comment rankled because my magîk was pretty much useless. Dead was dead. “What if someone’s magîk was lesser but they had more wisdom, or better skills like...” I paused a moment, scrambling for an ability that didn’t need magîk, and my stomach growled. “In the kitchen?”

Zîvrünê laughed, and Bîcav immediately joined in. I hadn’t been joking. Being hungry for good food was its own form of torture, but their mirth still made me smile. Bîcav excused himself and strode toward Basvîk, who was still visible on the path. My sister and Zerôn didn’t come back, and they weren’t around the next bend either. I felt a twinge of pity for the heir at my side. He was so *good*, and my sister *unfathomably* preferred Zerôn.

“Yes,” Rûne said, still chuckling over my comment. “Food is important.” Tilting his head, he looked at me pointedly. “You should probably eat more.”

“I can only eat so many mangoes before I turn into one, and Zîyanâ is a terrible cook.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I winced and then added, “Which you probably already know and doesn’t even matter now that she can trade her magîk.”

The smile left his face as soon as I’d said her name, and his expression grew even more somber until it resembled the thick clouds above. What I wanted wasn’t even possible, and sooner or later, I would need to grow up enough to admit it, regardless of my feelings. Hopefully, I’d be able to figure out a good use for my magîk, but thus far, seeing the souls of dead animals only made it so I couldn’t eat any, and crowded places with magî—specifically dead magî—made my skin crawl.

“Can I ask you something?” He didn’t wait for my response, instead rushing into his next words breathlessly. “Do you think Zîyanâ would want to bond with me if I wasn’t going to be the kûmdâr?”

I couldn’t answer his loaded question, not without admitting all the truth I knew, so I shrugged.

“I don’t know why anyone would want the position,” he muttered. “It’s tedious and trying, and it’s not like you can do anything.”

“No,” I responded immediately. “You could do a lot.”

He stopped walking and turned toward me. Pinning me with his bright gaze, Zîvrünê frowned, his mouth pulling down with disgust. “Not really.” He held my attention, and after a moment of silence, he responded to my

unasked question with a question of his own. “What do you think I could do, Dîsa? Qralî practically runs itself. The outposts make all their own decisions—they’re too far out for us to truly control from here in Yândarî—and the last decision my father made was about what time the market should open when a group of magî complained.” Throwing his hands up in frustration, he huffed, “And he merely declared the time wasn’t going to change.”

I inhaled as he spoke, filling my lungs with clean air—the verdant smell of the plants thinner at this elevation, but still there. Memories of the last several years passed in a flash of frustration, and I finally snapped. “But you *could*,” I said, protesting his conclusion. “If your father had wanted to change things, he could. And so could you.”

His eyes widened, probably at my vehemence, but there were two solid years, maybe more, where I’d eaten so many mangoes I’d been certain I was going to turn into one. Zîyanâ had spent every stamped credit we scraped up on training, and the only food I got was what I could forage and put together on my own. The last year had been easier because of Zîvrünê—and maybe even Zerôn. If the law allowed magî under eighteen to trade magîk, that time might’ve been different.

“You’re right,” he muttered, the corners of his mouth pulling down. He stared through me and then brought his attention back and asked, “But after that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but the point is you *could*.”

He was silent, and I gritted my teeth. What could he have to think so hard about? As kümdâr, all he’d have to do is declare the change and it would happen. Boom. Done. Just like that. I stepped past him, inexplicably angry for all the times I’d lay in bed with my stomach gnawing, and bumped him. He probably didn’t even know how hard it had been.

After my parents disappeared, Zîyanâ was old enough to remain on her own, but I was still too young. She could’ve given me up to a family of magî, there were several who would allow orphans to reside with them in exchange for work or future magîk, but we’d both agreed we wanted to stay together. There were no debts with family. I gathered food from the jungle or any plants Zîyanâ secretly grew, and I’d sell or trade them at the market. I did all I could, and I was not only proud of how far she’d come but my small contribution to the path as well—even if there had been sacrifice involved.

“You’re right,” he whispered, wrapping his hand around my arm.

His palm was calloused and rough, and the contact seared me. My heart

jumped, but the rest of my body stilled, fearful of what he might've seen.

"I didn't mean to," he said, still whispering. "And it was only a flash, I promise, but the memory was so strong it... jumped."

"Which one?" I asked, my eyes widening in horror. I pulled back, breaking contact just in case. I didn't want him sifting through my mind, peeking at more of my past.

"Just you curled under the blanket"—his voice cracked and then grew hoarse with emotion—"hungry." Squeezing his eyes shut, he dropped his chin to his chest and withdrew his still outstretched but empty hand. "I'm sorry," he said, raising his head to meet my gaze. His blue eyes glistened, but after a few blinks, the tears cleared. "I didn't know it was that bad. I tried... I did what I could."

My anger waned, and I nodded, acknowledging dozens of times over the last year that he'd bought food in the market only to declare he'd gotten too much or wasn't hungry after all. "True. And you did a lot. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. It's just... you could *change* that law for *everyone*."

Thunder rolled overhead, and we glanced upward where the gray clouds scuttled with the breeze.

"We asked my father to change it for you," he said. "He said no."

"What?" I'd met Kümdâr Zêvn multiple times. He'd always been nice. "Why?" I demanded. The truth felt like a betrayal, even more than the rule itself. I stood next to Zîvrünê, searching his face for the explanation that would make sense of the insensible. "Why would he say no? My power is so useless. Why deny me what little ability I had to help myself?"

Zîvrünê pursed his lips, and emotions flitted through his blue eyes: anger, frustration, then finally resignation. His gaze dipped, he took a deep breath, and the world fell away.

Suddenly, it was just him and me on the trail. And as he stepped closer, close enough for me to feel the heat of his body on my skin, I knew... My lips parted as he tucked a tendril of hair that had escaped its braid back behind my ear, and he wet his lips.

"He's afraid—"

"What the rot is taking you two so long?" Zerôn yelled.

I jerked away from Zîvrünê, immediately feeling guilty for allowing myself to get that close to him. But what if he had feelings for me? I glanced at him, and he winked before shouting back to his brother.

"Go on. We'll catch up."

The smoke billowed and curled, wrapping around me, choking me with its charring stench as it slithered between my lips to coat my tongue. I stared at rock—the solid granite wall of stone—rethinking what I’d *known* of the magî of Heza.

“Nowhere for them to go,” a male magî shouted, his diction sharp.

“Run!” another screamed, his voice filled with panic—so different than the first.

I swallowed the rank taste, knowing these magî were from the kümdâr.

“Did they escape out back?” another yelled, the same ring to his tone as the first. “Find them.”

The voices were getting louder which meant the Serîk were closer. Approaching the rock with my heart pounding, I reached out toward the smooth surface and yipped in surprise when Dostane’s hand appeared, sticking out of the stone.

I dismissed my first instinct: that the stone was an illusion. I’d touched the mountain dozens of times, and it had always felt solid. Which meant Dostane’s magîk allowed her to...

Poking her head out of the rock, Dostane asked, “Are you coming or not?”

“Yes,” I responded. There were no other options.

“No matter what, don’t break contact with me, even after we’re in,” she said in a rush. As she pulled me forward, she continued, “If you do, you’ll be trapped, and I won’t be able to get you out.”

My hand slid into the stone like mud, and my breaths grew shallow with

fear. I flinched with her warning, and my gaze jerked to hers just as her head disappeared once again.

“Really?” I gasped. “Has that happen—”

Dostane yanked me forward, and I entered the wall of rock, starting with my arm and foot, followed by my entire body. Stepping into the stone felt like walking into cold gravy, except when I flinched again, Dostane tightened her grip and glared. Next to her, clinging to her other hand, arm fully extended behind, was Doli.

I tried to open my mouth, only to find I couldn’t. I couldn’t turn my head, or swing my other arm out to the side. I could only move toward Dostane, until she squeezed my hand and held me back. Then I was suspended, unable to move... well, hardly at all. How I was still breathing was a mystery, but both Dostane and Doli were too, so I accepted it as part of Dostane’s power.

No wonder Mar did well when Dostane went with him to mine. How many other magî in Heza had abilities they weren’t discussing? A fresh wave of guilt lapped at my soul with the hypocrisy. I hadn’t even told my hostess my full zeta name, let alone what my magîk could do. I’d paid her in coin—something she’d proven unnecessary by her own resourcefulness, and now I understood why.

“I thought you said they weren’t in the rubble,” a male magî said from behind me, his gruff voice filled with irritation. “Are you sure they were even home?”

“The girl ran around to the back, and no one came out before Berk sent his magîk the wall of the inn.”

My legs ached to run, but my muscles merely twitched with the desire. I couldn’t even turn around. I studied Dostane’s face, her expression pinched with anger, but she didn’t move forward or backward. Her hand remained dry and her grip firm.

“Do we know if there’s a trap door or some other escape route?” the first magî asked.

“The boy didn’t mention one.”

Another magî intoned, “There is powerful magîk here—”

“Oh shut it, Bawêrî. You’re as useful as a dud,” the first said. “Next time I bring you, I’ll make sure to bring Bryk too. Then I’ll know when you’re lying.”

“I never lie,” the male magî muttered.

“Sure,” the first snapped. “And I’d like to be a tamarin.”

Suddenly, an undulation of magîk jarred through me and made my teeth rattle. I would've screamed if that were possible. Thankfully, it was not.

Dostane grimaced and tugged me an inch forward, the movement a minuscule reprieve from the pressure surrounding me.

"Berk, go ahead and blast into the rock. If there's a cave, just bring it down."

My heart stuttered, beating erratically, and fear mounted my back with terrible claws. If Berk sent a pulse of power into the stone like he had with the inn, we'd all die!

"Over here," a magî shouted, the voice of the magî who said he never lied. "There are footprints leading out this way."

The leader swore, and the puny reverberation that pulsed through the stone made me think he'd either hit or kicked the mountain, far better than an explosive blast. A moment later, the voices faded, and I looked to Dostane hopefully. But her attention remained fixed on the space behind me, her eyes filled with tears.

I glanced at Doli, her face contorted with anguish she was obviously unable to express. I strained, trying to turn my head to see what they saw, but I couldn't rotate a single inch.

The seconds dragged, and the torture of watching their suffering pressed against my chest—or perhaps that was the rock. Frustration mixed with my impotence, and as the moments passed, my emotions coalesced into fierce rage. Whomever was making them suffer deserved to pay for it.

Eventually, their expressions shifted into sad resignation, and after what felt like a year of dry seasons, Dostane pushed against my hand, guiding me to step backward. One, two, three steps... I felt warm air against my skin where there had only been icy stone a moment before. Relief washed over me, and I inched back, sucking in a deep breath as soon as my mouth was free. I was out! Mostly. My excitement remained high, though it dropped several degrees with the rancid taste of death coating my tongue—stale now—and I dreaded seeing the saturation of it.

Dostane held my hand tight as she advanced, slowing my progress, but if she let go, would my arm be forever stuck in stone? My next step backward was smaller, and I waited for Dostane to get closer to the surface before taking another one.

But my head was completely free, so I peeked back and studied the clearing. Smoke still filled the area. Though the cloud of death was thinner,

the haze hiding the details, it did nothing to obscure the destruction. I closed my eyes and, as Dostane released my hand, crumpled to the ground, curling in on myself with a wail.

Dozens of bodies lay scattered—*pieces* of bodies—broken and... I retched, heaving from deep within as I tried to clear the rotten taste of brutal death from my mouth. Sour bile burned my throat, and I spit the yellow fluid onto the gray granite. Tears and snot ran as I sobbed for the awful, pointless, destruction. Hours must've passed while we were in the rock, for not a single soul remained, but time didn't lessen the horror.

Why? Why would anyone do this?

"Dîsa?"

"It smells so bad. I-I can taste it," I said, trying to explain my extreme reaction.

Dostane touched my shoulder, but I kept my eyes and mouth closed, not wanting to feel any more of the weight of the mass murder.

"We should go and see who else is still alive," she whispered, now standing behind me. The warmth of her body radiated as she crouched, and she continued, "There may be other survivors."

I stood and scrubbed the tears from my face and wiped my nose. The two women started toward the rubble that had been their home, and my heart ached for them and all of Heza. Tears stung my eyes, burning them with the emotion I fought to hold within. Dostane was right: mourning the dead would do little at this point. And my guilt was held in check, barely, knowing that even if I had been out here, I couldn't have stopped this level of carnage.

Clearing my throat as I followed after them, I choked out the single word question running through my mind, "Why?"

The next inhalation turned my stomach, and I frowned as I studied the ground. Here, the stone was gray normal granite, and the scraggly trees we'd run through were still intact, a few of the leaves singed but not blackened or burned to the ground. But the bodies—and bits—were all scorched and blistered with the heat of fire. I widened my eyes in shock and snatched Dostane's arm, tugging her to a stop. Doli stilled next to her mother, and both women turned as I held my finger to my lips.

A loud crack rent the silence, and someone screamed in the distance. Sucking in a breath, I tasted the fresh death wafting on the air.

"They're still here," I whispered.

Both Dostane and Doli nodded, their eyes growing bigger as realization

and fear sunk in. Dostane pointed at the rock face, and I shuddered with the thought. But worse than the thought of hiding in the granite mountainside was the niggling sense that the Serîk were here... for me.

Doli shook her head. "I'm better, Mama. I can hold a shield now."

My attention jerked to the young magî I'd been living with—one I'd assumed held minimal, worthless magîk. "A shield?"

Dostane smiled, a sad, pitying look directed at me, and I wondered if she'd known my hasty assessment of them.

"I can make us invisible," Doli said, her eyes narrowing into a fierce expression. "We can get close enough and see what's happening."

My gaze bounced to Dostane, and the older woman frowned.

"But if you lose your focus, we would all be in jeopardy. I don't think it's a good idea..."

"I can do it," Doli insisted, clenching her hands at her sides. "I won't lose my focus." She huffed several short breaths and added, "What if Mar is still out there? Don't you want to know? What if we can save him?"

Dostane tilted her head to the side and gave her daughter the same pitying smile I'd received.

"Of course I want to know. But I don't want to lose"—she pointed at her daughter with a meaningful look—"you." Taking a deep breath, Dostane squared her shoulders and focused on me. "Is your magîk... Can you... Can your magîk be used as a weapon?"

I shook my head, frustrated that there was nothing defensive about my power. But even if the two of them decided they wanted to go back into the rock, I wouldn't join them. I needed to know what was going on. Why had the Serîk come, and what did they want? Or was this finally Zîvrünê taking over? My heart jumped with the thought, but I immediately dismissed it. Zîvrünê wouldn't attack an outpost.

Next to me, the two magî continued their argument while I thought of the best way to sneak closer to the market square. How many buildings remained? And while the layer of jungle growth was far thinner here than in the lower elevations, on the far side of the square, nearest the entrance to Heza, the foliage was dense enough to hide in.

"We're just too vulnerable. If you lose your focus for even one second—"

"I can do it," Doli snapped, pulling away from her mother with a glower. The young magî turned to me and asked, "Do you want to come?"

I'd already made up my mind to try, so the decision was easy. I nodded

and said, “If we skirt the edges of the perimeter road, we can get to the jungle and then assess the square.”

“How do you know they’re in the square?” Doli asked.

“It’s the best place to gather everyone,” Dostane answered, her lips forming a thin line. Her previous pity disappeared, and she regarded me with an intense look before slinging her arm around her daughter. “I’m coming. And just so you know, I know you *can*. I’m just scared.”

Doli hugged her mother, and a moment after she pulled away, the air shimmered and wavered, the scene around us fractionating into uneven pieces. We joined hands, and Doli explained that while we wouldn’t be visible, any sound would still carry.

We crossed the clearing quickly, and I tried to ignore the message of dead bodies. Had the Serîk known where we were hiding, or had they known we’d come back to this area?

My trepidation grew with each step as we passed through the trampled garden and then circled the inn on the left side. I blinked in shock at the walls—the jagged, broken pieces biting into the air in vicious retaliation. The baked-brick buildings surrounding Dostane’s home, likewise mutilated and singed, emptied of their previous residents, no longer able to provide any measure of protection.



THREE YEARS AGO

Our pace up the mountain path slowed, but my heart thundered against my ribs, racing with the excitement and anticipation of *maybe*. Had I misunderstood Zîvrünê's attention? Did his lingering touch and wink mean something *more*? Sure, I'd wanted it, coveted it—truly. But I wasn't her, powerful and beautiful, so I'd assumed he was courting Zîyanâ and tolerating me. *Assumed*. But I'd never asked, never dared to find out the truth. Was I wrong?

"If you could do anything, what would you want most?" he asked, oblivious to my internal conversation. His vibrant-blue eyes were lit with interest, and he stood taller, straighter, like a weight was off his shoulders.

How had I not noticed the weight on his shoulders?

"Do?" I parroted and then rushed to clarify. "Do you mean fly like a raptor, or weightier things, like change the law about trading magîk?"

He walked much closer to me now, and every few steps we bumped shoulders, hips, or hands. Each time, fire licked my skin and infused my body with warmth. My nerves tuned to his proximity, and the anticipation for the next touch grew until he was my whole world.

"Either. Both." He laughed, all the darkness from earlier now gone. "If you could do anything with your magîk, what would you want to do with it?"

The easy answer was to say fly because it would mean I'd overcome my fear of heights and had total freedom. But my thoughts went to Qralî, because even though Zîvrünê was right about outposts managing themselves, if the kümdâr did more, Qralî could be so much more. I grimaced, thinking about what Qralî needed most and what I could do with my magîk. I watched the

path, my gaze dropping lower the longer I tried to fit my ability into satisfying anything our world needed.

“I wish I could stop the bûyî.” I heaved a sigh and stated the obvious, most perplexing problem our realm faced. “Not that I have any ability to do that, but if I could do anything, that’s what I would want to do. No one else should have to lose loved ones to the death-bog.”

Zîvrünê’s expression sobered, and he nodded.

Six months after my parents disappeared, reports started coming into Yândarî of a magîk-mire. The bog appeared suddenly with its gaping maw and swallowed magî and any animal where it materialized before vanishing just as fast. After two years, the number of reports grew sufficient that the kümdâr sent out a team of magî to investigate—including Zîyanâ’s mentor, Brî.

A year ago, Brî returned—the only one of the six to come back. She’d seen the bûyî, said they’d lost two magî to it, and the others ran away and refused to return to Yândarî. With more questions regarding the unpredictable horror than answers, Kümdâr Zêvn sent Brî out with another group, this time his trusted Serîk. By then every outpost had sent reports of the mysterious bog, some of them multiple times, but no one had answers as to what was causing it, let alone how to fix it. The second group still hadn’t returned.

“I’m sorry,” Zîvrünê said somberly. He briefly squeezed my shoulder and then continued, “I wish there was some way to make sense of it.” Frowning, he muttered, “Without knowing *what* it is, I fear we will continue to struggle with stopping it. My only hope is the other magî will return with answers.”

Tilting my head, I asked, “You don’t believe Zîyanâ can heal it? I thought Brî said Zîyanâ was the key?”

I’d listened to Kümdâr Zêvn praise her as the answer when she’d surpassed the other magî training her. I thought that was why the kümdâr wanted Zîvrünê to bond with her. She was the most powerful female magî in all of Yândarî, probably all of Qralî.

“I don’t know that,” he answered, meeting my intense scrutiny with an open expression. “I would love for that to be true, but what if it’s not something wrong with the land? What if it’s something else?”

“What else could it be?” I asked.

According to Zîyanâ, this was the obvious answer: the problem was in the land as evidenced by *the ground* sucking up magî.

I bit my tongue, refusing to give in to my instinct to blame his brother.

Zerôn might give Zîyanâ clothes, but it was so she would look appealing to him. He bought food and gave her the leftovers—if there were any. He and Zîyanâ had been together before my parents died, but he never stopped his nightly visits—which were probably not for tutoring sessions. And when we were younger, Zerôn would threaten me when no one was looking. When I said something, I was called a liar. I had dozens of memories of him tripping or pinching or smacking me, and if I told anyone, somehow I'd get in trouble. He was a snake. And even though I didn't say it, I would forever think Zerôn was at the root of everything evil and bad in Qralî.

"I think it's ironic that Zîyanâ can heal the land and Zerôn can heal the body—any body—and yet those two don't find joy in helping others, right?"

"Oh, sure they do," he countered. "If there's something in it for them."

I laughed even though it wasn't really funny. *The truth rarely is.*

"That's not really fair, though," Zîvrünê said, discrediting his previous statement. "Perhaps when they were younger, they struggled to see outside themselves. But that's true of most youth... even if it's never been true for you."

He winked and then bumped my shoulder, making me blush.

"Both of them are well aware of the struggles of the realm, and you might be surprised with some of their insights."

Probably not. Zîyanâ came home and told me exactly what she thought of what was happening in Qralî. Not that she was selfish—if she'd been selfish, she never would've kept me. But she definitely bought into the caste system and thought the value of a magî's abilities should be rewarded accordingly, like her marrying the heir.

"I'm sure you're right," I said, despite my thoughts. "You do see them much more often than I do." I bumped him back, enjoying the physical contact, despite the subject of our conversation. I hated Zerôn. The only reason I was willing to suffer his presence now was because Zîvrünê was here. Did he really not see what was staring us both in the face? I pushed away the memory of Zerôn and Zîyanâ locked in an embrace last week. Ugh. They weren't even nearby. How could Rünê not see?

"Fetid rot," Zîvrünê swore. "You already know about them?"

I was about to protest, but the lie stuck. He'd probably picked up on it when I bumped him. Humiliation stained my cheeks, but the wide-eyed expression of surprise spreading over Rünê's face morphed to a smile, stopping my apology.

“Bîcav,” he yelled. “Come here!”

The tall guard strode around the bend just ahead of where we stood, a tentative smile on his lips. He nodded once at Zîvrünê who then sprinted ahead.

“What?” My attention went from Zîvrünê’s back to Bîcav. “What’s going on?”

“You know I can’t tell you if he didn’t,” Bîcav said, shaking his head, the smile falling from his face.

My shoulders dropped, and I rolled my eyes. “I’m not asking you to tell me what’s going on in his head. Well, maybe I am, but still. He just”—I waved my hand after the prince—“took off. He asked if I already knew... about Zerôn and Zîyanâ. Why?”

Bîcav surveyed the area, probably ignoring me on purpose, and I huffed in frustration, although the real emotion fluttering through my chest was eager anticipation. I stepped forward on the path, intent to follow Zîvrünê—we were only another dozen yards or so from the outlook—but Bîcav tapped my shoulder.

He pointed at a relatively flat rock and said, “Let’s sit and wait here.”

“What?” No way was I going to sit here and *wait*.

“It’s why he called me back here,” Bîcav said, tapping his head. “He wants to talk with them, privately.”

Right. And I’m being an idiot.

“No,” Bîcav said. Then he scrunched up his face in a comical, ridiculous expression. “Well, maybe. Yes, you are.” He tugged me back to the rock and tapped it with his foot. “Sit.”

“Fine. But only because you asked nicely.” I stuck my tongue out but pulled it right back in. Sitting down next to him on the large stone, I gave him a cheeky grin. No reason to add more evidence of my idiocy.

He sat next to me and asked, “What do you think the bûyî is?”

The darkest, most evil rot of the magîs’ soul. “No idea, but I’m sure it’s Zerôn’s fault.”

Bîcav barked a laugh but reined it in quickly. “You might not want to repeat that.”

“I’m sure you’re right...” I heard a shriek and cocked my head to the side, listening, uncertain if the noise was magî or beast. Of course the rain picked up, and the fat drops pattering on the leaves competed with a nearby stream and its chorus of frogs. I heard something again, over the cacophony

of the cloud forest, and the sound was like... “Is someone yelling?”

Bîcav’s smile slipped, and his face paled, both in a fraction of a second. “Stay here,” he shouted as he ran up the trail. “Stay here until I get back.”

Not a chance.

I bolted off the rock and chased after him. Three paces later, I slipped on the wet mud and bounced my knees against the stony ground. The pain barely registered as my heart thrummed with urgency, and I leapt up and clambered to the top of the path. The argument grew in volume, and I could decipher individual words singeing the air: liar, hate, betrayal.

Rounding the corner, my rising concern morphed into panic as the scene unfolded. I blinked, repeatedly, trying desperately to clear the horrific scene, and my breathing cut to shallow gasping as dread coated my skin in a bitter, cold flash of perspiration.

No...

Bîcav was closest to me, clutching his wide-eyed brother’s arms, but if my friend was restraining Basvîk at one point, that was no longer true. The two blond males both stood slack-jawed, staring at the other magî.

Zîvrûnê stood several paces away from everyone else, skin blanched and eyes dilated—his attention riveted on my sister. His lips parted and chest swelled as he sucked in a breath.

Zerôn held my sister’s arm—her right forearm, just above her zeta bands—and the two of them struggled near the edge of the cliff... *Too close.*

He strained with the force of fighting my sister, my beautiful sister, who writhed and screamed in the most disturbing display of vitriolic anger I’d ever witnessed.

Zîyanâ’s face was twisted into an expression I’d never seen before—not in all of my fifteen years. Her golden hair whipped in the air as she flailed, beads and feathers smacking Zerôn in the face, and the pale-pink sarong she wore was torn almost up to her thigh. The rage rolled off her, as she twisted and fought against Zerôn’s hold.

“You think you can just take it back?” Zîyanâ screeched. She thrashed harder, swinging her free hand at the younger prince. “How dare you—”

Time seemed to stop—the very jungle silenced with the gasp of terror—as Zîyanâ broke Zerôn’s hold. My heart seized, and panic wrenched the air from my lungs, but I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t... anything.

For a single blink, it appeared as though the empty air wrapped Zîyanâ in its embrace and held her—cocooned and safe—suspended, just off the edge

of the cliff. But even in Qralî, where air was heavy and thick with moisture, gravity existed, and Zîyanâ fell.

Her scream crawled over the lip of the rock, shaking me with her desperation, and then the sound of breaking foliage... followed by silence.

A faint wheeze escaped me as my mind caught up to reality, and then I spun on my heel and sprinted down the path, panic driving my pace.

The perimeter road appeared empty at first glance, but pieces of rubble lay scattered outside the buildings destroyed by the magîk blasts. The frequency of destruction waned as we drew closer to the market square, but the severity, the brutality, increased. At first I thought the bodies were random, but as we approached the third one, I noticed all of them had been positioned exactly the same: arms extended overhead, hands together to create the point of an arrow or spear. Direction or threat? Probably both.

Verl, the man with a green thumb who could grow *anything*, was lying face up, eyes staring unseeingly at the sky. His wife, Pyrt, beside him with her neck slashed. Turm, a magî who traded cheese, yogurt, and milk, was missing his legs—from mid-thigh down—the bloody stumps in shreds around the hunk of bone protruding on the left side. I scanned the area, but their souls weren't close—if they were still here at all.

Dostane whispered to her daughter, words of encouragement and warning, and the young magî kept her gaze fixed on the buildings, not the road, as her mother guided her.

Each corpse made me cycle, from relief it wasn't Mar, to despair and loss, to dreaded anticipation for the next victim. The half-mile walk stole years from my heart, but I couldn't step off the road, couldn't stop until I knew whether or not Mar was safe.

"You need to be careful," a young girl said, her transparent soul appearing suddenly by my side. "If they see any of you..."

I turned to her, anxious for her next words, but the apparition was gone.

Rot.

We approached the square, and three men in crimson leather pants stood across the path, barring the entrance. Their eyes remained trained on the road, and Doli pulled us between the tannery and the bakery. She raised her eyebrows, first at me then her mother. Unsure of the meaning behind the expression, I wasn't willing to take the risks needed to walk by the Serîk, so I pointed toward a path. If we skirted the edges of the jungle, we could circle around and come in from the other side.

The next half hour crawled, every second filled with terrible trepidation that we would be caught as we dodged the nearby Serîk on our way to the forest. I saw a few more magî in red leathers but didn't recognize any of the kümdâr's guards. Finally, we darted into the trees, and the relief drove us to run deep into the thick brush, the slapping of leaves and snapping branches pulling me up short.

"Stop," I whisper-yelled.

The two women turned toward me, panic etched into their features: wild eyes, lips parted, and blanched skin. The three of us faced each other, and I shook my head.

"Doli, we need the shield," I kept my voice low but urgent. "And we need to get out of here. The trail is as obvious as their corpse-arrows."

I pointed back the way we'd come, and they both gasped and nodded at the trampled berth. Doli put the shield up, making my vision undulate and break apart, and we returned to the beginning of our path and then carefully wound into the jungle, keeping closer to the edges as we circled toward the market.

The coppery smell of blood grew stronger, as well as the rancidity of brutal murder, and I pulled on Dostane's hand as I bent over and retched—despite my stomach being empty. As I straightened, Doli held out her hand, offering several torn mint leaves. Brilliant that. I grabbed several more, stuffing some in my mouth, and then held the fistful close to my nose, trying to crowd out the pervasiveness of death.

We arrived at the market, but the square was filled with magî. Whatever was happening in the center held the outpost captive, but the crying and wailing crescendoed and crashed in a wave of sorrow, and with the next lull we could distinguish their words.

"Tell us where she is," the leader yelled, the same voice we'd heard outside the rock.

Me? I gulped and looked at the other two magî, but both of them were looking at each other. *One of them?*

I scanned the trees and smiled grimly. The strangler fig tree in front of me was perfect for climbing with its twisted bark, but I hated heights. As in worse than being stuck in a rock. My palms and soles tingled with the thought of climbing, but I shoved away the fear. I needed answers, and the only way to get them was to go up.

“Can you keep me shielded if I’m not touching you?” I whispered to Doli, pointing at the tree.

She frowned and then nodded. “Yes, but I’ll have to stay close.”

Dostane closed her eyes and swallowed. When she opened her eyes, her expression was one of sad resignation. “Don’t lose your focus—either of you. I’ll wait here.”

We scampered up the trunk, the rough bark scraping against my exposed knees and hands. I pulled Doli to a stop as soon as we stood where the leafy branches would help conceal us.

“This one is the thickest,” I whispered, patting a thick bifurcation of the trunk. “And it goes out toward the square.” A half dozen smaller branches all climbed upward, but this one was perfect, as in the biggest, and I inched my way up, using the smaller, though still wide, limbs to steady me. A dozen feet up, and the thickest part of the branch divided again, and the diameter of the extensions shrunk, making my stomach flip.

Through the leaves I could make out the square, filled to capacity with all of Heza gathered, but I couldn’t see past the one branch blocking the very center of the plaza. I glanced at Doli, her eyes wide and skin slightly green, and noticed there was no wavy shield present—not that we needed it, but still.

“You all right?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I hate heights.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Me too. The trick is to only look upward.”

“Then how will we get down?”

I looked up, setting an example, because I didn’t even want to think about getting down. “Let’s deal with it once we see what’s going on. Right now, you could fall out of the tree and be just fine—we’re only a dozen feet up.”

She gritted her teeth, making it clear neither of us believed what I’d said. “Fine. But you’re making it really hard to keep the shield in place.”

“It doesn’t matter so much here, but if I have to hang out of the branches to see, it *will* matter.” I scooted forward, this time on my hands and knees, keeping my attention fixed on a branch several feet in front of me. As soon as I arrived, I glanced at Doli, who remained at the bifurcation in the tree.

“I have to stop here. I just can’t... but as long as I can see you, I can keep you shielded. Tell me if you see Mar.”

I pursed my lips, but there was no point in saying anything. Turning my attention to the crowd, I scanned the square, searching for Mar. He was easy to pick out because of his size—smaller than most male magî, though he stood out among the Serîk because of his tunic and the blood smearing his face. His expression of defeat made my heart hurt, and he sucked in several deep breaths, one right after another, catching his breath.

There were four distinct groups in the square. The Serîk, dressed in their red leather pants and fitted jerkins—nearly thirty of them. A dozen of the kümdâr’s magî surrounded a clearing, and almost as many guarded a couple clusters of the citizens of Heza. One of the groups being watched was smaller than the other—Mar among the magî on the left, just short of twelve total. The cluster on the right, maybe forty or so, consisted primarily of women and a few children. The rest of the outpost’s population stared at the cleared space, the area we’d skirted past to get to the jungle.

One of the Serîk stood in the middle of the clearing, screaming at the magî of Heza, while holding a large, round object in his hand. Then I noticed the body at his feet, the headless body, and knew he was using the severed head as a threat to keep the citizens in line. While we were too far away to distinguish his words with the current wailing, the contorted, angry expression on his face and vitriolic tone of his shouting was enough to know he was pissed.

The crowd quieted, and my insides clenched as the Serîk dropped... the head.

Fetid rot.

“What do you see?” Doli whispered.

I quivered and didn’t bother answering. The cacophony waned, and his voice carried.

“Bring me another one,” he yelled. “I will kill each of them until someone tells me where she is. It is the kümdâr’s command.”

One of the Serîk pulled another woman from the group of women and children, and a fresh wail arose. He gripped her by the neck, shaking her as

he yelled. I glanced at the smaller group, and several magî cried in protest. But Mar's expression morphed from fatigue to intense focus—on the female magî now being held by the Serîk.

"Silence," the red guard screamed.

The female flinched, tears rolling down her face, and then her expression relaxed, her eyes closing as if she were resting and at peace.

"Who's doing that?" the Serîk yelled. "Who?"

The magî grew silent, and several looked around, clearly perplexed.

"Tell me who is helping her, and I'll let her go," the leader bellowed.

He was lying; I knew it with every fiber of my being. Skimming over the cluster of magî with Mar, I noticed he was the only one staring at the female magî with such intensity, which meant... What was he doing?

"What is Mar's magîk?" I whisper-shouted back at Doli.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then she said, "He can make it so you don't feel anything."

My heart sank.

"What are they doing?" Doli asked.

My attention returned to the crowd and then the Serîk and his prisoner. The leather-clad man yelled at the magî of Heza again, and the weighted silence that followed made my skin crawl. Certainly, they wouldn't believe him—

The Serîk dragged a blade down the magî's arm, the burst of crimson running down her skin and dripping onto the stone beneath them, but the woman remained quiet.

"Who's doing that?" the Serîk screamed. "Tell me who is wielding their magîk, and I'll release her. But if you continue to hide, I'll kill them all!"

No. No, no, no. They can't—

"Mar! It's Mar," someone in the group nearest Mar shouted.

The Serîk grinned, and his grip shifted to the female magî's scalp. With a quick stroke of the blade, he severed her head from her body, the latter crumpling to the stone and blood gushing from her neck.

I sat up, the thick branch blocking my view of the square once again. "Doli," I gasped. "I need you!"

My panic must've driven her, for I felt her behind me only a moment later. Struggling to push the branch out of the way, I heaved against the wood and was rewarded by the splintering sound of the limb breaking. The bushy foliage fell to the ground, and I pointed out into the crowd where two Serîk

were dragging Mar out of the smaller group of magî.

“Can you magîk him invisible?” I asked.

Her eyes widened, and she nodded. “Yes.”

Mar was there, and then he wasn’t. One of the Serîk yelled, and the other doubled over as Mar must’ve hit him. Mar flickered into existence for a moment and then disappeared again.

“Get it together,” I snapped at Doli.

Tears streamed down her face, and she nodded.

“Get out of here,” Mar bellowed in his deep tenor. “Get out of here, Dîsa and Doli!”

The Serîk leader flinched and then snapped, “Find them!”

And at the same time, Mar yelled, “Heza, fight!”

Several things happened at once. The magî dressed in red turned away from their leader, and I felt their gazes. My heart leapt as I realized—

“The shield!”

“There!” a Serîk shouted, pointing up at the tree—at us.

“I can’t do it here and there,” Doli snapped.

A fraction of a second later, a roar went up from the crowd, and suddenly the magî of Heza moved as a wave and crashed into the Serîk.

“No!” Doli screamed.

I turned to Doli and blinked in surprise. *Wait...* “Why do you have us shielded? What about Mar?”

She shook her head and pointed over my shoulder at the chaos. “I can’t see him anymore.”

I glanced back, and my attention snagged on the dozen Serîk headed our way.

“We have to leave,” I said, my throat clogged with fear. “They’re coming.”

We scrambled back to the trunk, and as soon as Doli got to the split, she jumped. Without thinking, I pushed off after her, crashing to the ground with a thump as the landing drove the air from my lungs.

“What happened?” Dostane asked. “What’s going on?”

Sucking in deep breaths, I climbed to my feet as Doli explained in a rush.

Grabbing both females, I said, “We need to hide.”

The three of us sprinted into the foliage, terror and the Serîk chasing after us, but after a few minutes, Dostane stopped us.

“If we need to hide, we should go back into the mountain,” she said

between breaths. “No one can find us there.”

That wouldn’t do. “We should split up. It will force them to split up.”

“And then what?” Dostane asked.

I took a deep breath as responsibility settled on my shoulders. “Then I’ll go to Yândarî and find out what’s happening.”

The older magî leveled me with her gaze. “I think we just saw what’s happening.”

“But why would the kümdâr do that?” I muttered. The only conclusion I could come up with was if the rumors of Zerôn collecting magî for another kirinî had some truth. Did that mean Zîvrünê was trying to hide me? And if this had to do with me, there was even more of a reason for me to separate from Dostane and Doli. “Listen, this might be related to me—maybe.”

I glanced at Doli, and she tilted her tear-streaked face and narrowed her eyes.

“Maybe,” I emphasized. “I don’t know, but I should go find out. And if it doesn’t have to do with me, you should still go hide.”

“Who you are, Dîsa?” Dostane questioned either my sanity or the validity of my instructions. “What are you talking about?”

So I told her as much as I could, as fast as I could. Their eyes widened, but I didn’t stop talking to answer their questions. We had no time. After telling them my true identity and the rumors I’d heard before leaving Yândarî, I ran through the places I’d been—after I first left. “But I don’t know what any of them have done since, and I’ve been in Heza almost a year. Still, it’s got to be better than staying here.”

“What about my brother? Are we just supposed to leave Mar here?”

I wet my lips, considering my words. There was no easy way to say the truth. If he was still alive when the Serîk left Heza, he would likely be with them, especially if the kirinî was happening.

“We can hide nearby,” Dostane said. “And in a few days go check. If he’s still here...”

“I’ll look for him in Yândarî,” I said, rushing to fill the silence. “When I get there. Just in case the Serîk take him.”

Doli’s hazel eyes filled with fresh tears, and the rumble of thunder overhead promised the sky would weep for the fallen in Heza. I glanced up through the canopy, anxious to be on my way. Maybe Zîvrünê or Zîyanâ had tried to find me and I’d been too effective at hiding. Maybe I’d waited too long to go back. Maybe—

“Good luck, Zādîsa,” Dostane said, interrupting my musing. She put her arm around her daughter and pulled her close. “I have a feeling you’re going to need it even more than us.”

Doli sniffed and wiped her nose with her hand. She shrugged her mother’s arm from her shoulders and pointed at me. “If Mar dies because of you, I’ll never forgive you. Never.”

Her words smacked into me, all of our friendship disappeared with her words. I reeled, trying to come up with the right expression to mollify her, to breach the sudden chasm. But she didn’t wait for a response. Grabbing her mother’s forearm, she stepped away with a yank of momentum.

“Doli!” Dostane admonished. “She didn’t know.” There was a rustling of leaves as the two women departed, and then Dostane reappeared and, with a sad wave, said, “Goodbye, Zādîsa.”

The words rent my soul, but I had no time to waste. If the attack on Heza was my fault, I didn’t deserve forgiveness. I blinked away the tears and followed the slope down off the plateau.

THREE YEARS AGO

Halfway down the mountain, the clouds burst, wringing their moisture out in sheets of water. The ground beneath my feet oozed, the mud sliding over the rocks with the deluge. Behind me, Zîvrünê and Zerôn shouted, but their words were lost in the pouring rain and the whooshing sound of blood in my ears.

Zîyanâ fell over a hundred feet, and while my mind was telling me what I should expect at the bottom of the path, I wanted so much to be wrong. Perhaps magîk or even a miracle would've saved her. Maybe she grew plants to cushion her fall or... Was there anything else that could save her?

My heart crashed into my ribs, the force of its impact a vice-like pressure cinching tighter and tighter with every beat. Visibility declined as I started to shake and tremble from the shock. I stumbled over something—my feet, a rock, a broken branch—and landed on my hands and knees, the muddy ground splattering my clothing, chest, and face. Gulping in air, I raised my head as a blur of activity brushed by on my side, and a moment later, a hand was thrust in my face.

“Come on,” Zîvrünê said. “Let’s go.”

As soon as I lifted my hand, he yanked me upright, and I slammed into him. He swayed but, grabbing me by the arms, held me steady. Stepping back, he released his hold, only to snatch up my hand and pull me forward.

Neither of us spoke as we hurried down the rest of the trail, the colors of the lower canopy blurring through the rain and my tears. Footsteps pounded behind us, Bîcav and his brother closing in. All of us racing to the bottom—to find what?

Could she still be alive, or would we only find her broken body? And what had she been so upset about? Was it Zîvrünê's fault? I balked at the very thought. It had to be Zerôn—it was *always* Zerôn's fault. He was rotten.

What would I do if she was dead? The very thought made my stomach twist all the way up to my throat. My sister. My beautiful...

Zîvrünê stopped at the head of the trail, on the opposite side of the valley, but I released his hand and sprinted through the foliage, forward to where Zerôn stood, head bowed among the plants.

My pace slowed as I drew near, fear, anxiety, *trepidation* filling me more with each step, the weight dragging an anchor from my heart to my feet. My throat clogged as the broken branches and bent leaves registered. Why wasn't he doing something? Was it too late? Was she already dead? I pushed ahead, my vision tunneling the closer I got until all I could see...

The patter of rain faded with an overwhelming rush in my ears, the sound of my heart gushing in anguish. No. That couldn't be right. My mouth dried, and I had to blink away the tears so I could see... so I could see...

Zîyanâ lay on the ground, face up, her eyes wide with terror. Her hair was mostly fanned out on the left side. A dark golden halo of wet strands—almost snake like—surrounded her head, and one thick clump lay over her cheeks and nose. Her right arm was bent at the elbow, broken just above the joint, the bone protruding through the torn white flesh, accompanied by a shred of branch stuck clean through. A trickle of crimson oozed from the wound, disappearing halfway down her arm as the rain washed away the blood. Her sarong was torn on the same side, the skin and tissue beneath grated away from her crushed ribs and exposed hip.

Forgetting everything and *everyone* else, I gasped and fell to her side, being careful—so careful—to *not* touch her mangled body. Her lips were parted, her chest heaving with the effort of each wet, strangled breath. I wanted to help, wanted to do something to give her anything I could, something to aid her.

Rot.

I scanned her body, my hands moving on their own accord, fluttering uselessly over her face, neck, chest... her broken chest. I pulled the clump of hair away from her face, dropping the golden strands to the ground on the other side with the rest of her locks.

"You love her," Zîvrünê shouted from behind me. "You must fix her. *You* can... Fix her!"

I jerked back to awareness and spun, searching for the only one who could. “Please,” I begged Zerôn. “Please, help her. You...”

His hardened expression was like stone, firmly fixed on my sister, ignoring me and Zîvrünê. I scrabbled forward on my hands and knees, begging, until I was near enough to grab Zerôn.

“Help her,” I shouted, seizing his leg. I clawed into his skin, determined to make him—

Pain exploded across my chest, white bursts clouded my vision, and a brief fraction of a second passed before my head bounced off something solid and another explosion of pain tore through me. I gasped, blinking, desperate to catch my breath—to clear my tunneling vision—to *help* my sister. The sounds faded, and I seemed to be floating.

“You,” Zerôn snarled.

His voice crawled through the darkness of my mind, wrenching me from unconsciousness. The horror rushed back to me, and I sat up, panting for air as I dug my nails into the dirt to orient myself. The spinning sensation slowed, and muted colors wavered in the distance of the darkness.

I shook the dizzying feeling off, wincing as fire licked the back of my skull. Sucking in a deep breath, I tried to focus.

Zîvrünê begged, “I’ll give you anything. Please.”

No! I wheezed, waving my arms, and managed to speak. “Don’t...”

Zîyanâ crouched down in front of me, a worried expression on her face—her transparent face.

I gulped, my eyes widening as she came into focus. There was my sister, *completely whole*, except I could see right through her. My mind spun, trying to reconcile what I saw with what I knew. If she was here—that could only mean...

“You’re dead?” The words came out on my exhale, a question and exclamation all in one.

She shrugged. “Close enough, or I wouldn’t have been able to leave my body.”

Was I dead? I brought my hand to my chest, but the moment of reassurance fled as soon as I made contact with my skin. Would I still be able to feel my own soul if I was dead?

Zîyanâ laughed. “You’re not dead, Dîsa.” She glanced behind at where her body lay, Zerôn kneeling next to her. “What an ass. *Now* he heals me... when it doesn’t even matter anymore.” She offered a sad smile. “I’m sorry

I've been so rude. Zerôn—"

A loud crack of splintering wood startled us both, and I sat up to see Bîcav restraining Zîvrûnê as he bellowed at his brother. A heartbeat later, I winced as the ground seemed to roll beneath me, and my vision swam. Blinking, I shook my head, but before I could say anything, Zîyanâ continued.

"Did you know when your soul leaves your body, you can remember everything? Like all-the-way-back-to-Kânkarä... and when we first came to Qralî. We were friends then, but we don't always get to be together—like this." She frowned and asked, "Have you had a soul tell you things from before? I mean, in this life?"

"No," I whispered. "I... I can't hear souls." Except I could. I was, at this very moment, looking at my sister's. I thumped my fingers against my temple. Maybe I'd lost my mind... the stress... hitting my head...

"You can do more than that. You're a necro—What's wrong? You think you've lost your rocks?" she asked, shaking her head. "You're fine, Dîsa. Take a deep breath."

I forced a swallow but refused to argue with her; I was most definitely not fine.

"So now what?" I asked, my voice hoarse with shock.

Zîyanâ pressed her hand to her heart and then glanced over her shoulder. When she faced me again, a small smile played on her lips. "Let's go see what the boys are up to before I have to go."

"Where are you going?" I asked, scrambling to my feet. My mind reeled as much as my vision. We'd been taught the soul was eternal, that we were reborn after death, and my sister's soul was confirming it—but I wasn't ready to be alone.

She crossed the distance from where I stood to her prone body, waving at me to follow when she saw me still rooted.

"I think he really did heal me—all the way. I can feel it"—she raised her hand and smacked where it had been resting a moment before—"here." Her eyes widened, and she faced me. "Dîsa, you can put me back."

Me? I pointed at myself, letting my furrowed expression ask the question aloud.

"Yes. If *you* do nothing, I'll get pulled into another body. My soul will be born again. But..."

As soon as the words left her mouth, her expression shifted from

excitement to a wary pursing of her lips as she eyed Zerôn.

But my heart flipped, and my chest expanded with hope. I latched onto the idea, my mind emptying of everything else. This was how I could have her back. *Alive. Now. With me.*

I jumped up and sprinted toward her, despite her frantic expression. She waved me away, but I didn't stop—I wouldn't stop—because I *could* do this.

I'd all but forgotten about the regrettable experience because it had been both an accident and a failure. Having found a fledgling bird, fallen from its nest with its neck broken, I'd touched its body, and its soul slid back into the tiny form. I watched in dismay as it died again because its body hadn't been healed. Not like my sister's.

"Wait," she said. "No... I need to think. I don't want—"

I snatched her wrist, the cool-wispy air solidifying with my grip. I could feel her emotions seeping through the connection—fear, so much fear—but I could do this. I wanted to reassure her, to tell her it would be fine, that if Zerôn had healed her body, he must *truly* love her. So, even though I didn't like him, I could respect her decision to be with him—and I loved her so much.

Pushing past Zîvrünê, I dropped to my knees, pulling Zîyanâ's soul down with me.

"I'm sorry," he said from behind me, his voice choked with emotion.

Ignoring him, I took a deep breath and reached out with my free hand toward her prone, still body. The gruesome wounds were gone—healed, just like she said. But her skin was pale and ashen, her lips tinged blue, and she stared at the canopy above with glassy, unfocused eyes. I rested my hand on her chest, as close as I could to where she'd patted her heart. My stomach clenched at the feel of her skin, cool and wet. But I would not let death take her from me—not when I needed her still.

I closed my eyes and sucked in a deep breath. The air around her body tasted of rancid oil, bitter, sour... rank. I exhaled, pushing the malodorous air from my lungs, slowly, controlled and focused. *I'm in control.*

"Dîsa, no! Wait!" Zîyanâ shouted.

But at the same time, I lifted my head toward the sky and inhaled, opening my soul, my lungs, my body to the life all around us. Because that was her magîk—life. Finally, I opened myself to her, Zîyanâ. Where I'd held her wrist was suddenly empty, but I could feel her soul, a zing of sunshine, leaving behind a beautiful residual warmth as she slid through my body and

then back into her own.

“This is my fault,” Zîvrünê said, pulling me into his arms. He ran his hand down my back and whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

I blinked and, seeing nothing but the contours of his chest, pulled away, only to wish myself back into his embrace as Zerôn butted between us.

“It doesn’t matter if it didn’t work,” he snarled, pounding his finger on Zîvrünê’s chest.

Scooting to the side, I saw Zerôn’s golden features twisted in rage.

“I’m holding you to your promise,” he bellowed.

Frowning, I turned to ask Zîvrünê what promise he’d made, but Zîyanâ coughed.

Zerôn, Zîvrünê, and I all turned to her as she sat up. Her skin was still pale, making her wide eyes appear even bigger, practically swallowing her entire face. She glanced at Zerôn, Zîvrünê, and then finally me.

“What happened?” she rasped.

Heza was on the western side of Qralî, halfway between Yândarî and the most distal outposts and just south of the Hisk mountain range, on the southwest tip of Kur lake. The Rê, our most significant road, encircled Yândarî, bordered it really, and from the large, wide thoroughfare, four thick highways led travelers into the various parts of the realm: North Rê, South Rê, East Rê, and West Rê. Obviously, we weren't very creative in our previous lives—or very accurate. For the North Rê branched to the northeast, the East Rê to the Southeast, and the South Rê to the southwest. The West Rê was the only road that truly led to the western part of Qralî, at least until it hit the outpost Gol. Then it was forced to dip south until the Avî River was narrow enough to cross.

From Heza to Yândarî would take me at least two and a half weeks, if I didn't stop for anything except sleep. Three weeks was far more likely. Before starting out, I waited for the sun to climb well past the horizon. And when the days' dying rays painted the jungle in shadows of violet and rich cerulean, I pushed past my fear of heights and climbed into the trees—preferring the branches in an attempt to avoid some of the predators, namely Serîk and caiman.

I skirted between Gol and Gazi, my sulu wrapped tight around my waist and my steps sure and quiet. There was plenty of food in the jungle, mostly fruit and nuts, so I didn't starve. But by the time I approached the Cesaret outpost, two and a half weeks after leaving Heza, I was hungry for something hot, something cooked. I wanted roasted pheasant with potatoes and gravy, or Dostane's pîderîne balls. My mouth watered just thinking about *real* food.

But I was starving for interaction too—a magî to talk with, even if it was just to discuss the muggy air. I needed a bath as well, not just the intermittent rain showers of the dry season. Surely the Serîk would’ve passed by now.

I spotted the wide path branching off from the Western Rê in the fading twilight and thought the road a mirage. But as I approached, the noise from Cesaret rolled out from between the trees, and the normal sounds of the jungle—the cawing birds, croaking frogs, and chirping insects—were swallowed up in the bustle of magî at the end of a market day. I waited in the dense growth until the light filtering in from the canopy above dimmed, spying the citizens from afar as I searched for Serîk. Here and there, among the crowds, I spied male magî in their crimson leather. As time passed, the volume from the animals increased, as though the sun’s final departure for the day was invitation for their song to swell.

Most magî had packed up and headed into their homes for the night, including the guards, and only a few stragglers remained. Hopefully, I’d find one who was sympathetic and kind—or at least one with a loose tongue. I took a step from behind the trellis of pale orchids hiding me, and as if only noticing their beauty for the first time, I leaned over the blooms and inhaled the verdant scent—

A low growl crawled out from between the foliage.

My heart leapt into my throat, and I stuttered back a step, stilling when the growl ended with a short yowl of pain. Something of the animal’s agony called to me, and I stared into the lower layer of growth, inexplicably worried for the creature.

The sound of pain was too real to be faked, but that didn’t mean the animal wouldn’t attempt to defend itself from a magî. My magîk wouldn’t give me any defense either—not that I’d discovered anyway. But the girl I’d once been resurfaced, and I couldn’t leave without at least checking on the animal.

“Stupid,” I muttered to myself as I pushed fern fronds out of the way and climbed through the growth. Something thick and round smacked into my cheek, and I stifled an instinctive squeal. Grabbing for the offending reptile, as if I could fling it away before it struck, my palm brushed against a rough *vine*. I blew out a long huff, but my heart rate remained elevated, thumping against my chest even after releasing the vine—not a snake.

The snap of a twig beneath my feet was immediately followed by another low growl, this one much quieter despite the fact that the sound reverberated

through the mud and up my feet. There was only one creature in Qralî that could make that sound, and my sister used to tease me about my obsession with the Apex panthera.

I scanned the ground, looking for the contrast of colors of the spotted predator, but there was only the inky darkness of the jungle floor at twilight. Lifting my foot, my leg brushed against thick fur, and the panthera hissed as it scrambled next to me.

A yip of fear escaped as I backed away, stumbling over the roots of a tree, and then I fell, landing hard on my butt. Panic seized me as I stared into the murkiness. The dim moonlight was just enough to see the cat's deadly teeth, and I understood why I'd initially missed the Apex—his black fur blended into the rich darkness, making him almost invisible.

I was desperate to flee, heart pounding against my ribs. My mouth dried and breaths grew shallow, and I fought the instinct to run, knowing the great cat would instinctively give chase, and he would certainly win. Instead, I scrabbled upright, standing on tiptoes, raised my arms and puffed my chest out, doing my best to appear bigger than the great cat. I gulped for air as I stared the animal down.

He was big, even for an Apex, at least two hundred pounds, and well over three feet at the shoulder—at least at my best approximation from the inches separating us. I waited for him to lunge, to crush my bones with his terrible jaws. I waved my arms and forced a swallow, trying to wet my parched mouth.

But the beast merely sniffed the air, still not opening his eyes. I didn't understand what was happening, and my confusion mounted when the panthera dropped to the ground with another low yowl. He was sick—maybe even dying, though I didn't see his spirit. I dropped to my soles and leaned forward, studying the animal—difficult in the low light—fear replaced by curiosity.

"Hey, beautiful," I murmured as I inched forward. "Are you sick?" Could panthera get sick? Was there such thing? Illness among the magî was rare and never lasted long, for the number of magî with some ability to heal were plentiful enough. Death came after a sudden, severe injury, or with age, for no magî had found a way to heal mortality. But animals didn't have magîk. I snorted at the sudden realization—a cruel irony self-imposed by my own blinded infatuation with Zîvrünê, the previous heir. As a child, I'd adored panthera, until I was old enough to appreciate the impossibility of taming a

wild beast. But as I'd grown up, I merely transferred my adoration from one creature I could never have to another: Zîvrünê. Although the blame for the latter obsession wasn't entirely my own doing. I'd grown up hearing of his virtues. My parents had extolled them for years, for Zîyanâ's benefit. Alas, another irony.

I shook myself from the memories and eased closer, continuing to coo at the large cat as I drew near enough for my boot to rest against his fur. When he didn't move, I shifted over so that I was at his head. He raised it and released a pathetic yowl.

"What the fetid rot?" I dropped to my knees and reached forward, freezing when the great cat bared his teeth and hissed.

His hiss turned into a whine, and then he leaned forward and snuffed at my outstretched hand. My panicked heart softened and then melted when he bumped my palm with his nose—his very dry nose—so dry that there was caked blood around his nostril. I scanned his body for other injuries, but my attention continued to drift back to the gaping, vacant sockets where his eyes should be.

"Who did this to you?" I muttered, running my hand over his side and the ridges of his ribs. He was so thin. Of course, he was starving and dehydrated... dying. "I'll help you," I whispered. "I'll help. You'll... be all right. I'll be right back."

I went to find him food and water. At least the latter should have been easy enough to locate. I just needed a bowl to collect it in. I blinked into the darkness, surprised that it was now night—*When did that happen?* The Sivan blocked some of the moonlight, but the lower canopy was really thick here, and I was afraid to go too far and get lost.

After only a few steps, I stumbled over a coconut, elated to have found the nourishing fruit. I searched the area and collected several others, kicking them back toward the small clearing where the panthera lay. Eyes burning and gritty with fatigue and stress, I returned to the great cat, pitching forward when I tripped over an exposed branch. The two coconuts dropped, and one cracked. Hurriedly, I picked up the broken fruit and poured the watery contents over the cat's tongue. Then I pried it open and scooped out the meaty flesh. Repeating the process with the second one, I emptied the water, getting sprayed with the sticky fluid when the panthera shook his head.

"Fine," I muttered, wiping my arms and face—adding to the layer of grime I already wore. "I guess you're done." Exhaustion pulled at me, and I

debated climbing a tree. Probably smart considering how hungry the Apex probably was, although if he wanted to climb after me, he probably could. I eyed the trunk and closed my eyes, shifting to lean up against it. “I’m all out of gumption—all gone. Going to catch some dreams,” I murmured, my words slurring.

The weight of the animal pressed against my legs, and my fear spiked but faded rapidly with the animal’s deep purr as he settled next to me. Patting him, I added, “But I’ll catch you real food in the morning,” I promised. “As long as you don’t eat me, right?”



AS THE SUN’S rays pierced the canopy, I peeled my eyes open and gasped as the memories of the previous night returned. The Apex lay next to me at the base of the tree, with his back to the trunk, and I was draped over him. I bolted upright, pushing off the wet leaf-litter to stand. He arose and stepped toward me, a low rumbling emitting from deep within. I held still—or tried to. Still purring, he brushed against me, making me stumble to the side with the force of his weight.

“Whoa, big guy,” I said, laughing at his display of affection. I caught my balance, burying my hands into his fur as he continued to purr and rub against me. In this moment, I forgot about everything terrible, the potential horrors that could be waiting for me in Yândarî—my sister and Zîvrünê, and how Mar might be dead—and giggled with joy as my childhood dream of petting a panthera came true. I dropped to my knees, and my heart raced as the Apex turned and approached again, but as he drew near, he merely dipped his head and put it to my chest, his rumbling purr filling the space between us. When he lifted his head, he licked me, his rough tongue wetting the entire left side of my face.

“Gross,” I said, laughing once again.

He nudged me, and I stood. “Time to get you food.”

The amount of dried blood near his eye sockets told me his injury was recent—such that he would need help or die—as was evident. I cut down a thick vine and set a trap—just like Mar had taught me.

An hour later, I caught a tapir. I crashed through the foliage and whooped with excitement. Drawing my blade, I stepped forward to deliver a killing

blow, squealing with shock when the black panthera lunged out from the flora. He snapped his jaws once, catching nothing but air, but the second time... Bone crunched between his teeth, and the tapir shuddered and then stilled. He killed the animal with one crushing bite.

“Fetid rot,” I breathed, too stunned to even move.

The predator dropped his prey and then ripped a chunk from the tapir’s side, spraying me with crimson death. My stomach turned, and I rolled to the side and onto my hands and knees, gasping, “You just... in one bite... ruined... Rot.”

The bloody hunk of meat landed in front of me.

“I’m good,” I gasped, scrambling away from the coppery smell. “You eat it. I’m going to find something else.”

I stood as a rumble of thunder broke through the trees. A few seconds later, the soft patter of rain filtered through, and I smiled up at the cleansing water. I ripped a large leaf from a nearby plant, and then another, layering them on the ground to collect water for the Apex. I did my best to scrub some of the grime from my face. After a few moments where I did nothing but smear the mud more, I sighed, accepting the futility of a rain-bath. I needed a swift stream or lazy river—preferably without black caiman.

“I’ll be back,” I promised. My stomach rumbled with hunger, and as I drew closer to the road, the sounds of magî heading into the Cesaret market tickled my ears.

Excited to be among my own kind after weeks of being alone, I sprinted forward, the wet leaves slapping against my tunic as I rushed toward the edge of the jungle. Before I could break through, a heavy weight crashed into me from behind. My cry was cut short as I landed in the mud and muck, getting up close and personal with the pungent aroma and taste of decomposing plants. The Apex’s claws dug into my back, and he let out a vicious snarl.

“She’ll have stopped here,” a male magî said, momentarily distracting me from my white-hot rage.

I swung my arm at his legs, attempting to knock the panthera off. *How dare he?* “Is that any way to repay—”

“What was that?” the magî asked.

“Probably a celot,” another male magî said. “This area is well-known for cats.”

“It sounded more like a lemur, like it was talking,” a Serîk muttered.

Another magî snorted, closer to me, and when he spoke, he kept his voice

low. “Too bad Zerôn didn’t try one of them.”

“You mean *Kümdâr* Zerôn, Bren. If Bryx hears you, he’ll report you, and then you’ll be gone.”

“Shut your mouths, you two,” a new magî said. “Bren, how do you know Zädîsa will be here?”

I froze, and the weight of the cat’s paw lessened enough for me to lift my head. Through the underbrush, flashes of red leather appeared as the magî walked toward Cesaret. I tried to remember Bren, but if our paths had crossed two years ago when I was still in Yândarî, I didn’t remember him now.

“Because Zädîsa is spoiled. She enjoys comfort—and good food.”

I’m not spoiled. Although, there was no arguing about comfort or good food.

“And I can smell her,” he said, laughing. “She came down here, a couple days ago at most. The rain is making it harder, and all the other magî...”

Maybe I did know him. I huffed and the pressure of the cat’s paw disappeared, making me wince. I sat up, now covered in a fresh layer of mud, and rested my hands on my knees. Stupid magî. Stupid me. I glanced at the cat, the black fur of his paws and legs covered in the same filth—only his muzzle was saturated with blood.

“Thank you,” I whispered, crawling on all fours back into the dense plants, following my blind savior... until he ran into another tree trunk. I wanted to roll my eyes at him, and then at me because I’d been so ridiculously loud that a *blind* cat had pounced on me.

We returned to our clearing, and I opened two green coconuts and ate all the soft flesh. Fried pîderîne would have to wait—as would roasted pheasant and potatoes. If the Serîk were going into Cesaret, I couldn’t. At least I’d picked up one piece of information: the kümdâr was looking for me. And if he wanted me, maybe I should rethink going into Yândarî—even thought that meant not being able to help Mar. I winced at the thought. I’d brought so much pain upon them. I couldn’t let what happened in Heza happen in another post.

“Maybe we should find somewhere else,” I said to the Apex.

The Zîv needs you.

I froze, mouth ajar, and stared... at nothing. I forgot all about the panthera in front of me, all about the Serîk, the kümdâr, even Mar. Zîvrünê—

The male voice in my head was vaguely familiar, but only the kümdâr referred to his brother as *the Zîv*, so warning bells rang in my mind. My

thoughts bounced to Zîvrünê, and my chest tightened, bounced again, and I connected knowledge to conjecture. Zerôn couldn't speak telepathically, so it wasn't him talking to me—but it would require a lot of strength to reach me. Therefore, the Serîk must have been really powerful. So definitely one of the kümdâr's.

A trap.

Bîcav said to wrap it up, Buttercup. As in get your ass back here or the Zîv will die. There, he said, his voice suddenly sharper. I told her. Now let me be or it'll be my ass in the linoxa...

What the actual rot? *Hello?* I called out mentally. *Hello!?*

No response.

My thoughts darted in a million different directions. Bîcav was Zîvrünê's first, loyal even after Zerôn had become the kümdâr and all the way up until I'd left. The voice wasn't Bîcav's, but the Serîk had used Bîcav's nickname for me. Who would he trust?

Basvîk. Rot. I'd never thought much about Bîcav's brother. Basvîk was quiet, withdrawn, and he'd sworn fealty to Zerôn the same time Bîcav had sworn allegiance—through a magîk bond—to Zîvrünê.

Zîvrünê.

A vice-like pressure forced the breath from my lungs. The pretense that I was over the former heir disappeared—evaporated in a millisecond—and I stood. I was tired, filthy, and hungry. But apparently, I wasn't done walking. From Cesaret to Yândarî was two days, but I'd skirt around to Zîvrünê's hut on the opposite side of the capital and set up in the oasis I loved. I looked at the Apex predator sitting on his haunches as if waiting.

"Are you coming?" I asked.

He stood and, as I took my first step, followed, silently padding alongside as I worked my way back out toward the Western Rê, the road that would serve as a guide to get me to Yândarî.

At least I had company—sort of.

Something was wrong with my sister. The first night, after Zîyanâ *came back*, was odd. She kept asking who I was and who she was, but every time I told her, she nodded, accepting it as truth, only to forget the conversation, sometimes only minutes later. She'd had a big fall, so a little amnesia was to be expected—or so I assumed.

Just like normal, we'd both slept in the same bed, and the next morning she'd laughed when I asked if she was feeling okay. We had that one day where I was sure everything would be okay. But after her walk with Zerôn this morning, she returned quiet, contemplative. Maybe the change in demeanor was to be expected, given the circumstances.

"How was your walk?" I asked after returning from the market to dice onions to add to the beans we'd have for dinner. "Are you and Zerôn finally going to end it?"

"What?" she snapped. "Why would I end it with him?" She put her hand on her hips and stared me down.

I held the blade still and studied my sister. "You can't be with him and bond with Zîvrünê."

Zîyanâ shook her head. "You don't know what you're talking about. And I never really liked the Zîv."

Inhaling with surprise, I wrestled with her statement. I knew she had a preference for Zerôn, but to say she never liked her future bondmate?

She grabbed several blankets off our bed and then dumped them on the floor. "We're too big to be sharing a bed. You'll need to sleep on the floor until I leave."

Without another word, she strode from our home and left me gaping after her.

I waited up all night for her to return, at first going through our normal evening routines and then sitting on the floor and pulling at the frays in my threadbare blanket. But she didn't come home until the afternoon light of the following day filtered through the canopy. The corner of her mouth twisted up a fraction, tentative, and she offered to accompany me to the hot springs for a bath.

"We can steal some of the Zîv's soap, and you can pretend he'll love you someday. Then we'll go see the princes."

I said nothing, afraid to retaliate in any way, until I understood what was going on inside Zîyanâ's head. As we headed home, both clean and full of papaya, Zîyanâ danced around me on the dirt path, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Even after going into Yândarî and being told by Bîcav that the princes couldn't see us because of a family issue, she was still happy. So I dared to press Zîyanâ about her memories after falling off the cliff. "Do you remember what you said? When you were dead?"

Zîyanâ stopped mid-twirl and faced me, expression twisted and nostrils flared. "That isn't funny."

"I wasn't trying to be funny," I said, eyeing her from the side. Her anger made me uneasy—*more* uneasy—like I'd done something wrong. My heart clenched as I swallowed the lump of emotion at the back of my throat, and I turned my attention to the jungle by our home. "What's going on? Did I do something to offend you?"

Zîyanâ said nothing for long enough that I dared another peek, just as she shook her head.

"Why do you feel the need to make everything about you?" she asked with a huff of frustration, throwing her golden braids over her shoulder. "Why can't you stop clamoring for attention like a beggar, Dîsa? You were raised better than that." She tugged the ties out of her hair and dropped them on the ground. "What a waste."

Ouch.

She grunted and shook out the braids, muttering under her breath while she ruined the intricate style I'd plaited earlier. Was she implying I'd only done her hair to draw attention to me? Or that I'd made up the conversation when she was dead? Both were ridiculous. If anyone should be grouchy about

the hours I'd spent doing her hair, it was me. And if she couldn't remember our conversation from when she was dead, why was she angry now that she was alive? I couldn't fathom why she was upset, but her angst was as obvious as an albino caiman.

"I wasn't trying to get anyone's attention."

"I'm not stupid," she said, pulling to a stop. Narrowing her eyes, she spit out question after question, her expression hardening with each one. "Why can't you just be happy that Zerôn was able to heal me? Why can't that be enough? Did Zîvrünê put you up to this? Are you trying to steal our happiness?"

I blinked, stunned with the layers of vitriol beneath her words, and my jaw dropped. "I *am* happy he healed you—"

"Don't lie to me," she snapped, poking her finger in the air at me. "Your pathetic magîk is to see dead animals—not necromancy. But you're trying to say your magîk's changed, gotten bigger, *better*? Why would you do that?" She didn't wait for me to answer, putting her hands on her hips as she continued her attack. "Because you're jealous. You've always been jealous of me. Zerôn was right."

Zerôn? I opened and closed my mouth several times, but her conclusion was so ridiculously off I couldn't formulate a rebuttal beyond *that's rot!*

Zîyanâ sucked in a deep breath and lifted her face toward the canopy above.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I said, trying to smooth things over and, at the same time, wondering what was wrong with her. Maybe she did have brain damage. "And I've never been—"

"Cursed Kânkarä," Zîyanâ exclaimed, slicing through the air with her hand. She glared at me, rage contorting her features, making her truly ugly. "Please, just stop with your fetid manipulations. Don't try and twist this so that Zerôn is the bad guy. You and the Zîv are always saying things about Zerôn being selfish, trying to put him down."

I gaped in awe, confusion twisting my thoughts, tying my tongue and insides in knots. The longer Zîyanâ spoke, the less I understood. In the last five years, the only time I'd heard Zîvrünê say anything derogatory about his brother was the day she died—and he'd immediately taken it back.

"But it doesn't matter what you say now," she said, her lip curling up into a sneer. "Neither of you have the power to stop Zerôn's plans for Qralî—*our* plans."

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the muddled thoughts and rearrange my sister's words in a way that would make sense. "Your plans?"

How could she and Zerôn have plans for Qralî? Unless... My stomach churned. *No. No, no.* If Zerôn had power to implement plans, that meant... *Oh. Rot.*

Her sneer morphed from superiority to annoyance. "Are you trying to pretend that you don't know?" After a moment, she pulled back and laughed. "Oh rot, you *didn't* know? How is that even possible? The news was all over the marketplace."

I closed my eyes as loathing filled me. I'd ignored all that I could so I wouldn't have to see the souls at the open-air bazaar. Disgust pushed into every corner, every fiber, of my being, for Zerôn and Zîyanâ, even Zîvrünê, but most of all for me. How had I not seen her greed? For being powerful—Wait. It didn't matter. There was no way Kûmdâr Zêvn and Könserî Zälia would let Zerôn bond with Zîyanâ and take the rulership from Zîvrünê. When I opened my eyes, I saw my sister as she truly was. Had she always been so selfish and greedy? Had I been ignorant or willfully deceived myself?

"How..." I studied her, disbelief spreading with each breath. The rest of the world fell away, and I saw her flinch under my scrutiny.

"How what?" she snapped. "How could you be so stupid? I can't even begin to understand—"

"No," I said. "How could you fall for Zerôn over Zîvrünê? It's like choosing to play in excrement over water or sunshine."

"Har-har," she snapped. "You're *disgusting*. Why would you say... Never mind." Rolling her eyes, she continued. "It's like you don't think. Zîvrünê is stupid, but then, so are you. No mind, no vision. Neither of you will ever amount to anything."

Exhaling, I felt the cord—our family tie, the bond of sisters—snap. In my mind's eye, I could see it too. The edges—when had they become so frayed and worn?—hung loose and separate, and the last piece, the last thread, finally unraveled until there was nothing left. Had she severed it, or had I? I couldn't even say, but whatever loyalty I'd instinctively had for Zîyanâ disappeared all at once. I rubbed my chest, the ache of loss—a strange emptiness beneath my breastbone—twinged, an odd discomfort, because the anguish I should've felt wasn't there.

"I don't know why you're acting surprised, Dîsa," she said. Her anger, like my emotional turmoil, disappeared, and she sounded weary, exhausted.

Closing the distance, she dropped her volume as she spoke. “Zîvrünê is nice—I guess—in a pathetic way, but I’ve always preferred Zerôn. He’s so energetic and captivating and powerful.” Then she offered me a smile full of pity and said, “You’ll see. We’re going to change Qralî. It will be the rise of the magî, even beyond our former glory.”

I couldn’t agree, not even to keep peace between us. And I feared she would have to learn several terrible lessons before this was done. “He’s a snake. I only hope you see it in time. Before he strikes at you.”

She raised her hand, and I didn’t process the meaning—or purpose—behind the movement until it was too late. The slap of her hand across my cheek registered a fraction of a second before the hot zing of fire on my skin.

The entire left side of my face burned, and tears leaked from the corners of my eyes, but I raised my chin even as I swallowed back the hurt tearing through me.

“Don’t hit me,” I said. “If you don’t like me, fine. But don’t resort to violence to solve a problem between us. It doesn’t convince me you’re right.”

Zîyanâ shook her head. “I’m done. You want to continue to lie to yourself, go ahead. But I can’t—I won’t—support you anymore. You’ll have to figure something out on your own.” She stepped away, pivoting as she did so that she faced Yândarî. Walking back the way we’d just come, she tossed her departing words over her shoulder without a glance. “I hope you get stuck with the Zîv; you two deserve each other.”

I stood slack-jawed and rooted to the spot for several moments after my sister disappeared around the bend, ashamed.

Because I hoped she was right.



“SOMETHING HAPPENED,” I said, rushing toward Zîvrünê and Bîcav.

I had barely arrived home when the Serîk dressed in dark-blue leather appeared with instructions from Yândarî. Even now, I couldn’t remember his face, but his expression was seared in my mind. Serîk were the special forces for the kümdâr, so fearlessness was standard and an air of superiority exceedingly common. But the Serîk who’d arrived at my doorstep was neither. He wore the wild-eyed trepidation like an ill-fitting, uncomfortable mask, even after he’d delivered his message.

I skidded to a stop, frowning at Zîvrünê's and Bîcav's serious expressions before putting it together. "Did Zerôn already tell you?"

My gaze went from Zîvrünê to Bîcav because he would've already picked the thoughts about Zîyanâ from my head. An invisible vice squeezed the air from my lungs, continuing to apply terrible pressure as I grasped the pity in Bîcav's eyes.

"Tell me what?" Zîvrünê asked, his voice low and hoarse—*overused*.

Had he been yelling? Crying? And if he didn't know about Zîyanâ, why was he upset? Should I tell him now, or would I be adding to his burden needlessly? Still, it would be better to hear bad news from a friend than a stranger or—worse—an enemy.

I opened my mouth to say Zîyanâ was going to bond with Zerôn, but the words wouldn't come. Guilt held me back, tied my tongue. This relief—and even hope—sparked by knowing he was free of any obligation to her was wrong.

"Not wrong," Bîcav muttered, directing his words at me. He sucked in a deep breath and shifted his attention to Zîvrünê. "I'll wait here. You two better take a few minutes—in private."

"It must be really bad if he doesn't want us on the Rê," Zîvrünê said with a dark chuckle.

He held my elbow as we walked down the muddy path to the home Zîyanâ and I shared—used to share. After stepping inside, I held the fabric back for him while scanning the room for anything out of place. "Rot."

"What?" he asked, halting his advance. "What's wrong?"

I snorted, but my disgust was mostly directed inward. Waving my arm through the drab, barren room in a wide arc, I said, "She'd already decided to leave today."

"She left you?" Zîvrünê frowned, his expression growing darker as he glanced around the single-room dwelling. When his gaze returned to me, he asked, "How do you know?"

"All her clothes are gone." There were only a few bandeaus and sarongs left, all of them old and worn—from before my mother died.

"All the ones from Zerôn," he said flatly.

I nodded. Without the colorful fabrics, the space was all drab grays and browns. Is that how he'd feel without her? "I'm sorry," I whispered as shame burned through me for my brief joy at his freedom. "She's going to partner with him."

Zîvrünê barked a single, self-deprecating laugh. His shoulders dropped, as though burdened by an invisible weight. Loss? Anguish? Hurt?

“Of course she is,” he muttered. Curling into himself, he stumbled to the bed and plopped onto the edge of it, dropping his head into his hands. “He said she would.”

Disappointment battered me, knowing he was upset because of Zîyanâ’s choice. I must’ve misunderstood him on the trail. I’d thought he’d meant he cared for me—ridiculous considering our age difference.

“He told you they were going to bond?” I asked. “But, surely, your parents won’t allow him to be—”

Zîvrünê extended his hand, waving at me to stop, and muttered, “Two Serîk arrived late last night. They were on their way to Hedî when the bûyî swallowed them”—he raised his head and met my wide-eyed gaze with a ravaged expression that made my soul ache—“both my parents and ten of their Serîk—all at once—gone.” He swallowed and then added, “Zerôn is the new kümdâr.”

“Ugh. No,” I muttered, eyes closed as I waved to bat the Apex away. “Stop it.” I rolled to the side and brushed against the Apex’s furry legs, and he stopped abusing me with his tongue and nudged me with his head—much like being struck by a boulder. I flopped the other way, my eyes popped open, and I groaned. “You’re getting stronger.”

The beast responded with a throaty purr then leaned over to continue his kitty-love.

“Gross,” I said, bursting into laughter at the ridiculousness of my protest. If anything, I should have thanked the panthera. After falling into the mud two days before, there had been very little rain. Granted, it was the dry season, but the creeks we’d passed were only deep enough to splash at the dirt, and I was still filthy.

We were on the outskirts of Yândarî, and if we left now, we might make it through the market and to the far side of the capital before the upper crust of magî were awake. The working caste had been up for at least an hour, even before the sun rose, and they would be chatting amongst themselves as they got ready for trade.

Zîvrünê pointed the difference out to me almost three years ago—to me and my sister. He wanted everyone to be valued equally throughout Qralî—despite their magîk abilities. All those ideals and goals wasted. In hindsight, his weakness was obvious: while all magîk had value, it was not equally valued, and so neither were the magî.

There was an ancient myth about a magî who gave up his throne for a

bowl of grain. A story I'd heard back before my parents died, when my sister really did like me—or at least didn't hate me. Had Zîvrünê been as foolish as the magî in the tale?

My thoughts jumped from the story to Zîyanâ. She'd taught me to read and write, first using charcoal and stone and then finally with old scrolls of stretched animal skins filled with the stories of our "history". I had a royal education, learning of how the magî had left Kânkarä and come here to Qralî to escape the demons and their poisoned magîk. As children we'd laughed at the tales, but maybe there was some truth in our myths and legends—our *history*. If Zîyanâ's soul spoke truth, our souls really did continue to cycle.

I brushed the loose dirt from my filthy and torn tunic, the edges frayed and the front splattered with the tapir's blood and foul scent, a stench that would only get worse as the temperature climbed. And if we didn't get rain today, it would be brutal. I twisted my hair back into a braid and briefly debated going into the market, but the blind Apex made that route impossible. Not that I held a grudge. His presence had kept me safe—probably more than I even realized.

"Let's go see if Zîvrünê's hut is still there," I said to the panthera. "It sits just past the castle, by a waterfall and a beautiful lake. I'm sure you'll find a few fish for lunch." As soon as the statement was out, I rolled my eyes at the stupidity of it. "Or I'll find some for you. We can play in the water, and you can quit rubbing mud on me."

The great cat leaned against me as he passed, nearly knocking me over. But after only a few steps, he stopped and waited for me to catch up, reinforcing the pattern I'd noticed yesterday. He stayed within a couple feet, usually at my side the entire day while we walked. The first night I'd climbed a tree, nervous that he'd try to eat me, but he sat at the base of the tree and yowled, so I climbed down and joined him on the ground—which meant more muck for both of us.

"You're dirty," I said, running my hand down his back, the clumps of fur matted with mud and leaves. "You need a bath... and a name."

We continued to walk, staying inside the jungle instead of traveling on the Rê, crossing to the southern side of the road. As we approached Yândarî, my companion slowed his pace and drew back his ears. His guttural growl made me pause as the sounds of magî crawled through the flora. The animal's anxiety clung to me even when he was silently slinking through the jungle at my side.

“How about we decide on that name?” I whispered during a lull in his expression of displeasure. We were only a dozen feet off the Rê, and I didn’t want to take any chance of being discovered by the magî on the road as we skirted past the capital. I thought about names, holding my tongue until we’d passed a group of chattering people, and then said, “How about if I call you Growler?”

He hissed, and I jumped back with the reminder that he was not a domesticated animal. Sniffing the air, he turned toward me and let out a whine.

“There is something really odd about that,” I muttered before sucking in a deep breath. “Right, definitely not Growler. How about Midnight? Or maybe just Night?”

He whined again as though I was torturing him.

“Fine. How about something fierce? Like...” I put myself in his place, thinking of how he’d been starving to death only a few days ago because some magî had stolen his eyes. And why? Disgust and anger burned deep in my belly on his behalf; if it had been me, my thirst for vengeance wouldn’t be satiated until I’d ruined the perpetrator.

I stopped walking, dropped to my knees, and slowly placed my hands on either side of his face, against his matted black fur, and felt the ripple of muscle as he moved his powerful jaw. I swallowed but held still, trusting in the instinct that said he wouldn’t hurt me. But forcing a swallow did nothing to alleviate my parched throat, and I asked hoarsely, “How about Ruin?” He dipped his head, and I rushed to add, “As in you will ruin them for doing this to you.”

The muscles in his face tightened, and he leaned forward—toward me—until his head rested against my chest.

“I’m going to take that as a yes,” I whispered, running my hands down his neck. The corded muscles bunched as he straightened, and I backed away. “All right, Ruin, let’s get to the lake and clean up, and then I’ll find out what’s happening in Yândarî. Maybe someone there knows why a magî would attack you.”

As I hiked through the brush, the temperature rose, and sweat trickled down my back and between my breasts. I yanked off a leaf and waved it in the air, creating a pathetic breeze. “Let’s hurry. I’m practically melting out here.” All that time in Heza, and I wasn’t as used to the heat as I’d once been. *Rot*. “This is going to ruin me.”

The animal's ears perked up, and he bumped me just as we crossed into an area of mangroves. I stumbled over the raised roots and banged into the uneven ground with an, "Oof!" I glared up at the Apex, and he seemed to be grinning, his tongue lolling out between his deadly canines. Shaking my head, I grumbled, "I wasn't talking about you, but I'm glad you know your name."

I rolled over and sat up. This low to the ground, many of the sounds of Yândarî were muffled by the noise from the creatures in the jungle: frogs, crickets, and a few birds overhead, as well as the refreshing sound of running water. I turned my head to the side and closed my eyes, listening. My frown flipped, and I grinned up at the blind Apex. "We're almost there."

Not even ten minutes later, we burst through the foliage and into the haven by the Cewi falls. Nothing had changed in the entire clearing. The crisp smell of the waterfall, baked stones, verdant growth, and the teak house—with various clothing from Zîvrünê, Bîcav, and me. I let myself into the hut and, when profound silence declared the dwelling empty, grabbed a blue sarong, a simple one piece wrap, and then thought better of it. Instead, I found one of Bîcav's tunics and headed to the crystal-clear lake for a bath.

Anxiety drove me to hurry, and I splashed into the water for the fastest wash of my life; my need for answers—real answers—meant I needed to go to the market where gossip ran rampant. Eventually, I'd need to go find Zîvrünê and Bîcav, but I was glad they weren't here. I wanted information *before* I faced them. No fetid way I was going to blindly believe either of them again.

After changing, I fed Ruin and left, insisting that if he didn't stay here, he should at least stay away from the magî.

As I wandered through the market, a nagging sensation blossomed across my neck, increasing until the little hairs there stood on end. I peeked over my shoulder, noticing a single Serîk in black leathers—all the other Serîk I saw in the marketplace were wearing red—staring at me.

Hadn't Bîcav worn black before I left? But Zîvrünê didn't have any other Serîk—because he wasn't the kûmdâr. Furthermore, the Serîk in black was definitely not Bîcav. So what was going on?

I wandered through the various food stalls, starting with the bakeries. While I munched on a glazed confection, I did my best to gather information. Three merchant magî were discussing an increase in the frequency and severity of the bûyî—all in the outposts—mostly the distal ones.

As I moved from stall to stall, I learned another kirinî was declared after the kümdâr lost most of his Serîk, though no one whispered why he'd lost them. The most troubling gossip was that very few magî made it thru the kirinî now; almost all were dying in the treetop castle. But their bodies weren't returned.

What the rot is going on up there?

I turned to leave and came face-to-face with the Serîk in black pants.

He was tall with a slight, wiry frame, and he wore his hair shorn close to his scalp. He pursed his lips and said, "You're here."

"Yep," I said, nodding. "Here I am." I narrowed my eyes, studying him, but even up close he didn't look familiar. "Do I know you?"

"Not really," he said. "Bîcav sent me to fetch you. We should get out of here before someone recognizes you. Right now they think you're Zîyanâ."

I blinked, and my lips parted in surprise. "Why would they think that? I don't look anything like her."

"You do actually. Which is why the illusion is so easy," he said with a grin. "And also dangerous. There may be a magî who can see through my magîk, and then we'd have a problem. Because that tunic doesn't really fit you right."

"My tunic?" I glanced down at the green garment, made for a magî much larger and taller than me, and frowned. It was still green, but the illusion of a form-fitted dress now replaced the tent-like attire—a very tight form-fitted dress. "Why are you doing that?"

He raised his eyebrows as if my question was stupid, but I waited patiently for him to answer.

"We don't want Zerôn to know you're here. Zîvrünê believes the kümdâr is searching for you." After scanning the market, he flinched and pointed in the direction of Zîvrünê's hut. "Please. We're running out of time."

I surveyed the area, spotting only a few Serîk, no more than I'd seen all morning, and shrugged. "Why the hurry?"

The stranger stepped into my personal space and whispered, "Right this moment, what those Serîk see is one of their own talking with the kümdâr's bondmate. But sooner or later, one of them is bound to come over here and investigate why you're here. Your sister never comes to the market."

His anxiety was becoming palpable. There was way more going on that he wasn't saying. "Why does the kümdâr want me?"

He stared at me, expression hard, stern. "I don't know."

I didn't believe him—not one bit. I opened my mouth to tell him to leave me alone, but his image wavered, and I stumbled back a step. He was wearing red leathers one moment, then black, and then back to red.

"Please," he said. "Bîcav will meet us at Zîvrünê's retreat—the one by the Carkom."

"Are you sworn to the kümdâr or Zîvrünê?" The fact that this man knew about the hut wasn't particularly mollifying. Zerôn had once been allowed in the sanctuary—before he betrayed Zîvrünê—and the kümdâr could easily have his guards trying to break in.

"Zîvrünê."

"Which is what you'd say if you were sworn to Zerôn," I replied, raising my eyebrows to let him know I wasn't stupid.

He frowned and then said, "You were there earlier—late last night or this morning. You left muddy tracks into the washroom."

That was probably true, but I still didn't trust him.

"All right then let's go to the hut," I said, waving to indicate that he should lead. I followed after—no way would I lead a stranger there. "How long are you going to keep up the illusion?"

"As soon as we're out of the market, I'll let the illusion drop." He turned his head but didn't bother to face me as we wound through the crowd. "And I *showed* you the truth of the illusions so you could choose to trust me. If you decide not to, that's on you."

Ouch. "I'm still deciding."

"Sure," he bit out, picking up the pace.

We left the market, staying clear of the platforms which allowed access to the treetop castle of the kümdâr. Generations of leaders had dwelt in the sprawling residence, and as young magî, Zîyanâ, Zîvrünê, Zerôn, and I had played hide-and-seek, tag, and other childhood games in the abandoned areas. Now my sister and Zerôn dwelt there. The thought brought a mixture of hurt and sadness to the surface, feelings I thought I'd already dealt with.

As soon as we stepped into the jungle, good to his word, the Serîk dropped the illusion. His leather pants were now black, and my green tunic appeared exactly as it felt, baggy and ill-fitting. I followed as he wound through the barely discernible path until we hit the crumbling stone statue of The Carkom—the group of magî who'd led our kind out of Kânkarä. In the years since I'd left, the jungle had become a wall of foliage, thick and dense, appearing impenetrable from this angle. I closed the distance to stand by the

Serîk's side, and his expression tightened.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked.

"Yes," he hissed. He pivoted and stared down at me. "But I don't have access on my own."

Whether he knew it or not, the lack of free access told me Zîvrünê didn't trust him either. I frowned, but before I could say anything, the Serîk spoke.

"I'm not asking you to show me if you have a key," he growled. "We're just waiting for—"

"That's not what I—"

"Zädîsa." Bîcav stepped out from behind the statue, relief in his deep voice. He waved us forward. "I'm glad you came. Thanks, Bêrde. I can't believe you found her."

The Serîk beside me snorted. "She looks a lot like her sister, and you were right about the tunic." He glanced at me and frowned. "It's practically swimming on her. It wasn't hard to pick her out of the crowd."

"Hey," I said. "I left in a hurry."

"Come on," Bîcav said. "Let's not stand out here tempting fate."

My attention returned to Zîvrünê's first as Bêrde ducked past. Bîcav had been with Zîvrünê ever since I could remember—certainly a decade, probably more. I'd always liked Bîcav because even though he could read thoughts, he'd never betrayed my confidence. For being burdened with the weight of everyone's worry, he'd remained upbeat and optimistic—in *the past*. The last two years had changed the guard: his blond hair was darker, the skin around his pale-blue eyes was creased with worry lines, and his quick smile had yet to make an appearance. So different than before.

"Is the Serîk awake?" Bêrde asked from farther up the trail.

Bîcav's relief evaporated, and heavy trepidation slammed down on my shoulders as he shook his head.

"No. His wounds are healing though, slowly. Perhaps another few days..." Bîcav looked at me intently. "We have one of the kümdâr's Serîk here."

The admission made me roll my shoulders. He'd just admitted to treason—of some sort. Frowning, I scrutinized the Serîk. His tattoos seemed darker, which meant he'd spent a lot of time indoors, very atypical for the magî I'd once known.

"I see judgment in your eyes and hear it in your thoughts," he said with a long sigh. "You're all grown up."

I stepped past him and into the haven, throwing my response over my shoulder. “Two years will do that. You look terrible.”

He grunted.

“Were you all here this morning?” I asked. “I didn’t hear anyone when I went inside.”

Shaking his head, Bîcav said, “Only the kümdâr’s Serîk. The rest of us probably just missed you.”

Sure. I scanned the surrounding jungle, looking for Ruin. “What’s wrong with Rûnê?”

As soon as the question was out of my mouth, I grimaced, wanting to smack myself. Pathetic, Zädîsa. As if I needed confirmation that my pining feelings for the former heir weren’t resolved, I realized I practically named my pet—well, not mine really, but still—after him.

Bîcav raised his eyebrows, communicating volumes, and I blushed.

“You knew before and kept it a secret,” I muttered. “You better not say anything.”

A spark of Former-Bîcav appeared as he grinned. Pulling me into a crushing hug, he whispered into my hair, “I wouldn’t dream of it. I’ve missed you, Buttercup.”

I punched him in the stomach—much like punching a granite wall. Shaking my hand, I grumbled as I pulled away. “Why did it take you so long to get in touch?”

“Zîvrûnê didn’t want me to bring you back. Not until it was safe.” He tucked me under his arm and led me down the overgrown path. “But there’s too much at stake, and *I* think we need you or we’ll fail.”

Bêrde barked a low, dark chuckle and said, “You hope we won’t fail, but it might not even matter. We don’t know—”

“What?” The two of them were talking in riddles, and contradictory ones at that. “Is it safe or too late? And was that Basvîk who spoke in my head? Where *is* Zîvrûnê? And what’s wrong with him?”

Bêrde disappeared around the bend without answering a single question.

I craned my neck and studied Bîcav. “I have a million more and can’t even get one answered?”

“Let’s go back to the hut. *Someone* needs to clean up in there; it stinks like wet animal. Something big must’ve wandered into the glade and marked —” He pulled up short as my thoughts went to Ruin. “Oh no you did not. That thought about a pet is a *panthera*?”

I'd meant to clean up after the large cat but forgot in my hurry to get to the market. "I'll help you tidy up," I promised. "And you can tell me what's going on while we work, just like old times, right?" I barely took a breath in my rush to change the subject. "My first question: Why is Zerôn holding another kirinî?"

"Nope. Nice try though. You're not getting off that easy, Dîsa, and we're not changing the subject yet. You made friends with a *panthera*?" He picked the thoughts out of my head and added, "Wait... a *blind* panthera?" Bîcav ran his hand through his hair. "Zîvrünê is going to be... unhappy."

Oh well. Zîvrünê hadn't been happy with me ever since the night he bound my magîk and made me a zeta. I shrugged and continued down the path. Not like I *owed* him anything... except maybe a new tunic or two and some towels.

"What are you talking about?" I asked with false bravado as we approached the bend. I skipped ahead and shouted back to Bîcav, "Zîvrünê will love it: magî and animal living harmoniously; it's like his dream come —"

I turned to look ahead and froze mid-sentence, my heart flipping in shock. Sucking in a breath, I stared at the male magî who'd been my world up until a year ago when I'd finally convinced myself I didn't care anymore. I was such a liar, a really bad liar.

Zîvrünê stood just outside the doorway of his retreat hut, wearing nothing but his black leather pants. His dark hair was pulled back, making his blue eyes even brighter, but several unruly locks brushed against his jaw, his very tightly clenched jaw. He appeared thicker than I remembered. Perhaps he'd filled out more. His skin was pale, worse than Bîcav's, and *something* was off. Rünê was every bit as attractive as I remembered—actually even more—but... My mouth dried as I drank him in, silently studying every inch of the magî. Several moments passed before I pulled myself together enough to mentally smack some sense into my head. And then I grimaced. Because the former heir's skin was pale enough that I should've seen the faint pink scars immediately. Dozens were visible—all over him.

I blinked, and the ghostly shape of a panthera's soul stood next to him, there one second and gone the next.

My jaw dropped.

"What the fetid rot," Rünê snarled, echoing my thoughts.

He marched up to Bîcav and jabbed at him. "Why is *she* here?"

TWO AND ONE HALF YEARS AGO

“Are you afraid?” Zîvrünê asked, voice heavy with concern as he settled on the stone next to me.

His question was ironic, considering our circumstances. Although, after six months of touring Qralî, maybe he’d adjusted to this new normal.

But for me, by the end of the day, my cheeks ached from all the fake-smiles and false-platitudes. I was tired of lying about *all for the best* and *things have a way of working out*. Here in the cover of night, away from the kümdâr’s and könserî’s entourage, I could relax and drop my mask of joy. Unfortunately for me, as soon as the mask and the pressure to perform disappeared, the truth wormed out of its box and crawled through me.

“You’re not?” I responded, scooting over a few inches to give Zîvrünê more space. “Are you not listening to your brother’s speeches?”

At every single outpost, Zerôn and Zîyanâ would stand together on a raised platform in the center of the marketplace, and he spoke of a new Qralî. Worse, Zîvrünê introduced them. Every. Single. Time. The once-heir extolled his brother’s virtues and told of his unfailing love for Zîyanâ—how he’d selflessly healed her—a total lie.

When Zîvrünê finished weaving his narrative, I joined him on the platform with a smile and a wave for the magî. It was all they could coerce from me—and even that was becoming abhorrent, leaving behind the bitter taste of deceit. But I’d continue to play my part. For now.

“Zerôn has always had dreams for our realm—”

“So have you,” I snapped. “Or were those lies, too?”

He stiffened beside me, and I *almost* regretted the words, but the flash of remorse was swallowed by the ever-present simmering anger. Zîvrünê could've said no, could've at least tried to deny Zerôn the rule. Instead, Zîvrünê honored his word and acquiesced the throne—just like that.

Zîyanâ and I had a fierce and bitter fight last night, a thousand times worse than our argument the day she told me she wasn't going to partner with Zîvrünê. Only this time, when she hit me, I came back at her. An hour later, Zerôn sealed my hatred with a strap of leather to my back. He refreshed my memory of a very powerful, painful lesson from childhood: he was still equally adept at inflicting wounds as he was healing them, just like when we were younger.

I stuffed the memory away, relieved because of the space between me and Zîvrünê. Far enough that he wouldn't be able to see into my mind and my shame.

He sighed, a long exhale that made my soul ache with the what-ifs of younger, more-naïve, Dîsa.

“He will be a good ruler—he and your sister. She will temper his drive, and I have to believe it was the right thing.” He cleared his throat, but his voice remained hoarse. “She's your sister, and if I hadn't surprised her... It's my fault she fell. I had to make it right.”

I flinched and turned toward him, searching his face—his tortured expression—for answers. “How could you think that?”

But I *knew*.

“Zerôn said that to you?” And just like that—*bam*—all of my hatred boiled over. I curled my fingers, clenching my fists so hard my nails bit into my palms, and snarled, “And you believed him? How could you believe him?”

Zîvrünê hung his head, clutching it in his hands as if trying to keep it in place.

In one blink, all my anger disappeared and fear rushed in. “D-don't,” I stammered. Choking on the rest of my words, I swallowed and tried again. “Don't believe him, Rünê.”

The tension drained from him, and he straightened, eyes wide with wonder. “What did you say?”

What did I say? “Just... You shouldn't believe him. He twists things, turns them around, but he's manipulating you.” I'd heard Zîyanâ spouting his convoluted logic long enough to know Zerôn was a master at manipulation,

even if it wasn't his magîk. "You shouldn't believe it when he lies; there's no power in words."

Zîvrûnê shook his head. "Not that. You called me Rûnê."

"Sorry," I said, wincing at my breech in manners. "I didn't mean to." He'd earned the "Zîv" when he'd become a zeta, and to drop it was a terrible insult. Technically, he could challenge me over it. "Please don't make me fight you."

He chuckled, and the deep, throaty laugh made my insides squirm.

"Would that make you afraid?" he asked, still smiling. "To have to fight me?"

I snorted. He wouldn't hurt me. He wouldn't even stand up to his brother. "No."

His smile disappeared under now-pursed lips, and the mirth faded from his eyes. Turning his gaze to the upper canopy, he said, "And that is why Zerôn will do better as kûmdâr. To rule, one must have the respect of his subjects... and his partner. I had neither."

I opened my mouth to protest and blinked as the truth of his statement sank in.

"You can close your mouth, Dîsa. What's done is done."

But I pushed forward, refusing to accept what was done. "But you're so good, and he's... not. I thought good always won, that bullies got their just dessert. What happened to that?"

The throaty croaking of the nocturnal frogs swelled, and an owl hooted overhead. The cacophony of the warm night wrapped us in its soft embrace, cocooned away from the rest of the group, but their presence still hung around my neck, strangling me. If Zîvrûnê wouldn't do anything, I couldn't.

"Why are you okay with letting him rule?" I whispered. My hatred raged, and I gritted my teeth, wrestling with the overwhelming emotion. Tears burned my eyes, and I blinked the moisture away, recognizing the futility staring me in the face.

He raised his hand, slowly, and when I didn't pull away, he wiped the escaped tear from my cheek. My skin burned where he'd touched me, searing me all the way to my soul. Even knowing his weaknesses, I loved him.

"What is your biggest fear?" he asked.

Losing him. "My biggest fear?" I stalled, trying to come up with something other than the truth. "What I don't know."

He started to nod but then stopped, tilted up his chin, and then his features

bunched, slowly at first, but the expression picked up speed, growing deeper until he shook the confused grimace from his face. “You’re afraid of what you don’t know? How is that even possible?”

I wanted to laugh, but his earnestness kept me from teasing him. “You know the saying ignorance is bliss? Worst saying ever. How is that even possible, to be blissfully ignorant?”

“But how can you fear something if you don’t know it even exists?”

Ah. “You’re right. It’s not the something; it’s the lack of knowledge that I fear. If I know what’s wrong, then I can plan what to do about it. I’d much rather act than be acted upon.” It would be nice to be on the giving end with Zerôn, maybe present a knife and drive it through his heart—not that I would do it, but I wanted to. Sadly, I was fairly certain he’d just heal himself. “Like if we knew what the *bûyî* is, why it’s happening, then we could do something about it. No bliss in our ignorance.”

He paled and nodded. “Yes, I see your point.”

“What about you?” I asked. “What do you fear most?”

Zîvrünê studied me, head leaning to the side and the corner of his lips pulling up into a soft half-smile. The vibrant blue of his eyes deepened in the absence of light, and there was a flash of something almost predatory in the intensity of his look—there one second and then gone.

“May I hold your hand for a moment? I promise I won’t peek inside your head. I just want to show you something.”

I flipped my hand, palm up, and extended my arm. “What do you want —”

He pressed his hand to mine, the warmth of his skin radiating into me, and I knew there was something deeper of *us*.

“Do you feel that energy?” he asked. I nodded, and he continued. “With that energy, you know something, right? Some knowledge flashed in your soul, something deep. And whatever *it* is, you’re completely convinced it’s truth—either about me, you, or... *us*.”

My heart did a little happy dance at the mention of *us*, and I sucked in a shallow breath as he pressed his fingers between mine, threading our hands together. He tightened his grip and stared me down.

“What if you were wrong?” he asked.

Wrong? The very word made me grimace. Doubt and fear—of losing him—twisted my stomach. But I wasn’t wrong. Not about him.

He raised our hands in front of my face and held them there. “*That* is my

fear, Dîsa. That the judgments I've made, the decisions about someone else's character or integrity or worth... What if I'm wrong?"

I stared off into the darkness. I couldn't lie, I didn't even want to, but I also wanted to understand. For years, a decade really, I'd tried to reconcile what I saw of Zerôn and the way Zîvrünê spoke of his brother. This was the first time Zîvrünê had expressed *any* doubt. Was it about Zerôn and Zîyanâ? And if so, what could Rünê do now?

"Are you saying you doubt what you know?" I whispered as I focused on him once again. "Is that really possible? Can't you see into someone's mind—their memories—and see their true character?"

He brushed his thumb over the back of my hand, and my breath caught. Looking at me through his thick lashes, he inclined his head toward me, a slow confirmation, not once breaking eye-contact.

"I can. But there are layers—and it takes time. If I know what I'm looking for, it's easier, but there is the conscious memory, clouded by perspective, and subconscious, buried memories which are more difficult to access, but they're more... reliable."

"Really?" How did I not previously know all that? I squeezed his hand and asked, "But you need physical contact to access them, right?"

He nodded. "Exactly."

I was missing something—something important. I ran through what I knew and wanted to hit myself as the answer stared me in the face. "They won't let you touch them."

"My parents asked me to stop when I was younger. They said there were things young magî shouldn't know." He frowned and then laughed ruefully. "Truly, there are things I wish I could forget."

I blushed, thinking of possible intimate memories that ten- or twelve-year-old Rünê might've seen. "Yes, I'm sure."

He sighed and released my hand, lying back on the rock and staring up at the darkness. "Reasonable request, right? I was six at the time, and even though I understood why, their request hurt my feelings. I told Zerôn when we were ten; it took him four years to notice that our mother and father never touched me—at least not my skin."

Zîvrünê rested his hand on my back, and I flinched.

"Are you okay?" he asked, pulling back.

The physical wounds of Zerôn's latest abusive lashing were gone—healed by the magî who'd inflicted them. "I'm fine," I said. "You can scratch

my back; it would feel nice.”

He chuckled and then traced patterns absently through the fabric of my tunic as we both stared into the dark jungle. The silence between us stretched, and the noises of the jungle rushed in to fill the gap.

The longer Rûnê caressed me, the more I relaxed, relishing his touch. The idea that someone wouldn’t want it was so strange—even knowing the consequences of it. He’d never tried to deceive me either. I remembered when he’d explained what would happen when I was five—oh! “Zerôn told you to stop touching him when he was ten?”

“Yes. When I was younger, it was more challenging to control the magîk. I could fall into someone’s memory with the slightest contact. Brushing against your arm *might* be a single image, but with prolonged contact, I can see a lot. So, I started training to avoid accidental contact, and I’m very conscientious about it.”

I’d never thought about asking him to stop, never even considered it an option, even when he explained it all those years ago. His magîk was a part of him. I thought of all the times he’d rushed to my side; he was always the first, always willing to give me a hand—for years—and then he stopped coming by—after Zîyanâ became a zeta. I shifted, turning so I could see his face, and he dropped his hand to his side on the rock.

He lay still. With eyes closed, his dark lashes contrasted against his skin, pale in the moonlight. He forced a swallow.

“I d-didn’t ask you to stop,” I said, my voice hoarse with shock.

He sat up and scooted away from me. Not off the rock, but far enough that there was no way for him to brush against me. Like he didn’t want to touch me, not even accidentally. Carving my heart out might’ve hurt less.

Keeping his gaze averted, he said, “I should’ve given you more of a choice. I was greedy—”

“Not greedy,” I said, unable to hear him destroy the joy he’d given me. “And you did give me a choice,” I protested. “Every time you extended your hand, you gave me an option. I never had to take it. You never forced contact. Not once.”

He closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. “But what I wanted...”

I waited, dying to know what he wanted. Was it the same thing I wanted? Because, ever since I was seven, it had been him—always him. Only him.

Clearing his throat, Zîvrûnê stood so suddenly I flinched. The muscles of

his arms tensed all the way up his shoulders and across his back as he clenched his fists.

“You’re too young, and it was wrong of me to touch you.” He squared his shoulders and, in a voice thick with emotion, added, “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Without looking back, he strode away.

And almost completely out of my life.

TWO YEARS AGO

After a year of awkward touring with my sister and her bondmate, Kûmdâr Zerôn, my relief in being back in Yândarî was exceedingly short-lived. What I'd hoped for—freedom from obligation and discomfiture—never materialized. As soon as we were back at the capital, I returned to the home I'd been living in. Minutes later, a Serîk knocked at the doorway and informed me that my rooms in the treetop castle would be ready by nightfall.

I grunted in acknowledgment of the message, but I had no intention of living there—or even visiting—if I could avoid it. Zîvrünê's silent treatment was sporadic but consistent enough to sting, almost as awful as watching Zerôn and Zîyanâ fawn over and paw at each other. But the worst was Zerôn's vicious temper.

I'd only gotten through the last six months because of Bîcav. Despite Zîvrünê's declaration, his guard found ways of bringing us together, and he endured the former-heir's verbal chastisement repeatedly. But the haunted look in Zîvrünê's eyes worsened with each interaction, and even though he'd talk with me, he kept his promise and his distance: no contact. The awkwardness grew, and I'd taken to avoiding everyone the last month of the trip.

As for the new kûmdâr and his bondmate, something about the way Zerôn and Zîyanâ interacted was too much. And maybe I'd imagined it, but there were times my sister's eyes seemed wide with panic when she darted a glance at her partner. Not that she would ever confide in me. Whenever she saw me coming, my sister changed course and avoided my path, and if I was

unavoidable, she'd avert her gaze as she stormed past, making it clear I was invisible to her—or dead.

“What time shall I tell them to expect you? Supper will be served at twilight.”

I grunted again but kept my gaze on the new hole in our roof. “I’m not coming.”

The silence stretched long enough that I would’ve thought the Serîk gone, except I hadn’t heard him leave. I sighed and met his gaze.

The male magî wore fitted leather pants and a sleeveless jerkin—an outfit that should be terribly uncomfortable in the heat of the jungle. But he wasn’t sweating at all, so there must have been magîk involved. His golden-blond hair was tied back at the nape of his neck, and he had two bands of crimson on each bicep. He glared at me. “Do you need me to rephrase the invitation to be clearer?” he asked, his expression hardening. “The kûmdâr has issued a *command*. If you refuse to commit to a time later, I’ll escort you into their presence now.”

I glared at the guard, and my simmering anger boiled. Was this a joke? “You’re telling me I don’t have a choice where I live now? I didn’t marry Zerôn. Why would I want to live near him?”

He had the decency to fake-smile, like he was embarrassed. “I’m merely responsible for bringing you to him. I can either take you now or later. What happens when you get there is between the two of you.”

Which meant Zerôn had probably threatened the guard too.

“I’ll meet you at the edge of the market at the end of the day, plenty of time to get to supper.”

He nodded but didn’t budge, and when I let the curtain fall, he snorted.

I wrinkled my nose at the moldering contents of the home. There was scat on the ground, and as I drew close to the bed, I noticed several holes in the fabric. The vanity was gone, as was the chair, taken by my sister or some other magî after we’d left—I didn’t know nor did I care.

With a sigh, I turned my back on my former home and stepped outside. I didn’t really want to live here anymore, too many memories with Zîyanâ. Which meant I’d need to find another, preferably before I went to the castle. There was no way I’d be living there with my sister and Zerôn. Perhaps Zîvrünê was staying at the castle; then the hut by the waterfall clearing, my favorite place in all of Yândarî, would be vacant. And if the hut wasn’t available, maybe he had another hidden-by-magîk cabin somewhere in Qralî.

Totally worth asking—begging even.

The guard continued to follow me all the way into Yândarî. As soon as we got to the market, I decided to play dodge-the-Serîk. By the time I arrived at the entrance to the clearing, I was not only sweaty but dirty from crawling between the vendor booths.

I knew where I was going—I'd been here hundreds of times—only... I couldn't find it. I walked into the jungle from the head of the path, clearly visible and just as I remembered, but after weaving through aleph ears and palm fronds, I exited only a few feet from where I'd entered. *What the rot?* Was I walking in circles? After the third time, with my chest tight and heart slamming against my ribs, I marched back into the lower canopy, livid. Because if I couldn't get to the clearing, that meant—

“Bîcav!” I shouted. Only he wouldn't have made the enchantment; he likely didn't have enough power to create such a powerful ward. And if he didn't create it, he wouldn't be able to let me in anyway, not without permission. “Zîvrünê! If you've magîked the way so I can't get in, I'll *never* forgive you!”

I waited a few minutes, my frustration mounting because, if he had created a magîkal barrier, it was within his right as a prince—even if he wasn't heir. Zîyanâ and Zerôn likely had several hideaways; they'd probably made them while we traveled. But I didn't even have a home anymore. What did I have? Absolutely nothing. Weak and useless magîk, a sister who hated me, and my best friend not only shut me out, but, of all the places Zîvrünê could've picked, he'd stolen *my* favorite.

Well, he couldn't have it.

I fixed the clearing in my mind: the path opening up into the small meadow which faded into mud and smooth river rocks surrounding Cewi falls and its small crystalline lake. Behind the falls was a cave, lit by bioluminescent moss, and a hot spring of water. I didn't even want the hut, as long as I could be near the water—the only pool of water where I'd never seen a caiman or conda. That was my destination.

I mentally walked the pathway there, keeping my eyes closed. I pictured the fallen coconut tree to the left of the trail way past the huge banyan, its massive trunk mostly hidden amongst the foliage. I inhaled the verdant growth all around me and imagined the crystal-blue lake as well as the crisp, clean moisture from the waterfall. I clung to the memory of making soap with Zîvrünê, with the scents of sandalwood and ylang ylang, and then stacking it

near the hot springs in the cave. No one was going to keep me from my favorite spot—*not even him*.

I opened my eyes and stomped into the jungle, following the path with raging determination. I knew my way through here, so I kept my attention fixed forward. Spotting the banyan tree, I march ahead, unwavering. A vice gripped my chest, and I struggled with my next breath. The magîk tugged me to the left, and as I took another step, it yanked with such force I stumbled.

“Nice try,” I muttered with my gaze still fixed on the banyan. “You are not going to steal the best place in Yândarî and keep it for yourself, selfish ass.” I trudged on another step and then another. “Not you”—step, step, breath—“or Zerôn”—step, breath, step—“or Zîyanâ.” I couldn’t catch my breath, and my legs were filled with stones. “I don’t... care if... you’re... all... zetas,” I gasped, pushing forward as my vision tunneled. “I... won’t... let... you... have... it.”

I lumbered past the banyan tree and then fell to my knees as the vice tightened. I sucked short gasps of air as I crawled. Blinking, I spotted the leaning trunk of the coconut tree ahead. I could get that far. I inched my way along the path, the need to turn around roiling through me, churning my stomach. But my head and heart were in agreement—against the instinct of my body.

Stubborn? Absolutely. I was not going to have my life dictated to me, not by Zerôn or Zîvrünê. The gap between me and the fallen tree shrunk, and I felt something wet under my nose a moment before the coppery taste of blood slid down my throat.

Ass.

I scrabbled over the tree, exhausted. The amount of effort to get thirty yards felt more like a thousand miles straight up one of the upper canopy trees. My vision tunneled, the blackness creeping through me faster than I could crawl through the remainder of the barrier. As unconsciousness slid up to greet me, I thought if I died, I’d need to find a way to get revenge on Zîvrünê.

“What the rot?” Zîvrünê snapped from somewhere outside the darkness of my mind. “What are you doing, Dîsa?”

That was rich coming from him. I could ask the same. Well, I would, if I could. But my mouth refused to spit out the words—or any words. My eyes fluttered open for a brief moment before closing again. Being alert was far too much effort.

The ground swayed, and then Zîvrünê's muttered complaints rumbled through me. His words didn't register, and I ignored his frustration. I was plenty frustrated, too. Or I would be, right after I finished my nap.

The crashing water sounded like victory, and with my next breath the smell of sunbaked stones mixed with the scents of ylang ylang and sandalwood. I peeled open my eyes to confirm my triumph. One glance at the clear-blue water, and then I grinned up at Zîvrünê.

The worry in his vibrant-blue eyes turned into relief. "What were you think—"

"You can't steal my happy-place," I rasped, smacking him on the chest. Although my strike was more of a pat. I gave up on exacting my revenge until I could put more weight behind it. Instead, I closed my eyes and rested my head on his shoulder, relaxing into the surety of safety, and said, "It's my favorite place."

He said something in reply, but I didn't bother listening. The consequences from Zîvrünê would have to wait. My body was demanding immediate recompense.

When I awoke, the roaring of the waterfall was muted but still there, a background sound to the shouting voices in the other room. The smell of simple pîderîne wafted back to me, rice and toasted nuts, and my stomach growled in anticipation while the last vestiges of sleep drifted away.

"She's not the only one who's been here," Bîcav yelled. "What if someone else tries... and dies?"

There was a moment of silence, plenty of time for Bîcav to absorb the thoughts from the other magî, and for me to wake up.

"Did you know?" Zîvrünê snapped, his voice filled with hot anger. "Did you pull those thoughts from someone's head and not tell me?"

Whoa. I'd never heard him accuse Bîcav of disloyalty. And what knowledge would make Rünê so upset?

Something crashed—shattering with the force of impact—and Zîvrünê swore. I sat up, the thin fabric bedclothes dropping to my waist. I flinched at the splattering of blood on my top and skirt and the dried, crusty feeling around my nares. A pang of concern for Bîcav pushed me to roll from the bed. My knees held, barely a tremble, and I lurched my way down the hall to where the two magî argued.

"How could you think I would keep that from you?" Bîcav asked.

"Do you want me to believe she's never thought about that day?" Zîvrünê

snarled, sounding more animalistic than magî. “In over a year—not once?”

I skidded to a stop, eavesdropping. They were either talking about me or Zîyanâ—and either way, I wanted to hear.

Bîcav answered, but his voice was too quiet for me to distinguish the words.

“Just come in here, Dîsa,” Zîvrünê said, his voice sounding as unsteady as my knees. “Now that you’re awake, you may as well answer my questions directly.”

Bîcav had rattled me out.

I stepped into the kitchen and smiled nervously. Zîvrünê stood at the cooking range, dishing rice into a bowl and wearing a simple sulu tied around his waist. He scooped a large dollop of creamy cheese on top of the rice and then pointed at the table. “Have a seat. Breakfast will be ready soon.”

I slid into a seat and waited, watching as he set to peeling a mango.

“Did you really put Zîyanâ’s soul back into her body?” he asked. He turned, handed me the bowl, and added, “After she fell... is your memory accurate?” He swallowed and held out his hand to stop me from answering. “You don’t *have to* tell me, and I’m sorry I took the memory without asking. It just happened when I picked you up, but if it did happen... You’ll need to be careful.”

Of course he doubted. The idea of necromancy barely made sense to me. I felt like butterflies—no, worms—were crawling in my stomach as I started talking, but as I unfolded the truth of that day, the tension flitted away.

Unlike Zîyanâ, he believed the memory happened exactly as I’d remembered it. I explained everything to him, relieved to be back in the same rhythm as our former relationship. He asked a few clarifying questions, but mostly he just listened.

“Does Zerôn know?” Zîvrünê asked.

I shrugged. “If you’re asking if I told him, the answer is no. But maybe Zîyanâ did—”

“He probably still doesn’t know,” Bîcav answered, his expression darkening. “His new Serîk told him Dîsa has power—a lot of power—but they don’t know what it is. I heard the guard, his fearful thoughts on the other side of your barrier. It’s why Zerôn wants her near, so he can find out what she has.”

Fear traced my spine, leaving needle-like chills blossoming over my skin.

“You’re okay.” But Zîvrünê’s reassuring smile was tight. “The Serîk

left... a while ago.”

“Can he get through?”

“No,” The smile dropped from Zîvrünê’s face, and his blue eyes darkened. “And that was dangerously stupid on your part.”

My gaze darted from Zîvrünê to Bîcav, knowing the latter would hear my unspoken questions.

“It’s impossible to break through another magî’s magîk,” Bîcav answered plainly. “But you did. The only conclusion we’ve come up with has to do with the quantity of power.”

I frowned, the immediate protest dying on my lips. “But that would mean...” I shook my head, staring at Zîvrünê. “That’s impossible.”

“Your education has been grossly neglected,” Zîvrünê said. His shoulders dropped, weighted by invisible burdens. “Not that it’s your fault, but what you don’t know could kill you. Besides that, you don’t like ignorance, so let’s increase your knowledge. Bîcav can help train you too.”

The big Serîk grunted. “Fine, but then you’ll need to explain to Zerôn why none of us are at the castle.”

“I’ll go tell him now. Whatever project he and Zîyanâ are gearing up for has him consumed. They’ve built a linoxa off the castle, and he keeps talking to me about their legacy. I wish I could have you there, Bîcav, so I knew what he was planning.” Zîvrünê pointed at me. “Whatever happens, stay away from them. I don’t know what they’re up to—”

“You would know if you looked,” I said, raising my eyebrows.

Zîvrünê’s attention shifted to Bîcav, and then the prince said, “Keep an eye on her. I’ll be back in an hour.”

As soon as I finished eating, Bîcav took my bowl. “Let’s start your training, right after you take a bath.”

“I don’t want to take a bath,” I said. “Can’t I just change clothes?”

He screwed up his face with a look of disgust. “You stink.”

“No way.” I sniffed and grimaced. Ugh. I did stink. “How long was I out?”

Blowing out a long breath, Bîcav prolonged my agony for several seconds before answering. “Three days.”

Rising from the table, I chuckled. “Which explains why I stink.”

After a bath, and another bowl of pîderîne, Bîcav and I sat on the shore of the lake, talking magîk. Unfortunately for me, there wasn’t another necromancer in Yândarî, possibly not in all of Qralî. Bîcav said there were a

few spirit mediums, those who could communicate with the souls of the dead, but neither he nor Zîvrünê knew them well, and now that Zîvrünê wasn't kümdâr, all he could do is request an audience—which he was afraid to do until I'd agreed.

"Of course I'd say yes," I said, surprised about the hard boundary. "Why wouldn't I?"

"As soon as you meet with a spirit medium, Zerôn will have a pretty good idea what your magîk is."

"Got it. On second thought, let's not."

"That's what we thought," he replied with a deep chuckle. "But that's why Zîvrünê wasn't willing to make your decision for you. Staying out of your head meant he wasn't sure where you stood in regards to Zerôn and your sister."

Snorting in disgust, I picked up one of the stones that lay on the bank and threw the smooth rock into the water before addressing Bîcav. He should've known though. He was near me enough that he would've heard my thoughts. "How come you didn't know?"

The blond guard raised his eyebrows and stared at me meaningfully. But whatever the message he'd intended by the look, I wasn't grasping the meaning. Finally, he relented, and explained.

"Whenever Zîvrünê and I are near you, all you think about is him. I don't have his same magîk, so all I can hear is what you're thinking at the moment."

I blushed, and my thoughts scattered.

Bîcav straightened, and then he glanced behind us toward the path. "Your sister is outside the barrier, screaming at me. She wants to talk to you."

I flinched, and my insides squirmed because I wasn't so sure I wanted to hear what she had to say. Shifting on the stones, I decided to use every advantage available. "What does she want?"

He closed his eyes, and I waited while he listened to her thoughts. When he opened his eyes again, he gave me a sad smile.

"She's upset, and her thoughts are all over the place, Buttercup." He stood and extended his hand. "You should go listen to her." He pursed his lips as if considering something and then shook it away. "Just stay right outside the barrier, and I'll be able to hear you both."

I didn't want to go, but I had nothing to do with what was best. I let him help me up, and it was all I could do to walk back toward the hut. "Just

so you know, I'm going because I trust you, not her."

"I know, but thanks for saying it aloud." Bîcav bumped me with his elbow when we got to the trail. "Come on, I'll walk with you. Zîvrünê changed the barrier so you can come and go as you please. And he also fetched you clothes from the market."

"I'll have to pay him back."

Bîcav touched my arm, drawing my attention to him. "Don't even suggest it. You don't know how much he already feels like he owes you. Please don't burden him with more."

"But I—"

"Trust me on this one."

He waved his arm at the path, and I stared at the bent and torn leaves from where I'd fallen.

With a deep breath, I asked, "Are you sure this isn't a trap? I don't want to go out there and get ambushed or something."

Bîcav snorted and leaned in to meet my gaze. "I wouldn't let you go if I wasn't sure it was safe. Zîvrünê would kill me if you were harmed on my watch. But I won't tell you secrets that aren't mine to share."

I wanted to be grouchy with him for not telling me what he knew, but a spark of giddy-warmth had blossomed in my chest with his mention of Zîvrünê.

"Fine," I said, marching past. "I'll go talk with my sister."

After rounding the bend by the fallen tree, I stopped. I'd been acutely aware of how my sister had ignored me for the last year, but the evidence of my own disregard stared back at me in the form of a stranger. Zîyanâ wore a loose tunic covering from shoulders to knees. There was no belt, and her golden hair was plaited in a simple braid. She wore little makeup, and the golden tattoos were bright against her sickly pallor. But the most disconcerting thing was Zîyanâ's hunched shoulders and her tight expression of worry. *Why is she so tense?*

"Dîsa," she said, forcing a smile. "I wanted to see if you would come for supper."

I studied my sister, trying to get a read on her, but I didn't know her—not like I once had. "No thank you."

"Why not?" she asked.

My chest tightened, and the brief debate of sparing her feelings was lost to the truth. "I don't trust Zerôn."

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed. Then she straightened, nostrils flaring, and pointed at my tunic. "Are you sleeping with him?"

"N-no." I took a step back, reeling. How had she come to that conclusion?

"You're a liar," she muttered, jutting her chin out. "He was right."

Indignation flared through me, and I waved at her new clothing. "Is this the new Zîyanâ style?"

She stiffened, and in a single heartbeat, her tight expression morphed from hostility to rage. "I was trying to be nice. But if you want to stay here, I

guess you like being a whore to the Zîv and his Serîk.”

I stared at Zîyanâ, too stunned for words. They flitted in and out of my mind, but I couldn’t even form a sentence.

“When you finally get tired of them manipulating and confining you, let me know. Zerôn and I would love to have you as our *guest*, completely free to come and go as you please. Zerôn has even offered to hire a private tutor for you to train under.”

Which might be tempting, except I didn’t trust Zerôn one bit, and Zîyanâ seemed determined to share in his fate.

“But chances are Bîcav is nearby watching and listening, and you’re too in love to see the truth, just like you’ve always been.” She sneered in disgust and spun on her heel, throwing her parting comment over her shoulder. “Come yourself or send one of Zerôn’s Serîk ahead of you when you change your mind. We have rooms all ready and waiting.”

Her bizarre display pretty much insured I would never come. I turned and, no longer affected by the barrier, walked toward the cabin. Bîcav met me a few feet in, his eyes wide with horror.

“That didn’t go like... Wait. I missed something.” I could tell just by the look on his face. “What did I miss?”

“She’s scared.”

I frowned because that was not the vibe I’d gotten.

“Of Zerôn. Something changed between them in the last few days or so.”

Obviously. Because I’d never gotten the feeling of fear from my sister, and the year of travel had been filled with affection, presents, whispers, and laughter.

Bîcav tilted his head toward the hut. “Let’s go wait for Zîvrünê.”

We’d barely arrived when the magî prince appeared wearing a wary expression. He found us sitting by the lake, pointed at me, and said, “You’re going to have to make a choice.”

I stared at him, his bare chest, hard abs, and vibrant eyes. He was beautiful and fierce. *You. I choose you.*

Next to me, Bîcav cleared his throat, trying to hide his laughter.

Blushing, I stammered, “About wh-what exactly?”

Zîvrünê frowned at Bîcav and then settled next to me, on my other side. “Zerôn knows you broke through my barrier, which means he knows how much power you have.” Rünê tapped his zeta bands. “You need to be marked.”

I nodded, remembering when Zîyanâ had received her zeta tattoos from Zîvrünê and his father. She'd been so excited about getting them, but afterward she only told me that she'd been marked—nothing else. The sudden weight of what Zîvrünê was saying sank in, and I grimaced. “Zerôn wants to mark me?”

“It’s his right as Kümdâr—”

“No,” I gasped. The idea of Zerôn tracing the marks on my arm made my stomach heave. “I don’t want him touching me.” I looked at Bîcav and then to Zîvrünê. “You said I have to make a choice, which means there is another option. Can’t you do them? You helped do Zîyanâ’s, right?”

Zîvrünê leaned forward and stared at Bîcav, and I turned to see him shake his head.

“You don’t have to worry about that at all,” Bîcav grumbled. “And you shouldn’t even have to ask.” The Serîk stood and, narrowing his eyes, added, “Your doubt in yourself is making you ask questions you shouldn’t.”

Zîvrünê’s eyes widened, and whatever thoughts he threw to Bîcav had the latter shaking his head as he strode away from us.

“Worried? Doubt?” I asked. When neither of them answered, I raised my voice and asked again, “What are you worried about?”

Zîvrünê met my gaze. “We’ve always believed that each of us is made up of two parts: body and soul.”

I rolled my eyes, frustrated that he felt like now was a time for a basic metaphysical lesson instead of answering my questions. “I’m aware of—”

“But there is a third part: your mind.” He gave me a sad smile as he tapped the side of his head. “And there is a lot about it that is challenging to decipher... even for me.”

The concept of “mind” being the bridge between body and soul wasn’t a new one. I remembered listening to a discussion years ago when he was just Rünê, and he, Erôn, and Anâ were still training, before my parents died.

“But that’s your magîk,” I said in protest. “How could you not understand your magîk?”

He barked a short, dark laugh. “How could you not understand yours?”

That was not fair. Narrowing my eyes, I snapped, “I haven’t been trained like you have.”

“But who can train a zeta?” he asked. “It’s one of the biggest challenges because there is no one stronger, right? So any magî training can only take you so far before you surpass their abilities. And the rules—like the

impossibility of breaking through another's magîk—can be broken or rewritten by another zeta.”

He took a deep breath and let his words settle. My thoughts raced with all the implications of what he was saying, but there was no agitation with the proposal. In fact, it made sense. I wasn't sure if the knowledge or determination came from my mind or my soul, but I wasn't going to let him take away this spot, barrier or not.

“So are you saying it was because of my mind or my magîk that I broke through the barrier?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. But the zeta bands tie all three together: body, soul, and mind. And if you're not at peace with the binding on all those levels, it might affect your magîk.”

“So then I *definitely* don't want Zerôn to do it. Can't you?” I asked. “You were supposed to be Kûmdâr. Don't you have the power to do it?”

He nodded. “I do. But it will be sealed by my magîk, which will have an effect until one of us dies. That's why the kûmdâr does the bands of zetas; it ties your allegiance to him. But if I do it, you'll be loyal to me over Zerôn—”

“Already feel that way,” I said with a snort. “Bands or no bands, that won't change.” My mind jumped to him and Zîyanâ. “Did he redo your bands? Or Zîyanâ's?”

He blew out a breath, and my stomach responded by twisting in knots. He better not have let Zerôn bind him.

“Not mine. I'm certain he'll have done all three of Zîyanâ's, and they also have their mate bond, tying their bodies and souls to one another. The ones I did on your sister were tied by my father, so they were loosed when he died.”

“Why didn't Zerôn redo yours?” The only threat to Zerôn would be Zîvrînê. Why wouldn't the kûmdâr want to bind his brother's allegiance?

“For the same reason I hesitate to do yours. I'll have to touch you.”

An eager thrill blossomed in my chest with his words, and I tried to suppress my smile. “I'm sure I'll survive,” I quipped. As soon as the words left my mouth, the deeper meaning settled. “You'll see my memories.” Blushing, I stammered, “Th-that's a little embarrassing.”

He stood and brushed off his butt. Even knowing he would be subject to all the memories of my infatuation, I couldn't help looking at him. How mortifying.

“I wonder if that's why Zerôn refuses to bind me,” he said, giving me a look of pity. “He doesn't want me to know how much he loathes having me

as a brother.”

I scrambled upright, stunned that was his conclusion. “No way. And honestly, why would you want him to bind you?”

Zîvrünê swallowed, and his gaze went distant. When he spoke, his voice was rough with emotion. “When we were little, my father said it was like dulce. Remember, we were boys who liked sweets, which is probably why he chose the analogy. To make the confection only required four ingredients—”

“Two,” I said, frowning.

He smiled a boyish grin and said, “That’s what I’d said, too. But it’s four. Milk, sugar, heat, and time. Time is like the magîk binding; it marries the other ingredients in perfect balance. Without the binding, the other three can be out of harmony, so much so it can be challenging to contain the result. If you had too much sugar or milk, perhaps there would be no harm to anyone but the zeta. But too much heat—say, in the form of fire—could destroy others.”

Was he trying to say... “What about you? Are you going to burn everything down if you don’t—”

He looked down at me and rolled his eyes. “I’m fine, Dîsa—Zädîsa.” He furrowed his brow, took a deep breath, and then, glancing away nervously, rushed to add, “But after your binding takes, it would be great if you would redo mine.”

“Sure. Of course.”

He cleared his throat and asked, “Where would you like to do this... and when?”

“How about now?” I asked. “Or does it take some special preparation, or ingredients, or something?”

“Nothing special, just us. But you have to lie down, so maybe somewhere a little more comfortable?”

Bîcav had gone back to the cabin, so I suggested the cave. “It has that spongy moss area I could lie down on, or is that too dark?”

Zîvrünê studied me, his blue eyes bright, and as he inhaled, he straightened. “Let me go change. I’ll meet you there.”

I waited on the shore, nervous that he wouldn’t come back. But he did, wearing a short sulu and a smile. Together we walked into the cool water toward the waterfall and the cave behind it—where I’d become a zeta.

The moss was spongy and soft, and I lay down on it, my entire body thrumming with excitement and trepidation.

“Will it hurt?” I asked, raising my voice to be heard over the pounding waterfall.

Zîvrünê knelt by my side, a somber expression on his face, as if he took what we were about to do as life or death. Then he leaned over me and whispered, “It won’t hurt you at all until the very end. Then you’ll feel tightness in your body, like you’ve climbed too much in one day. And your thoughts will be slower, your emotions a little more volatile, like you’ve had too much alcohol. You might even have a sense of wrongness because my magîk will be there too, for a short while. But in a day or so, you’ll feel fine.” He leaned back on his heels to look me in the eyes. “Are you ready for this?”

I nodded.

He picked up a small blade, and I tensed, gasping in horror as he sliced over the meaty part of his palm. A slow smile spread across his face, which only confused me more. My muscles coiled, the need to flee bubbled up inside, and then Zîvrünê winked at me.

“It looks barbaric,” he said. “But the cut is shallow enough that it’ll scab over, probably even before I finish. Although, I hope not.”

“Are you going to tattoo me with your blood?” I asked.

He chuckled and inched closer. “No. My magîk.”

That sounded less creepy, but I wasn’t stupid. “Then why did you cut yourself?”

“It’s easier for me to use my body fluids as a vehicle because there is

magîk in them, and blood is one of the most concentrated. I'd rather not have to use just my mind, and to bind you with my soul is a different bond."

I tried not to think about how much I wanted that bond in particular.

"Now, close your eyes and try to relax. I'm going to paint your arms, your face, and your navel. I'll go as fast as I can."

"Don't hurry on my account," I replied. "I've got nothing else to do today."

His touch was feather-light as he painted three bands on the skin of my upper arm. He finished the left arm, and I felt his breath against my skin where he'd touched. Whatever words he murmured were lost to the sounds of the waterfall, but I felt a thrum of energy go through me. The copper smell of his blood barely reached me as he worked on my arms, and I remained still—even when he moved, scooting closer to my head.

His touch on my face was brief, just a single dot on my forehead, but I sucked in an unsteady breath as his lips brushed against my skin and he whispered the magîk to seal the binding.

"Strength to your mind..."

His words dove deep, muddling my thoughts until I was sure I was dreaming.

I opened my eyes, and there was Zîvrünê leaning over my bare abdomen, smiling. Dream-like, Zîvrünê licked his finger and touched my skin just above my navel. Desire ripped through me, and I gasped. He put his finger back in his mouth and closed his eyes.

My breaths grew shallow, and the ache for him deepened as he leaned over and licked my skin. I parted my lips, and a whimper escaped. I blinked, and the cave became a cloud of sand. Lost in the dream, I did what I would never dare in real life. I ran my hands into his hair and murmured his name.

I wanted him. I wanted his joy and his peace and his freedom, just like I knew he wanted mine. I loved him. All of him. He was my other half. My soul mate. He was the light to my darkness, the temperance to my impulsiveness, the fire to my ice. My perfect balance. He was everything I loved, and my greatest joy came with him. I ached with the need for him and begged him to bind us so we could be together. I wanted *us*, merged as one—his weight on and in and through me. I arched with his touch, trying to maneuver to get closer to him. Surely he could feel this too.

There! His fingers stroked my soul, and I opened up to him, begging that he would do the same.

“Please,” I cried, panting and writhing with need. “Rünê... Rünê... Rünê.”

Suddenly, panic clutched my heart, and I knew the demons were chasing us, searching for a way to break through the wall we’d built to keep us safe from Kânkarä. The thought so strange and foreign but real, so real. Then there was Zerôn laughing at Rünê, saying he was lesser and always would be. Rünê with his eyes closed, sitting in the corner of his room, bruised and beaten, chanting “not real” and then begging Bîcav to help him know what was happening. Zîvrünê watching my sister fall, the guilt for the pain he’d caused shredding him. So much self-loathing, and my soul ached. Tears streamed down my face, and I wailed with anguish for his pain. I couldn’t take it—

The dream and nightmare collided, a cacophony of images and emotions, threatening to pull me under. A weight settled next to me, and I reached out to touch him. As soon as our skin met, peace washed over me, and the visions disappeared.

I blinked my eyes open, and Zîvrünê knelt over me, his eyes wide. The waterfall crashed at the mouth of the cave, and the moss above lit the cavern in soft light.

Blushing, I sat up and winced. “I’m sore.”

Golden bands encircled my arms—zeta tattoos. My abdomen—around my navel—was stamped with an odd design of waves, triangles, and circles. None of them, I was confident, made by a tongue. I closed my eyes and asked, “How much of that dream did you see?” But if he’d seen that dream, did that mean... “Did I see your memories?”

He shuttered his eyes and backed away from me. “I doubt it. My power doesn’t work that way.”

“Maybe it could,” I responded. But it was relieving to know that if I hadn’t seen his memories, he hadn’t seen all of that dream either. “I never thought I’d see more than the souls of animals, and you saw what happened.”

He jerked his head toward the waterfall, indicating it was time to go. Once we got to the other side and were wading out of the lake, he said, “But you were younger, your magîk still undeveloped. It might even continue to change over the next couple of years as you grow up.”

His words stung, because they implied...

“Are you saying I’m not grown up?” I blurted, anger spiking through my body. I stomped the rest of the way out of the water and then faced him.

“You think I’m still a child?”

Zîvrünê had the decency to bow his head. “You’re still a subadult, Zädîsa.”

“But you banded me like I was an adult,” I retorted, pointing at my new tattoos. “You can’t have it both ways, Zîvrünê.”

He jerked and met my glare with one of his own.

But I plowed on, heedless of the silent warning. “If I’m a subadult, you might’ve just sealed my magîk, making it so it wouldn’t grow. Or maybe that was your plan all along.”

He blanched and took a step toward me. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

I knew that. There wasn’t even a bit of doubt in my mind that he was speaking truth, but I was livid. I opened my mouth to accuse him of something else—I wasn’t even sure what—but was saved from my own stupidity by Bîcav charging toward us, yelling.

“What the fetid rot are...” He pulled to a stop, his mouth gaping. He pointed at me and glared at Rünê. “You marked her as a *zeta*?”

Zîvrünê sighed. “Binding her magîk was the best I could think of”—he shot me a pointed look—“to keep her safe.”

Bîcav’s surprise settled into reluctant acceptance; his mouth closed into a smooshed grimace and then evened out into flattened lips before he spoke again. “Still a dangerous move.”

“All of them are, at this point.” Zîvrünê raised his eyebrows.

Bîcav stared at his prince, nodded once, and then left.

Somehow I felt like they were speaking of more than just me and my magîk.

Zîvrünê turned to me and said, “I know your emotions are all over the place right now, and that’s even normal. And I promise, I don’t think you’re a child, but you’re not quite an adult either. I want to keep you safe for as long as I can.”

“Then stop treating me like a child,” I retorted. As soon as I’d spoken, I slapped my hand over my mouth. “I’m sorry,” I breathed. “I seem to have lost my mind.”

Instead of getting mad at me, he laughed. “It’s to be expected; it really is. I think your sister blurted out something about Zerôn right after she woke up.” He sobered and added, “That should’ve clued me in to her real feelings then, but I wanted...” He shook his head as if to clear it and then settled into silence as he led me to the cabin. As soon as we arrived, he said, “Bîcav will

return in a few minutes with a magî who will change your tattoos to look less conspicuous. If they're blue, everyone won't immediately know you're a zeta." Rubbing his eyes, he sighed and then added, "After that, you're free to go and come as you please."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Something strange is happening in the linosa. I'm going to try and find out what it is. I suggest you stay away from my brother and your sister, but I would never confine you." He sucked in a breath and choked out, "And I would never treat you like a whore."

"Oh rot," I gasped. "Did she say that to your face too?"

"I don't think she would dare. Bîcav showed me. Anyway, I'm not sure what to do about the mess we're all in, but I'm determined to fix it."

My chest swelled with pride and hope. "I think you should kill your brother and become the kûmdâr."

His eyes widened, and I slapped my hands over my mouth again. I obviously had a major problem with controlling what was coming out.

"I think you'd better wait until your judgment is better before you leave. Just a suggestion, but if Zerôn hears you speaking treason, I'm not sure I could stop him before he exacted punishment—even on you."

Surprised at my lack of control, and recognizing the wisdom of his recommendation, I nodded and said, "I think I'll stay put for a while."



THE NEXT MORNING, I felt like an aleph had marched over my back, kicked me, and then marched over my front. Every muscle in my body ached, and my head throbbed. My mouth was dry and tasted like mud. Pretty much, I felt awful.

Bîcav brought me water, tea, juice, and milk, but I only managed a few sips of each before I made him take the tray away. Zîvrünê came in twice to check on me, but he stayed in the doorway, a furrow on his brow.

The magî he'd sent yesterday changed the appearance of my bands. Instead of the three vibrant-golden bands he'd given me, I had picked blue like a common magî of little consequence. She said it would fade with time, but it was the best she could do. I didn't care, but Bîcav and Zîvrünê stayed up late into the night discussing it. And here he was, at my door again, staring

at me.

“Are you coming in this time? Or will you huff and leave?” I asked, keeping my lids half-way closed.

“I do not huff,” he muttered.

“Okay,” I replied agreeably as I closed my eyes again. “If you say so.”

Creeper.

“**W**hat?” I snapped. Rünê’s meaning sank in, and I reeled on Bîcav. “Are you joking? He didn’t know I was coming back?” If I could have glared fire, I’d burn him to ash. Anger and hurt wrenched through me, and I stormed over to my friend and poked him in the chest. “You—” I clenched my teeth and then corrected myself. “—no, whoever you got to talk to me in here”—I tapped my head with my fingertips—“was it Basvîk? Anyway, he said”—I jerked my head toward Zîvrünê—“that *Rünê would die if I—*”

Zîvrünê raised his voice and, right over the top of me, started yelling. “*You* brought her here? How dare you—”

Bîcav grabbed my arms, holding me still as he bellowed, “Stop.”

I snapped my mouth shut, and Zîvrünê was likewise silent.

Bîcav released me and, marching toward his master, continued to rant. “You *need* her, you fool. What you and Zerôn...” He slammed his palm into the prince’s chest and growled, “This is madness, and you’re blind to your own stupidity.”

“How dare you?” Zîvrünê snapped, smacking Bîcav’s hand away. “I said —” Rünê gasped suddenly, and his body trembled.

I stood rooted to the spot, blinking with shock as I tried to make sense of what was happening.

As he shuddered, his skin rippled, and seizing, he stumbled and released an inhuman growl.

What the rot? I sucked in a huge breath as he landed on the ground, thrashing on the leaf-litter. Fear scattered my thoughts, and I didn’t know if I

should go to him or stay away.

“Bêrde,” Bîcav shouted while waving for me to get back.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my voice hoarse with panic.

Bîcav ignored my question as he knelt next to the prince. Before I could ask again, Bêrde ran through the doorway, joining Bîcav, and the two magî crowded around Zîvrünê, muttering to one another and blocking my view.

Ruin yowled in the distance, and my attention flicked toward the tree line for the panthera even as I inched closer to Zîvrünê and his men. My gaze jumped back when I heard a grunt, and my panic lessened with Bîcav’s matter-of-factness.

“Let’s get him to the springs,” Bîcav said. “He’ll be fine after he soaks and has something to eat. Bêrde, help me lift him.”

Bîcav scooped his hands under Zîvrünê’s arms, and Bêrde picked up his feet. I shuffled behind them, refusing to let Zîvrünê out of my sight but uncertain if my presence was welcome.

Pinning me with his gaze, Bîcav gave a jerk of his head. “Come on, Zädîsa,” he called as they rounded the building. “Hurry up.”

My heart fluttered with trepidation, and I closed the distance. There was no reason to voice the questions burning the tip of my tongue; Bîcav could hear every one of them. The longer the silence stretched, the bigger my fear became until I felt like I would explode if he didn’t say something.

We went to the waterfall, where I’d hurried to bathe earlier today. The sun was up now, but the cool water—normally delicious in the heat—didn’t even register until mid-thigh. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll pull him through the waterfall,” Bîcav said, wading deeper into the water.

Frowning at the non-answer, I sucked in a seething breath, but before I could speak, Bêrde released Zîvrünê’s feet and faced me, offering a sad smile when our gazes connected.

“You should go to him,” the Serîk said.

I only had time to look at Bîcav before he bellowed, “Hurry up, Dîsa.”

Jolting into action, I dove forward, taking long strokes to catch up.

“The waterfall will probably be enough to wake him up. Then you shouldn’t have any problem getting him into the hot springs.”

“Why does he need to sit in the spring?” I asked. But I wanted to know what was wrong. Why was he seizing? And why would the heat help?

“Once he starts talking, ask *him* all your questions as fast as you can,”

Bîcav said. He treaded through the deep area, pulling Zîvrünê like they'd done this a hundred times.

Something about Bîcav's expression made me hesitate. This was bad—really bad. So did I want answers? *Stupid question*. Did panthera eat tapir? I swam toward answers like a caiman was chasing me.

At the waterfall, Bîcav took a deep breath, and then ducked under the pounding water, letting it beat against Zîvrünê. His legs jerked, and his feet splashed in the lake, evidence that he was awake. After filling my lungs, I followed, diving under the punishing force to avoid the brunt of the cascade.

I popped up on the other side, the dark cavern lit by bioluminescent moss on the ceiling. The scent of sandalwood and ylang ylang permeated the air, and I smiled at the nostalgic scent. Memories of him kneeling next to me and patiently giving directions when I was young surfaced, and emotion clogged my throat. He *had* to be okay.

"He's steady now, so you can take him to the spring in back," Bîcav said, pushing Zîvrünê toward me. "Give him a minute or two to become coherent, but then... Don't hold back. When he stops talking, come and get me."

Without waiting for a reply, the big Serîk dove back under the waterfall and disappeared, leaving me with Zîvrünê.

He stood, staring blankly at the back wall, and here in the dim light, his skin was even more leached of color, his eyes glazed. With a huge shiver, he whimpered, and a moment later, his teeth started chattering.

Rot.

"Come on," I said, sidling up to him. I pulled his arm over my shoulders, and slid my arm around his waist, squeezing to get his attention. "Let's get you in the warm water."

He let me guide him, saying nothing as he followed along. We climbed out of the lake and crossed the dark granite to where the hot spring-fed pool bubbled with warmth. The hint of sulfur hung in the air, but more pronounced were the heavy smells I associated with him. I smiled when I spied the soap we'd made, hundreds of bars, still stacked against the wall. He slid into the water and exhaled with relief, settling on the ledge.

I studied every plane and angle of his face, from his hairline over the arch of his dark eyebrows, and the water glistening off his eyelashes, illuminated by the moss above. I visually traced the slope of his nose and the bow of his lips, and my breath quickened. *Two years away... still not over him. I might never be.*

He stared at me with his bright blue eyes, and I wondered how long I'd been daydreaming.

"Hi," I said lamely, frowning when I couldn't even think of a single question.

"You should leave," he said, his voice low.

I flinched, and the retort flew out of my lips before I could consider the wisdom of it. "Stop treating me like I'm a child. I grew up."

"I can tell," he replied with a chuckle. After a beat of silence, he added, "But it doesn't matter. You should still go."

"Why?" Questions. Right. I had lots of them, but the one running through my head on replay escaped first. "What's wrong with you?"

He stood, water running down his sculpted chest. "Does it look like there's something wrong with me?"

This sounded more like Zerôn's arrogance. Fine. Two could play this game. "Why are you answering my questions with questions?"

"I'm trying to avoid them," Rünê said, his expression growing troubled. "Why are you here? You shouldn't be here."

"At least one of your men thinks otherwise. I only came because..." Yikes. What to say? Did Zîvrünê think he was dying or did Bîcav? "Because I got a message from Bîcav."

Zîvrünê crossed the pool, making the water ripple out before him. My skin tingled with anticipation as he drew near. I expected him to stop, but he closed the gap between us. Pushing into my personal space, he boxed me in, and I reactively stood. Now there were only inches between us, and the heat from his body radiated to my skin.

"Bîcav called you home?" he asked, studying me.

"Yes," I said, looking everywhere but at him. "Or he had someone else do it, rather. That's not his magîk, but you know that. Anyway, he was worried about you."

Zîvrünê snorted. "I'm fine."

Grimacing at the obvious lie, I glared up at him. "Magî who are fine don't have seizures. And they don't look like you." I waved at him, blushing because he was practically the most perfect male magî ever. "I mean you've gained weight, not that it looks bad. But you're paler than you used to be, and why do you have all these scars?" I ran my finger along one of the pink lines, and desire ripped through me so suddenly I jerked my hand away as if he'd burned me. My gaze returned to his and, when I spoke next, my voice was

breathy. “Also, you’re moody—which might not mean anything, except you’ve never had a temper, not even when Zîyanâ left you for Zerôn.”

He raised his eyebrows, and I cringed with guilt. That was probably a low hit.

“You’re really going to go there?” He laughed, but the sound was dark and filled with self-loathing. “It doesn’t matter.”

My guilt evaporated, and I smacked my palm on the water. “Yes,” I snapped. “I am going there because it does matter. That was over three years ago. And Zîyanâ...”

He shifted closer to me, and the water rippled again. I glanced down at his chest and the top part of his wet abdomen, bare but with tight squares of muscle, and swallowed. Relax. *Don’t like him.*

Pushing my attention up, I forced another swallow as my gaze skimmed over his chest again. So not right to be *that* attractive... and I was definitely not over him. He waved his hand in front of my face then snapped his fingers, and I shook off the stupor. *Double rot.* “Where was I?”

Smirking, he waited long enough so I knew that *he* knew I’d been ogling and then said, “Zîyanâ.”

Right. I was such a hypocrite—but still. “I understand you were upset because you thought you were going to partner with her, but she never treated you well, and Zerôn is an ass.” I held up my hand to stop his protest, but it never came. He merely stepped closer, and my words spilled out unchecked. “She was young and stupid and so were you. I never understood why you would trust Zerôn. You had to know—” His knee bumped mine, and I sucked in a shallow breath before continuing my ramblings. “—he was selfish. But she was only a year older than me now, I think—” He traced his fingers up my arm, and my mind completely blanked. “—so...”

Rot. What was my point? Something about him not being with Zîyanâ... which was a good thing. He inched closer, and his scent swirled around me. Why did he smell so good? Like sandalwood and ylang ylang and something so *him*.

“Do you really believe I was ever upset about your sister?” he asked, still smirking.

I stared up at him, his eyes capturing my soul, and nodded.

Zîvrünê traded his right to rule Qralî for Zîyanâ’s life. If that wasn’t love, such a feeling didn’t exist. And she repaid him by severing their engagement and bonding with Zerôn.

“Are you trying to tell me you’re not?” I asked, my voice dripping with sarcastic bitterness from the last year. “Or that you don’t care about her? I know that’s not true. You’re probably with her—”

“No. Never,” he said, his voice rough. “I do care about her, but like a sister. I don’t want her; I *never* wanted her. I thought you knew. I thought I was pretty obvious.”

My semi-certainty shattered, and my questions spilled out. “You said you would never touch me again and then you almost never *spoke* to me again. You treated me like I was the fetid bûyî for six months. Why would you do that?”

“Did you want me to talk to you?”

“I stood outside your room and begged,” I snapped. “Don’t you remember?” Every single minute had been torture.

He held my gaze, steady, intense. “If that happened, I have no memory of it. Are you sure you came to my room?”

I opened my mouth to clarify. Maybe I’d been wrong. Maybe—

Rünê curled his lips and added, “Or did you merely imagine such nonsense while in the arms of your lover?”

“Wh-what?” I gasped and shook my head. “What lover? What are you even talking about?”

“I saw you talking to one of the Serîk while we were traveling. Zerôn said —”

Lies—so many lies—and he *believed* them.

“I’ve never had a lover,” I shouted, blushing with the admission. I sucked in a deep breath and added, “I never wanted anyone else. *That* is the truth.”

“May I touch you?” he asked.

He wanted to see?

“Fine. Sift through my memories and see the truth. Zerôn is a liar.” I sucked in a breath as he cupped my neck and tilted my head up toward his. He stroked his thumb down my neck and just above the swell of my breast. My lips parted, and I forced out a question, something I’d always wanted to know. “Do you care about Qralî? About the magî?”

The last question came out breathy, and his eyes flashed green. His gaze traveled over me, heating my skin. He cleared his throat and said, “I’ve never cared about ruling.” Pursing his lips, he slowly reached forward to push my hair back and then tugged the tunic off my shoulder. He traced his fingers over my exposed skin and added, “And I didn’t care that Zîyanâ left me.

Even if it was wrong, I was glad.”

The longer he touched me, the more my mind clouded with desire. I didn’t want to concentrate hard enough to formulate a question. I would steal every second of this for as long as he wanted—forever. He traced his fingers down my neck, making me shiver despite the heat in the cave. Then, eliminating the small remaining distance, his lips parted, and he slowly leaned over me.

My lips parted in expectation, but he leaned to the side.

“What are you...” The question died as he traced his nose up my neck, along my thundering pulse. I grabbed his arms to stay upright, swallowing hard as he caressed my skin. Closing my eyes, I tilted my head to give him better access.

I’d dreamed of Zîvrünê like this for longer than I wanted to admit—even to myself. My heart pumped with the rush of desire. He exhaled, his breath stroking my already heated skin, just behind my ear, making me ache with want. I whimpered, and he grabbed my hips, holding me still as he pressed closer, until we were flush.

I let him. I would let him do anything he wanted. Fear that I could break this spell kept me immobile as he rotated his hips, grinding against me. I clung to him, to the pleasure, wanting it to last.

“It’s always been you,” he murmured, his voice low and gravelly. His grip tightened, and he kneaded through the tunic over my hip and then pressed his hand to my lower back, a rumble coming from his chest. “I was such a fool to miss it.”

He pressed his lips to my neck, softly, and then again, open-mouthed as he tasted my skin. I panted, the short breaths pushing my breasts against him. His words barely registered, but the desire between us swelled with the steam rising from the hot springs. His teeth grazed where he’d just tasted, and I moaned, pushing my hips into him—no longer thinking at all.

Instinct drove me, and I whimpered as he coordinated our movements. He was mine. He’d always been mine.

“Rünê,” I whispered, his name a sweet plea on my lips.

He responded with a throaty growl and pushed me against the wall of the pool. He inched my tunic up, the pads of his fingers rough on my thigh, and I moaned again. “This... yes... Rünê.”

The pressure of his lips on my skin increased as he kissed down my neck. A moment later, my moan morphed into a startled cry as he bit me. The sharp

pain disappeared, but my neck... The pain wrenched me from the torpid lust, and I shoved him as hard as I could—which is to say he didn't even move.

"What the rot?" I snapped and leaned back. "That hurt."

Whoa. My stomach dropped, and I put my hands on his chest. There was something wrong. His eyes were clouded with desire, totally understandable, but Zîvrünê's irises were normally blue—bright blue, like the vibrant poison dendros in the marshy areas of the jungle. But even in the dim lighting, his eyes *weren't* blue. They were green. Definitely green.

"Zîvrünê?" I swallowed and patted his chest. "Hey. Rünê? Are you okay?"

He shuddered. Closing his eyes, he stepped away, releasing his hold on me. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "You should go."

Leave? After we just almost... My concern turned to anger in a flash. “What? You just... we just... and you think... No.”

He jerked his head upright and pinned me with a glare. “I’m telling you to leave for your own safety; you should listen.”

“Excuse me?” I huffed. Memories of him telling me to leave two years ago flashed in my mind. “You don’t get to tell me what to do. And no way am I going to listen to you. Not after last time.”

“You don’t trust me?” he asked, incredulous.

“Really?” I snapped. “You abandoned me to the jungles of Qralî while you did... what?” The cloud of desire evaporated in the steam, and all the anger, frustration, and *hurt* I’d carried for two years came roaring back to me. “I will never do what you tell me. Never again. That’s not how love works —”

“You think you know how love works?” he snarled. “Does it protect? Does it sacrifice? Does it protect and sacrifice even when it’s torture? Tell me, Dîsa, does love look like that?”

What the rot? I frowned, baffled with his ranting. Was he implying he felt that way... Oh, of course. “You mean Zîyanâ—”

“No!” he bellowed and then shuddered with the vehemence of his denial. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and then another, standing stiffly in the water only inches away from me.

But I wasn’t going to let this go. I’d gone two years without answers, and I wasn’t going to live that way any longer. I was no longer a subadult and no longer ignorant.

He opened his eyes, blue once again, and said, “You misunderstand.”

“Then, please, tell me,” I whispered. “I want to know.”

Nodding, he stepped backward until he was on the opposite side of the pool and then sat. “I wanted to be in love with Zîyanâ; it was the best thing for Qralî, but I didn’t love her. I finally realized I couldn’t pretend that day she fell.”

My face pinched from frowning so hard. This made no sense.

“Do you remember that morning?”

His look was so intense I could feel it on the other side of the pool. I tried to remember, but the details seared in my memory of that day were from *after*.

“You had Zîyanâ braid your hair, and you wore one of her tunics.”

I did remember. She’d put a red bead in with a black feather. She’d teased me for having a crush on Zîvrünê, reminding me that he was hers. I almost didn’t go, but my infatuation with Zîvrünê was greater than my pride. Zîvrünê had walked beside me, and we’d talked—I couldn’t even remember what about—then he sprinted forward, the beginning of the end of my world.

“One of the worst days of my life,” I muttered, remembering the shock of seeing Zîyanâ’s soul, and her denying it later. I’d come into my power that day, but it had brought only misery. Like Zîvrünê giving Zerôn the right to rule to heal her body, the only reason she was able to get back in and live.

“Me too,” Rünê said.

I rolled my eyes at my own stupidity. “Right. Sorry—”

“Not what you’re thinking, Dîsa. You might’ve believed I was so in love with Zîyanâ that I gave up my right to rule.”

“That’s not true?”

He closed his eyes, dropped his chin to his chest, and murmured, “No.” After a moment of silence, he continued, “I told Zîyanâ I didn’t want to be with her. I wasn’t in love with her, I’ve never been in love with her, and it wasn’t fair to either of us. I knew she and Zerôn were close. Zerôn liked to tease me, but I didn’t care.”

“You didn’t care?” I repeated his words like a stupid night parrot, even though I knew what they meant.

“Not like that.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and grimaced.

But then why? What had happened? Something big—really big. And then why had they both come to me and begged me to flee?

After another bloated pause, he cleared his throat, rousing me from my

musings.

“I told her I knew about her and Zerôn and I wasn’t going to bond with her. I thought she’d be relieved; I knew she didn’t love me.”

Fetid rot. I knew Zîyanâ, and, as much as I loved her, she wouldn’t have been happy. She would’ve been terrified. She would’ve only seen the stability and power she was losing.

“She threatened to jump. Zerôn grabbed her. I don’t think she meant to...”

I remembered sprinting up the mountain, someone shouting, and then Zîyanâ screaming. I’d seen her golden hair, her hands flailing. Zîvrünê hadn’t even been near her. *Oh Rot.* My stomach clenched, and I gave voice to the doubt, “Did he push her off?”

He clasped his hands between his knees, gaze down. “I don’t think so.”

But he couldn’t assure me if he hadn’t seen it in Zerôn’s memory.

“So why—”

“Why go along with Zerôn being Kümdâr? I meant it when I said I didn’t care about power. Rather, I wouldn’t care as long as my people were safe. I’ll do whatever I need to keep them safe, to keep my loved ones protected.”

I covered my mouth and turned away. My stomach churned, an instantaneous reaction as memories of the murders in Heza surfaced, my sister bleeding out, of the last two years of my life. I muttered, “Who are you trying to keep safe?”

“Everyone,” he said, throwing his head back as a strangled cry broke free. He coughed, cleared his throat, and said, “Everyone.”

Disbelief filled my chest and spilled out of my mouth. How could he not see? “You thought letting Zerôn rule would keep *anyone* safe?” I asked incredulously. “Really? Who? Who was it going to keep safe?” I reined in my emotions, shoving them back into the recesses of my mind to deal with when I had time and space to process. Glancing up at him, I said, “They’re not safe.”

He stood, stiffly, a frown fixed on his face. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Are you talking about the bûyî?”

“No,” I replied. His surprise further confused me—like he didn’t know. “Zerôn is doing another kirinî... a third... a fourth, maybe? I don’t even know how many this is.”

“What?” he snapped, his expression morphing from confusion to betrayal to rage in a blink. “No. He’s not. Where did you hear that? Someone is lying

—”

I jerked my hands out of the water and held them up in surrender. “No one,” I said in a rush. “No one told me, Rünê. I saw it. His Serîk gathered a bunch of magî together in Heza and then slaughtered them.”

He started shaking again, and uncertainty seeped into my skin. The only information I’d learned was about the past, and my interpretation then had been so wrong. Was I wrong now, too? Maybe I’d misunderstood whatever was happening in Heza. Except there was no way to misunderstand the deaths, or the Serîk in red.

“I don’t know why, but I watched it with my own eyes.”

Zîvrünê darkened, and fury rolled off him. Keeping my hands up felt even more important as his face contorted into a vicious mask.

I tried to mitigate whatever damage I’d done. “Listen, the Serîk were gathering magî; I assumed it was for another kirinî. Maybe I’m wrong about that part. I really don’t know what he’s doing with them. Sorry that I upset you.”

I inched back until my calves were flush to the stone. The only way to increase the distance was to get out, flee—which would be akin to admitting that he made me nervous. Even though he did, I couldn’t let him know it.

“You’re wrong. He said it was over,” Zîvrünê growled. He sucked in deep breaths as though trying to calm himself. “He promised he would stop... if I... He swore it.”

Through the water I could feel his body practically vibrating with rage.

“You need to leave. Get out of here. Leave Yândarî, and don’t come back. No matter what.”

I snorted in disgust. “I’m not leaving again. At least not without a lot more answers. All the answer, actually—like everything you know.”

His furrow hardened. “Not from me...”

He shuddered and then, without finishing his sentence, spun and dove under the water, surfacing at the other end of the pool a few seconds later. He climbed out—not even bothering to look back at me—crossed the cave to the clear, cool lake and leapt in, swimming through the pounding waterfall as though he were being chased.

Ass. Or maybe he was delusional or ill—only we didn’t get sick, ever. Zetas were the most powerful magî, and illness didn’t affect us. Injury yes, but I’d seen enough of Zîvrünê to know he was physically whole, except for the scars. What was up with the scars?

I released a slow breath, trying to find a way to put together the puzzle he'd presented so there was sense amidst the chaos, but it wasn't happening. The only excuse I could come up with was a mental issue, but that was actually Zîvrünê's power: magîk over the mind, memory, brain stuff and all that. Unless he was losing it. Had he ever had someone bind his powers again?

I swam back to shore, and as I waded out of the water, my frustration grew. Marching toward the hut, I was startled by the sudden burst of shouting.

"If he dies, we'll get nothing," Bîcav snapped, shifting out of the way as I opened the door. He rounded on me and said, "You were supposed to ask questions and then come talk to me. What did you tell him?"

I mentally ran through the last bit of our argument, and the big Serîk's eyes widened.

"Are you sure?" he asked, glancing down the hallway.

There was no reason to answer him aloud, and he must've plucked the answer out of my thoughts. He swore and spun, running down the hall toward an open door, shouting, "She's telling the truth."

As if I would lie. I marched out of the house and returned to the shore to sit on the rocks and let the air suck the moisture from my clothing while I thought. Why would Zîvrünê think I was lying?

The only people I assumed were liars were those who'd proven themselves such—like Zerôn. But when I lived here, in Yândarî, I hadn't trusted anyone either. No, I did, but only Zîvrünê and Bîcav.

So what was really going on? Zîvrünê's hut was quiet behind me, the only noise in the clearing coming from the waterfall and the trill of the birds. I returned to the home, armed with suspicion, and let myself in. I padded down the hallway, stopping just outside the open doorway, and peeked through.

The room was pristine white, with the exception of the battered and bruised male magî in bed, propped up on pillows, and Bêrde sitting at his side. At the end of the bed stood Zîvrünê and Bîcav.

The recovering magî's left eye was swollen shut, and he spoke with a lisp—likely because of his split lip. But there was something familiar about the Serîk's voice.

"Zerôn wasn't just looking for her, but he does want Dîsa. Zîyanâ told him her sister can see the souls of dead animals, and now he thinks she's the

key to making it work.” His attention jumped from Zîvrünê to the doorway where I stood.

“You,” I breathed, staring at the Serîk. I recognized him now. “You were in Heza.” Memories of the gruesome bodies flitted through my mind.

A heavy weight settled over the room—dread, anger, horror—or perhaps that was all me. Even so, Zîvrünê just stared at me, and Bêrde stared at the kümdâr’s Serîk. Bîcav had the decency to blanch with my scrutiny and drop his gaze, but he could pick the thoughts right from my head.

“How did you get here?” the Serîk asked. “They didn’t find you?”

The rock in my stomach doubled. “Were you in Heza looking for me?”

“Yes. But the kümdâr wants other strong magî, too,” he said, lifting his hand to his face. He brushed his fingertips over his lower lip and winced.

“You know him,” Bîcav said. Not asking but stating a fact.

I nodded, continuing to stare at the Serîk. “Your leader accused you of lying, and you said, ‘I never lie.’ Then you proceeded to tell your leader that we’d gone off a different direction. You said there were footprints...” He probably didn’t even remember the conversation from a month ago—that kind of destruction might even be commonplace for his kind—but every second of that terrible day was etched in my memory. “You lied and kept us safe.”

The Serîk surprised me with a somber nod.

“That was the beginning of the end for me,” he stated, his voice filled with loathing. “I couldn’t... This perversion of magîk... His vision for Qralî is not my vision. I couldn’t serve him anymore, a magî who wreaks destruction on his own kind.”

Zîvrünê growled and clenched his fists. Bîcav muttered something, and Zîvrünê deflated and pinched the bridge of his nose. Part of me wanted to yell at all of them, and the other part wanted to comfort Rünê. Instead, I fixed the Serîk with a suspicious look and asked, “You want us to believe that the kümdâr let you leave?”

I scanned the room, looking to see how the other magî were taking his story. Would I put it past Zerôn to beat one of his Serîk as a way to get inside Zîvrünê’s hideaway? Nope. Not at all.

The Serîk flinched and muttered, “Let me live is more like it.”

“I found Bawêrî on the Western Rê, unconscious, four nights ago,” Bêrde said, his features hard as granite. “He was near the jungle’s under canopy and it was late. I don’t know when he’d been dumped, but he wouldn’t have

survived until morning, too many hungry panthera, caiman, and conda.”

Four nights ago? Ruin and I were still traveling, although we’d been deliberate in avoiding the Rê—for obvious reasons.

“He’s telling the truth,” Bîcav said, turning to me. “And he wonders how you got past the Serîk on the Rê; they left dozens of magî from Heza all the way to Yândarî.”

All eyes shifted, and their gazes landed on me.

“I didn’t travel on the Rê,” I said. “We—” Bîcav shook his head, and I quickly amended. “—I traveled near it but stayed in the jungle, just in case.”

Zîvrünê approached the side of the bed and asked the Serîk, “Will you let me see into your memories?” Rünê’s hulking form blocked my view as he stood over the magî. “It won’t hurt. I just want to know...”

The Serîk nodded and said, “I know your ability, Zîvrünê. You can steal through my memories”—he held out his hand—“but you won’t like what you see.”

Zîvrünê tensed, and his words floated to me. “I almost never do.”

Silence descended, and a few minutes later, Zîvrünê stepped away from the bed, his body trembling. I stared at him, waiting for him to say something, but he stalked past me on his way out the door. He didn’t even glance my way.

“He knows,” Bîcav said, his deep voice tinged with sorrow as he glanced at where Rünê had exited. “At least now he knows what Zerôn is doing.” After a long exhale, Bîcav looked at the other magî. “Bêrde, will you help Bawêrî clean up? Get him something to eat, and help him rest, please?”

Maybe I should go after him—

“Zädîsa,” Bîcav said. “Let’s go have that talk. You need to know what’s going on.”

Finally. “That would be great.”

I followed my friend outside to the shore of the lake, and we sat on the smooth river rock. Staring at the crashing white water, I waited for Bîcav to pick the questions from my head and deliver the answers. The seconds passed, rolling into minutes, and still he was silent.

Turning to him, the ravaged expression on his face stole my demands, and I said, “It’s been bad.”

He nodded and scrubbed the tears from his face. “Much worse than I expected,” he replied with a sniff. “He wanted to keep you safe from... all of it. And Zerôn is persuasive, even in his lies.”

I shook my head and spat, “I’ve never believed him.”

Bîcav laughed, another dark chuckle. “You’ve never trusted easily—except when it comes to your sister.”

I huffed a laugh. “I haven’t trusted her since before Zerôn became Kûmdâr.”

“Except the time she took you to an empty room so you could ask Rûnê to stop ignoring you.” Bîcav’s gaze was filled with pity.

Which was why Rûnê had no memory of my begging.

The big Serîk continued, “Your sister and Zîvrûnê, they’ve wanted to believe Zerôn would change. If they do enough, maybe he’ll see the error of his ways. It’s why Zîvrûnê doesn’t listen to me—even when he knows I’m speaking the truth of Zerôn’s thoughts.”

“What about the day Zîyanâ died? Did Zerôn really push her?”

Bîcav shifted on the rock so he was facing me. Raising his eyebrows, he said, “Sometimes what a person thinks and what actually happened aren’t the same. And I can only hear the thoughts when present—and only one person at a time. Over the years, I’ve heard a lot about that day, but all three of them have very different thoughts, and if I told you...”

He exhaled, long and low, and the anticipation made me want to hit him. He laughed again, but this time, the darkness held real mirth.

I narrowed my eyes and said, “I might want to hit you, but I didn’t.”

Nodding, he continued to chuckle for several seconds before speaking. Pulling me in for a side hug, he said, “I appreciate you not acting out on your thoughts of violence.” He sobered. “Zîvrûnê found out first about Zerôn and Zîyanâ, and then later—after they had bonded—about their plans. You didn’t know—and he never told you—about his lack of feelings for your sister... or his feelings for you. Even when you were younger, Zîvrûnê liked you better, a fact that Zerôn used to torment him about. Zerôn is very adept at twisting truth until it is sordid or perverted. And Zîvrûnê has been fed a diet of shame from Zerôn for most of their lives. Giving Zerôn the rulership was an attempt to keep you safe and when that wasn’t enough, he sent you away.”

Fetid. Rot.

Bîcav went on to explain, and I sat dumbfounded, staring at the water but seeing nothing. My reality—the truth I’d built my life on—was flipped inside out and then backward.

After Zîyanâ fell, as we raced down the mountain, the two of them fighting. Zerôn heaped blame on Zîvrûnê; Zîyanâ would’ve never threatened

to jump if Zîvrünê hadn't destroyed her hopes and dreams by telling her he didn't want to bond. The ultimate threat: Zerôn said he would tell me that Zîvrünê had driven Zîyanâ to jump.

"I wouldn't have believed Zerôn," I said, nauseated by the abhorrent lies. "How did Zîvrünê not know?" My eyes widened as truth dawned on me. "Didn't you tell him?"

Bîcav nodded. "Of course I did, but *you* didn't. And how would you have known to say anything? I serve him, and when he tells me to say nothing, I have very little choice." He shrugged. "And then you were gone."

I thought of Zîvrünê storming out just now and asked, "So now what? I feel like there's still something I'm missing. This isn't all just who likes who, is it? Because that can be cleared up now, preferably before dinner."

Bîcav looked up at the Sivan canopy and snorted. "No one would want that more than me, except Zîvrünê."

Uh-hello. Me. Definitely, me because Zîvrünê tastes like... I thought of the almost kiss in the cavern, blushed when Bîcav coughed, and then pushed the thought from my mind. *Think about birds... or fish.*

"Anything else," he said. "Although I'm disappointed that's as far as it went."

The afternoon sun was falling, and the colors of the jungle deepened in response to the decrease in light, and I hoped he wouldn't see that I was blushing like I was stained with acai juice. Dropping my head into my hands to hide, I murmured, "He bit me."

"Niiiiiice." Bîcav chuckled.

"No, not like a love bite. There's something wrong with him." *His eyes were green, and he's acting strange.*

Bîcav's laughter dried up, so I peeked at him between my fingers, sitting upright when I noticed the somber expression on his face.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He should be back," Bîcav said, climbing to his feet. He held out his hand and added, "Let's go find him; Zîvrünê should be the one to tell you the rest."

Only... we couldn't find him. He wasn't by the lake, or in the cavern, or hiding in his room. Zîvrünê had disappeared, and the longer we searched for him, the more agitated Bîcav became.

"I think he left," I said as we circled back around the dwelling. While the hut appeared small from the side nearest the lake, the building extended deep

into the jungle, and we'd searched *all* through the area. "He was so mad—"

"He wouldn't leave. He knows better than to leave the sanctuary of his magîk-protected clearing. He wouldn't take that risk, not with the Serîk and you here."

I studied Bîcav, the fear etched into the skin by his eyes, and I knew he was wrong.

Three days passed, all much the same. By the end of the week, I was tired of being tired. I went back to the lake and bathed, walked around the clearing, and ate a full bowl of pîderîne for breakfast. The next morning when I awoke, Bîcav came in wearing a common sulu and a frown.

“Your sister has been to the barrier three times this week. Are you well enough to visit with her?”

I sat up and grimaced. “Do I look well enough?”

Bîcav sat on the edge of my bed, the stuffed mattress dipping with his weight. He held out a glass of juice. “No, but she refuses to talk with either me or Zîvrünê.”

“You want to know what she has to say?” I asked, immediately realizing the stupidity of my question. “You probably already know, but I don’t want to hear it again.”

My throat clogged with the thought of her calling me more names. *A whore?*

The girl who held me while I cried after my parents disappeared, who listened to me talk about my adoration of Zîvrünê when I was eleven and twelve, had turned on me. In hindsight, she’d been slowly changing the last couple of years—ever since she’d been with Zerôn. And now she *wanted* to talk to me?

“Zîvrünê has been to the castle every day this week. He’s tried to find this place, the linoxa, but he can’t. We don’t know what Zerôn is doing or why. But there is rumor of another kirinî.”

I frowned, his words yanking me out of my drowning self-pity. “Why would he have another kirinî? It was the first thing he did after becoming Kûmdâr.”

Bîcav nodded and nudged the juice toward me again. I sighed and took it, immediately chugging the contents so my stomach wouldn’t have time to rebel—and then grimacing when it did. Still, I kept it all down.

“Now will you tell me?” I asked. “Why is he holding another kirinî?”

He stood and walked to the door. “We don’t know. Maybe you should go find out from your sister.”

“Where’s Zîvrünê?”

Bîcav frowned, his gaze darting down the hall. Swallowing hard, he then said, “At the castle.” He took a deep breath and stepped out of the room before pausing just outside the doorway. Without turning back to look at me, he said, “If you can do anything to get him to stay—anything to get him to stop going there—I wish you would.”

What more could I do?

I scooted to the edge of the bed so I could get dressed.

Stomping through the trail, I wanted to hit something, more particularly, someone. Zerôn was at the top of my list, followed by Zîyanâ. But Zîvrünê was a close third honestly, because if he wasn’t so thoughtful or compassionate or self-sacrificing, maybe I wouldn’t need to be talking to my sister to try and figure out what she and her insane bondmate were up to.

What the rot was a linoxa? I’d never heard the term used to describe a place before. What type of a place would be an experiment? Something big and terrible if Zerôn created it.

I stepped through the barrier, and all of my anger drained out of me like someone had pulled a plug after washing dishes.

“Zîyanâ?” I said her name, stunned by her unkempt appearance.

Her tunic, dirty and frayed, hung limply down to her knees, and her hair was matted and oily. She shifted, faced me, and reached up to cover her cheek—or rather, the purple-and-yellow bruise on her cheek. She wore no makeup, nothing to cover the wound or distract from it. As soon as she saw me, relief washed over her features, and she ran toward me.

“Dîsa,” she said, pulling me into a tight hug. “I was so worried.”

I leaned away and studied her face, but there was nothing but sincerity there.

“But you’re okay,” she said. “Nothing bad happened to you, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she wiped her nose. “Zerôn said”—she sniffed and swallowed—“you’d been hurt. But you don’t look hurt.”

What the rot? “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I just wasn’t sure. I didn’t know.”

“You’re not making any sense. What did you think had happened? What’s going on, Zîyanâ? What is Zerôn telling you?”

At the mention of his name, her eyes widened and she darted a glance behind. When she returned her attention to me, her jaw was set in a determined line. “You should go. Leave Yândarî. Zerôn suspects”—she tapped my arm where the new tattoos were—“this has been tampered with, and he wants you to enter the kirinî so he can assess your power.”

“I don’t want to,” I said simply. “And I don’t have to.”

“If he changes the law, you will have no choice. He’s ordered the elders... But if you leave... Have Rûnê and Bîcav help... You should go.”

My insides twisted with pity because it was clear something was wrong with my sister, only I had no idea what all Zerôn was doing to her.

“Do you need somewhere safe to stay?” I asked. “I’m sure I could bring you back through the barrier—”

“No,” she shouted. “D-don’t you dare.” She pulled away from me and the path. “Really, you should go. I’m trying to help you. You don’t want to get mixed up in what’s going to happen.”

Cold anxiety blew by, and I wondered what she knew. She took another step back, and I rapidly fired off all the questions I could think of.

“What is the linoxâ? Why does Zerôn want to do another kirinî? Why would he want me? Did you tell him about my power?”

Taking a deep breath, she shuffled closer and whispered, “Can I ask you a question?”

All her behavior was so uncharacteristic of the magî she’d been, and I wanted to kill Zerôn for whatever he was doing to her. “Sure,” I said, even while my mind was spinning. How could I get her out of here? “You can ask me anything.”

“Would it be wrong to steal happiness?”

All of my thoughts drained with the question, and I stared at her, my heart thumping against my ribs in warning. “What?”

“If I found a small bit of happiness”—she swallowed and then continued—“would it be wrong to take it? Would you think less of me?”

The question was weighted, and I had no idea of the context, but my heart ached for Zîyanâ. In my core, I believed stealing was wrong, but her word choice made me think she was referring to a betrayal of Zerôn. I extended my hand, hoping she would come closer so I could pull her to safety, and said, “I will always love you. You’re my sister; I want you to be happy.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she stepped back—away from me—and repeated her initial message. “Leave Yândarî. Don’t come back. You don’t want to get mixed up in this.”

Then she ran away.

Stunned, I stood rooted to the spot for several minutes, staring after Zîyanâ. Should I go after her? There was something seriously wrong, and she probably needed help, but was I strong enough to give it to her? My gut instinct was to wait and talk it over with Zîvrünê and Bîcav. I pivoted to return to the cabin, but my gaze snagged on the flora. Right where my sister had been standing, the plants had grown thick and dozens of inches taller in her wake.

I returned to the cabin and told Bîcav everything, even though he’d heard it all firsthand. But the plants’ growth was new.

We waited another hour before Zîvrünê burst into the hut.

“Zädîsa!” he bellowed, voice tinged with panic.

Bîcav and I sprinted to him.

The former-heir stood in the hallway, blue eyes wild with fear, and the emotion rolled off him in crashing waves.

“Holy Kânkarä,” he said, pulling me into a fierce embrace. “She didn’t take you. Fetid rot, I can’t believe... She didn’t take you.”

I could only assume he meant Zîyanâ, but she hadn’t even mentioned me going with her anywhere.

“She told me I needed to leave,” I said, wiggling out of his embrace. “Why—”

Bîcav sucked in a deep breath and left the room.

“Where’s he going?” Fear clawed at my chest, and my heart skipped a beat and then tripled its pace as my adrenaline spiked. “What’s going on?”

Zîvrünê leaned toward me and held my gaze. “You need to go, Dîsa. We need to get you out of Yândarî as fast as we can—”

“Can’t I just hide here?” This sanctuary was protected. I could even add an extra layer of magîk. Maybe. Probably.

“I wish you could, but this is the first place he’ll look if you stay.

Please..." His voice cracked, and his features were ravaged with emotion. "Please," he begged. "I'll send for you as soon as it's safe. No, I'll come to you myself. Just, I need to find a way to stop this, and I can't think... You're so vulnerable. There's a caravan of magî going to Terit... Please?"

His anguish wrenched my heart; his sheer panic overwhelmed me. As if to confirm the terrible reality of the situation, Bîcav returned carrying a rucksack.

"This will get you to Terit, possibly farther. There are stamped coins in the bottom. Just be careful how and when you use them. Not many magî have coin like that."

"Save the coin until after you get to Terit; the magî in the company have been well-compensated to get you there and to return here without you. Don't tarry there though."

"I don't want to go."

Zîvrünê closed his eyes, and when he spoke, his tone and words and expression were rife with conflict. "You will leave. If you refuse, I'll have Bîcav throw you out." He choked on the last word, and a single tear trickled down his shadowed cheek.

His words punched me in the stomach, igniting a fire of rage at his manipulation. I wrenched away, livid that he would stoop to such tactics, that he wouldn't even level with me. Refusing to tell me the truth like I was a child. I took two steps before he caught my arm, and momentum rocked me back.

"Dîsa—"

"No," I snapped. "You can't have it both ways. You can't be my friend and treat me like that. You're hiding something—maybe a lot of somethings—but I won't let you decide what I'm going to do or not do. Keep your sack. Keep your coins. Keep your—"

He fell to his knees and bowed his head, holding his hands up in supplication. "Please."

Fetid rot. His contrition gutted me, and I knelt next to him.

"Just tell me," I whispered.

He shook his head, his bowed head, and his shoulders trembled. "I can't. Please... Please, don't ask." Lifting his chin, he blinked away tears and said, "I promise, Zädîsa. As soon as it's safe, as soon as I make it right, you can come back."

I glanced at Bîcav one last time, depending on him, his honesty. With a

single nod, he crushed my hope.

“Do what you can to warn the outposts to avoid the kirinî,” Bîcav said, his expression grave. “Perhaps if they don’t use magîk, the Serîk won’t bother. Maybe they won’t even be able to track magî in the distal posts.”

A stone of dread settled deep in my belly, and I knew—I *knew*—this wasn’t the time for hysterics. Both Zîyanâ and Zîvrünê were terrified—and terrified to tell me. If I wanted to be seen as an adult, I needed to act like one.

I rose and extended my hand to Zîvrünê as I whispered, “I’ll go.”

He shuddered and then stood with liquid grace, not bothering with my hand. “Do what you can, but don’t risk exposing yourself.” He grabbed the bag from Bîcav and held it out to me. “We’ll find you as soon as it’s safe.”

Yanking the bag from Zîvrünê’s hand, I grumbled, “I heard you the first dozen times. Enough with the safe; I get it.” I looked up at Bîcav. “Take care of him. Don’t let him be the sacrificial lamb again, right?”

Zîvrünê stiffened and then laughed, a low, dark sound without mirth. “Please be careful.”

He leaned over, and I froze as he brushed his lips against my cheek. Before I could say or do anything, he strode from the room.

“Come on, Buttercup,” Bîcav muttered. “Let’s get you to the caravan.”

So I went... because I’d do anything for Rünê.

“D o you know where he went?” I asked. The question was a courtesy because I was certain Bîcav knew. How could he not?

He was in my head right now, just like he would’ve been inside Zîvrünê’s head the entire fetid time I was gone, hiding in the outposts. I pulled my shoulders back and marched toward Bîcav, my frustration swelling. I was functioning on such limited knowledge precisely because no one bothered to talk to me.

How can I help... “When I don’t know what the fetid rot is going on?” I screamed, poking him in the chest. “So help me, Bîcav, if he dies or gets maimed because of your stupidity, I will find a way to make you pay... even if I have to steal your body for him!”

Bîcav gaped like a torpid fish, so I jabbed my fingers at him again for good measure.

“Can you do that?” he asked.

I had never tested the limits of my magîk, so I ignored the meaning of his question and poked him one more time. “Yep, I just did. And if you don’t get your legs in motion, I’ll figure out a way to break them.”

“No,” he said and grabbed my arm.

Hauling me alongside him, we left the lakeside sanctuary, taking a path I’d never seen before. Instead of exiting near the Rê that led into the magî market, Bîcav wound through the lower canopy of growth. The sunlight dimmed, crossing from afternoon to early evening, bathing the flora in shadows. I searched the area for Ruin, but the great cat hadn’t been around

since our arrival, not that I could blame him.

My attention snagged on a large aleph ear plant, and I brushed my fingers over the surface as we passed. Something was off. I'd never seen leaves this big before. A faint memory tickled my mind, and I asked, "Is there something happening with the plants? The jungle seems different."

Bîcav nodded but gave no other answer.

"Do you know what's happening?" I asked, letting anger leak into my voice. "I'd love to know if you're deliberately being obtuse or if you have a sick, new fascination with being gamey. If you don't know, just spit it out. I'm not going to think less of you for not knowing."

"I have theories... but no answers."

"I'd like to know what you think."

We arrived at a small clearing between the tall trees of the canopy with a rope and pulley attached to one of the large banyans. Bîcav grabbed the rope, and a few seconds later, a simple platform rushed toward the ground, jerking to a stop when Bîcav held the rope taut.

The wooden unit was crudely built, roughly hewn pieces of lumber sealed to one another. Even if the surfaces were uneven, they'd been buffed so as not to cause splinters on bare feet. I glanced down at Bîcav's feet, but they were shod with shoes, magîk shoes—much like mine.

"I think it has to do with your sister," he said, distracting me from the wood.

I met his gaze, and he raised his eyebrows as if to challenge me. But his supposition was more than reasonable. I shrugged and said, "I could believe that. Do you know why?"

He grunted and then said, "Zerôn mistreats her, but I'm not sure if that's enough to make things grow crazy."

I mulled over his words, looking for something to either lend or steal credit from his conclusion. He waved me onto the platform, and I absently followed.

"Hold on," he said as he reached for the rope.

"What?" I snapped back to the present, and my irrational fear sliced through me. I spun, my eyes widening as I realized—

"There's nothing to hold on to," I screeched, throwing my arm around him as my stomach dropped to my ankles.

His laugh twisted with my scream as we ascended into the trees, lessening the panic enough that I didn't turn into a puddle of goo at his feet, although it

was pretty close. The blur of green in my peripheral vision made my stomach churn, and I closed my eyes, waiting.

The platform shook under my feet, bouncing as we came to a stop. I released Bîcav's waist, turned, and smacked his bare stomach with a loud clap.

"Oww," he rumbled, chuckling. "Still worth it."

I brought my hand back for a second hit, but he caught my wrist.

"Fun's over. We should talk while we have a chance."

I scanned the area, memories wiggling to the surface. We'd played tag, capture the flag, and hide and seek up here in the trees. The suspended bridges were a maze—some of the areas completely abandoned over time—making the perfect sanctuaries for children.

My mouth dried, and I shook off the nostalgia. "Where from here?"

"This way," Bîcav said, taking the first bridge to the east.

He led at a brisk pace, fast enough that I had to scramble to keep up. Left... right... left...

"So what's the linoxa?" I huffed. "That word means experiment."

"Yup," he grunted.

I waited for him to explain further, but Bîcav was quiet. Too quiet. Maybe he was out of shape or something. No, if I was still able to talk, he would be too. I debated telling him the rumors I'd heard about magî dying up here in the kümdâr's castle, but I didn't want to put voice to my fear.

"So?" I prompted. "What are they..." My voice cracked because I knew whatever he said would be awful. I knew, but I wanted *so much* for that to not be true. I forced the question out as the anguish tore my heart in two, despite the rasp of my voice, despite the fact that Bîcav could hear my thoughts, despite the baseness of *anyone* who would allow *such things* to happen, let alone participate in them. "What are they experimenting with?"

He turned, whether he heard the accusation in my voice or my head, and his lip trembled as his expression crumbled. "I'm hoping Zîvrünê just went to confront his brother. That was all I picked up in his thoughts when he left."

"Would that take this long?"

His non-answer hung heavy in the air between us, and my heart chilled.

"Bîcav?" I said his name through gritted teeth.

"Maybe." He cleared his throat and added, "But if I'm wrong, we need to hurry... if we're going to save him."

Wait. "What?" I screeched. Anger swelled until rage consumed me.

“You’d better hope we can *save him* or I’ll destroy you for letting *whatever-it-is* happen.”

I continued to seethe, hurling accusations in my mind because Bîcav was Rûnê’s guard, meant to protect. How could he stand by and let Rûnê be harmed?

Bîcav bowed his head and closed his eyes. “It would be no less than I deserve. But I *can’t* disobey him.”

I spit at his feet, disgusted and embittered. Even if his obedience excuse were true, and I was certain it was, somehow he’d contacted me. Somehow, he’d managed to disobey Zîvrûnê long enough to get me here. Why wait so long?

“Basvîk has no loyalty to Zîvrûnê, but I had to convince him to reach out.”

Even as reasonable as that sounded, I couldn’t believe it had taken Bîcav two years. “Let’s go,” I snapped. “And you better explain why you let this go on for two fetid years.” When he said nothing, I glared at him and snarled, “What. Is. Going. On?”

“I’d tell you if I could, but he bound me with a vow so I can’t tell you.”

“He bound you with magîk?” I asked.

Bîcav nodded, and I clenched my fists so tight my nails cut into my palms.

“Why would he do that?”

“If you believed you held no value, what would you do?”

Bîcav’s question hollowed me out. I’d watched Rûnê struggle with that question my entire life, but did I ever say anything to contradict the lie? And the blatant truth of my earlier battle with the same issue was in my own pathetic history. I’d been so desperate to be of worth to Rûnê I’d left when he told me to *just to please him*. Damn. “Take me to him, or I’ll—”

Bîcav waved away my threat, and I could tell by his expression that death would be easier than the guilt he’d carry.

“Come on,” he said and led me to another elevating platform and then another.

We wound through the trees, through the crisp clean air perfumed with the smell of thriving foliage, into an area far from where we’d played as children. The growth here was darker, and the smell...

I clapped my hand to my face as the stench of unwashed bodies, rotten meat, and something else...

“What is that?” I muttered through clenched teeth.

But that was all I needed to ask before I tasted the rank and putrid stench of death. *Rot*—it was everywhere here, so thick it coated my every breath, even through my nose.

“What is this place?” My stomach heaved, and I stopped to retch, bringing up the scanty meal I’d had a few hours ago. “Bîcav?”

“The kûmdâr’s prison,” he said. “I’m sorry I brought you this way, but there are no Serîk here; it’s the only way I know we can get to the linoxa without risking getting caught.”

My eyes burned, and I remained hunched over, wishing there was some way to not breathe while we passed through. “Please, can we hurry?”

Bîcav tapped my chin, and I tilted my head to look at him.

He gave me a small, sad smile. “It won’t get better, Zădîsa.”

I whimpered and nodded, waving at him to get going. It didn’t matter if it got better or worse; we needed to get to Zîvrûnê. I stretched my hand out, Bîcav grabbed it, and I let him tug me through the prison. When we stumbled into the foliage of the canopy, I sucked in one clean breath before the next assault pummeled me.

The smell here wasn’t worse because it was stronger or more rank. The air wafted with the growth of the canopy, but layered over the smell of fresh leaves was a putrid sour smell on top of rancid, brutal death. We crossed another bridge, and the odors grew until the air was so saturated with the coppery stench of blood, so heavy with humidity, that it seemed weighted with crimson. In addition:—wet animal pelts, acrid ammonia, fermenting alcohol, and sour vomit.

I trudged after Bîcav, my heart and soul rent with anguish.

“How often did he come...” I choked on the question, unable to finish it as the taste of blood coated my tongue.

“Every day,” he whispered, and a moment later he answered my next question. “He discovered this just before you left; it’s why he sent you away. A few weeks ago, we stopped.”

“But Zerôn didn’t stop whatever he was doing,” I stated, waving my hand. The evidence weighted the air.

Almost like a dam burst, Bîcav continued, “It wasn’t always... like this. The changes were gradual... and slow... like boiling a frog.”

The analogy was sickening and hard to believe.

“Zîvrûnê found out Zerôn had lied—that he was experimenting on other

magî. Zîvrünê said he was done, and there were a few days I believed we were finished. But... Zerôn begged forgiveness. His explanations made sense, enough sense to make Zîvrünê doubt himself, and the two struck a bargain. That's when I had Basvîk call for you."

"Zerôn is a liar, and Zîvrünê's never seen it. How could he believe anything that snake—"

"How long did it take you to see your sister's selfishness and pride?" Bîcav asked, stopping to face me, his pale-blue eyes sharp and clear.

The truth sliced through me.

"Does he see it now?" I asked. "Does he know?"

Bîcav didn't answer right away. We rounded the next bend, and flickering torchlight flanked an open doorway ahead. He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I hope so, but I've been hoping he would see the reality of Zerôn for years."

"Why would Rünê come back here?" I asked. "Why would he storm off..."

The pity etching Bîcav's features indicated how much I would hate his answer.

"He came up here because Zerôn was hunting you. Rünê would do anything to protect you."

My heart clenched as ice slithered through my veins. There was no time to mourn something I couldn't fix. The past was done. I had to make a better future.

"Is this the linox?" I asked, pointing at the building.

The rectangular structure was built of stained wood, with a dozen small square windows along the front, half on either side of the lit doorway. No noise accompanied the smell billowing out from the openings, but the taste of death, rancid and oily, grew.

Bîcav nodded and pointed at the window just to the left of the door. "If you go to that one, you'll be able to see in. The others are all magîked. I suggest we look before we storm in, but I'll follow your lead."

Dread settled deep in my stomach and pulled my shoulders into knots. The smell increased the closer I got, but when I rose on my tiptoes and looked through the window, I forgot all about the stench.

I forgot everything.

The linosa was a single room, longer than it was wide. The perimeter walls were lined with cots, easily a dozen on either side and several more along the back. Most were unoccupied, but more than half were stained with dark, dried blood. The sole occupant on the left side of the room was a female, judging by the length of her hair and the drape of the fabric covering her torso and midsection. Her skin was lined with dozens of thin scars—just like Zîvrînê's—all over her extremities. Her skin was pale, almost tinged blue, and her chest didn't rise or fall—at all. Her eyes were open, but she stared unblinking at the ceiling, and her jaw hung open, her expression slack with death, but her gray flaccid skin indicated her death was not recent. The stench was too fresh to be from her demise. I was about to glance away, but my attention snagged on the spotted ears poking through her dark-chestnut hair—furry ears—like an ocelot's.

As I checked out the rest of the room, my attention snagged on the black panthera hanging upside down from the ceiling and twitching. My soul screamed in protest, and only Bîcav's hand stopped my cry. I covered my eyes but couldn't unsee the gutted panthera, his chest severed and empty and his neck slashed. Fresh blood splattered the floor from the vicious slaughter, and there was a bucket-sized circle from where they'd collected his blood—his life.

I forced my eyes open, and hatred burned through me, demanding revenge.

And then I saw Ruin's soul slowly stalking across the room.

To the right of the panthera's body, three other magî lay prone, lashed to

their cots, only one still moving. My gaze skipped to Zîyanâ, the left side of her face smeared with blood, who stood screaming at Zerôn and Basvîk, the two arguing in front of her. The gruesome scene played out silently—the noise somehow contained by magîkal wards.

Bîcav dropped his hand from my face and gasped.

But I couldn't say anything, ask anything, because the situation was too riveting. I blinked, and time slowed as my vision tunneled.

Zerôn wore a simple bathing sulu around his waist, but the garment and his body were spattered and slicked with blood. In one hand he wielded a blade, and in the other he clutched a gruesome hunk of something—membrane? Organ? His face contorted with rage, and he leaned forward, screaming at Basvîk who was likewise yelling at his master.

How was it possible for Basvîk to defy the kümdâr, because defiance was a gross understatement.

I stared in awe as Basvîk lunged at Zerôn, and the kümdâr kicked his servant so hard he flew across the room and out of my peripheral vision. But I couldn't look away from the kümdâr and the bloody hunk in his hand. Zerôn turned and backhanded my sister next, and her mouth opened in a soundless scream. He bellowed something and shoved her to the floor on his way to the writhing magî on the cot.

Bîcav stepped from behind me, but before he had time to cross to the other side of the doorway, Zerôn drove the knife into the magî on the cot, the male bucking against the ropes.

No.

Zerôn jerked the blade down and... plunged his hands into...

Zîvrünê...

Zîvrünê's chest.

I sucked in the horrific realization just as Bîcav emerged on the other side of the window. The weight of understanding slammed into me, and time sped forward. Anguish, horror, rage... exploded. I shrieked, a blood-thirsty bellow of hatred and wrath, as I raced into the linosa.

"No!" I sprinted past my sister crumpled on the ground, past Bîcav and Zerôn locked in a fight, and fell to the side of the cot where Zîvrünê lay, bloodied and gasping for breath.

Ruin's soul pressed to my side, and I tilted my head to the canopy and screamed.

"Do it now," Bîcav snarled from behind me. "Heal him, or I will

decapitate you. I'll be done before any of your other Serîk even arrive."

Hope sparked in my chest. I sucked in the emotion greedily, turned to Zîvrünê... and sagged to the floor with a wail of sorrow.

Zîvrünê's soul crouched next to me. He studied me, a sad smile thinning his lips. I blinked to clear my tears so I could see him, and his compassion nearly undid me. Bringing my fist to my mouth, I stifled my sobs. The anguish of his death threatened to drown me, clogging my throat and severing my heart, and I whimpered, unable to rein in the pain. *Rünê*...

Even in death he was beautiful.

"Don't cry." His gaze traveled over me, as if he were trying to memorize me. "Your tears always hurt more than anything else, my love."

"No," I gasped through the tears. "Please... I don't... want you... to leave. I need..." I choked on the words, powerless to stop the hemorrhage of emotion. Incoherent thoughts flitted through my mind, and all the reasons I could ask him to stay vanished, until only the truth remained. "I'm not ready for you to go."

"There's no way to put me back," he said with a wave of his hand. "Zerôn has grafted so much panthera into my body, I'm not fully magî anymore." He laughed, a low chuckle tinged with sadness. "That's why I bit you." He reached forward but halted shy of touching me. "You can't break the rules of mortality this time, Dîsa," he said with a sigh. "There's no way to put me back and have me live." His eyes widened, and he pointed at the panthera soul at my side. "What is that?"

"Zädîsa!" Bîcav bellowed, making me jump.

From the look on his face, that wasn't the first time he'd yelled my name. As soon as our gazes locked, Bîcav tilted his head toward Zîvrünê's body—his chest now sealed.

I blinked, my mind racing, racing, racing... I looked at Ruin and then to Zîvrünê.

He met my stare with those vibrant-blue eyes I loved. Oh, I loved him so much. What would it take to bring him back? Could two souls inhabit the same body? The wrongness of the thought bludgeoned me, but what if...

My heart thundered against my ribs, and my mouth dried. Would he forgive me? Was it even possible?

If Zerôn had managed to merge their bodies, could I merge—

"Dîsa!" Bîcav shouted, cutting through my thoughts. "Serîk will be here any minute."

“And they will kill you all,” Zerôn sneered despite the blade at his throat. “Foolishness. What do you hope to accomplish, Dîsa? Do you think you have the power to thwart my vision?” His eyes, hard and cruel but alive with purpose, sparked brighter. “Or will you join me? Walk by my side while we change Qralî, and we will be the Apex of all.”

“Don’t believe him,” Zîvrünê whispered next to me.

I shook my head and, turning back to Zîvrünê, smiled at the magî I loved. My heart swelled with the emotion. It was so big, so grand, so all-consuming that my body was insufficient to contain the quantity and quality of it. I held my hand out, palm up, and my soul thrummed with joy as Zîvrünê placed his hand against mine.

The room fell away, and I asked him, “Will you stay?”

“You know I can’t,” he replied, threading his fingers through mine. “But I will find you again.”

Where? When? Where would he be in the next life? And even if he was born today, I would be here until I died. I wasn’t naive enough to think Zerôn would let me go. So, how many lives would pass before we could be together again? How many had already passed?

Ruin’s soul bumped me, and I swayed with the force. I glanced at the great cat, ran my hand down his silky fur, and made my decision. If Zerôn broke the rules to get what he wanted, I would remake the rules to get what I wanted. And then I’d do whatever I had to—whatever it took—to destroy him.

But first, and most importantly, I would save my love.

“Ruin.” I breathed his name, petting the panthera. I tried to put all my emotions for the animal into each stroke. “Come back to me. Come back, and we will exact your revenge.” I broke contact with Zîvrünê, placed my hand on the chest of the corpse, a blending of panthera and magî, and closed my eyes. Opening my soul to the beautiful Apex predator, I thought of my love of the animal as a child, my ache of sorrow when I’d met the beast, my worry when he’d disappeared, and my sadness when I’d seen him dead. Flashes of protectiveness and possession—emotions and instincts that were not mine—blazed inside as the panthera’s soul slid through me and into Zîvrünê’s body.

I rested both my hands on the body and whispered, “Hush.” Then I turned to Zîvrünê and begged, “Please?”

“It won’t work.”

“It will,” I said, filled with the fire of determination. “There is no way it

won't, because *you* will make it work. I'll bind your souls, seal your magîk, mind, body, and soul, so the two of you will merge... and then you *will* come back to me. Please," I begged as fresh tears streamed down my face. My heart thumped with the ticking sense of time running out. "Please. I need you—your strength, your wisdom, your kindness, your insight. It will be because of *you* that we'll win."

"You have always given me more credit than I deserve," he murmured, bowing his head.

"No," I said, shaking my head with fierce denial. "You've just never given yourself the credit you should."

He jerked upright, his eyes narrowing and jaw hardening. He stared at me, and his lips curled into a rare smile of triumph. He nodded once and held out his hand. "We'll make it work... together."

I grabbed his hand, and he passed through me so fast all I felt was love—his for me or mine for him, I couldn't even tell.

The body bucked, and a low rumble of voices broke through my concentration. I shoved the distractions away, forcing myself to concentrate. It had been two years since Zîvrûnê sealed my mind, body, and soul, and my memories of the ritual were faint... I'd have to wing it.

"Bîcav," I snapped, holding my hand out behind me. "Cut my hand!"

Fire seared my palm, and crimson dripped between my fingers. I climbed up on the cot and straddled Zîvrûnê's bloody body. I could feel the two souls beneath me, their panic, and I placed my uninjured hand on his abdomen and leaned over him. Sliding my hand to his chest, I pressed my body to his. Then I rested my bloody palm to Zîvrûnê's head and considered how his mind—his poisoned thoughts—had been his greatest weakness because of his brother. No more.

"Shh," I whispered. "Don't overthink, Rûnê. Be still, Ruin."

Fear—so much fear—emanated from them, but both souls stilled with my coaxing.

I closed my eyes and breathed in, filling my chest with air and love—all my love—and began. "With my magîk, I bind your mind, thoughts, and impulses. You shall not only see clearly, but you'll trust your own judgment and act swiftly and with confidence." Then I rested my hand over his arm, adding my blood to theirs. "With my magîk, I bind your body"—I pressed and dragged my hand over his bicep—"that you will have strength"—swipe—"stamina"—I thought of all his injuries with the next swipe—"and rapid

healing.” I moved my hand to his abdomen. “With my magîk, I bind your souls and your magîk, that you will become one, Rûnê, just as your mind and body are now one.”

I stared at his face, his beautiful features gruesomely bathed in blood. The embodiment of everything good in Qralî was right here—in him. With the back of my hand, I wiped the crimson from his lips and, trusting the instinct which urged me closer, leaned over him again. I wiped the blood from his eyes, still shut but twitching with movement, and traced my fingers over his brow and down his jawline, smiling as his chest moved beneath me. I caught a whiff of sandalwood, and my smile grew.

I brought my lips close to his and inhaled just as he exhaled, his breath was mine, as was his love. As our breath mingled, my lips moved against his, and I whispered, “With the power of my soul, I bind you together—whole and complete. And with my soul, I seal you, declaring you mine, just as I’m yours. Forever.”

His hands tangled in my hair, and he pressed me closer. His chest was flush to mine, and his heart—his beautiful heart—pounded, spreading life and vigor through his being. He tilted his head and sealed our lips.

My heart burst with joy. He sat us up and stroked my back, bringing me closer. He nipped at my lower lip, and I opened to him as he deepened the kiss. The saltiness of my tears mixed with the blood on our lips, but all I could taste was him. Our tongues tangled briefly before he broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to mine.

“You did it,” he said.

I blinked, my chest swelling with pride—for me, for him, for *us*. “We did it.”

My moment of victory expanded, and for a single heartbeat, I *knew* all would be right.

But with a shriek, the moment burst—shattered—and Rûnê shoved me behind him. He released a vicious, *inhuman* snarl, and panic slashed through me.

He tumbled from the cot, landing on all fours, and his cry of pain merged with the low yowl of a panthera, swallowing my gasp. His bloodied skin grew dusky. Pinpricks of black appeared, and with my next blink, the fine hairs of the panthera’s fur erupted over Rûnê’s skin. Shaking, his body thickened, his limbs shortened, and his hands and feet morphed, becoming bigger, heavier. His black tail—his *tail*—twitched in the air. Thick nails,

no... claws broke through the skin of his paws, and he shook his head as his mouth opened in a grating huff. His deadly canines elongated as his head and jaw widened.

He growled, and the sound held no trace of the magî I loved, only the vicious sound of an apex predator. Rûnê was gone, and in his place was the sleek black panthera.

Ruin.

Ruin stalked through the linoxa, away from the cot and toward the kümdâr. The panthera bared his teeth and hissed, the hair rising on his hackles as his tail twitched. He stopped a dozen feet in front of me, lowering his chest as it rumbled with his anger.

After scrambling up from the bloody floorboards, I tugged my tunic down and wiped my hands along the sides of the now filthy fabric.

Zerôn *somehow* held his blade, and he now stood behind his bondmate, one arm around Zîyanâ's waist and the other around her neck, holding the knife to her throat. He inched forward, keeping her body as a buffer between him and the great cat.

My sister's arms were extended, and she whimpered incoherently as her tears mixed with the blood streaking her face. Zerôn whispered something in her ear, lip curled in disgust, and then he said, louder, "Everyone stay back."

Bîcav stood and stared at the cat as if it were a puzzle he couldn't find the next piece to. Basvîk climbed back to his feet, using one of the cots for support. His lip was split from whatever scuffle he'd had, and his murderous glare was fixed on his master.

I took a deep breath and darted forward, dropping to the ground next to Rûnê. Holy Kânkarä. What did I do? Running my hand over his fur, I whispered, "Hush, Rûnê—Ruin. Hush."

Zerôn cleared his throat, and I jerked, surprised by his sudden proximity. How had he gotten so close? He stopped several paces from the deadly panthera and narrowed his eyes.

Eyes widening, I looked up, past my sister's wilting frame and stained

face, to him. His cold, calculating expression indicated his fascination, and he seemed to be absorbing all that transpired. His gaze darted from the great cat to me, and he grinned.

“Clever girl,” he said, eyes bright. “I never even thought to bind them together, but of course it makes sense that fusing two bodies bit by bit would need a magîk seal.”

The panthera growled, but as he crouched low, ready to pounce, his legs gave out and he yipped.

Rot.

My breaths grew shallow, and I absently stroked his fur as I tried to calculate a plan that wouldn’t end up with Zîyanâ or Zîvrünê or all of us dead.

“Basvîk,” Zerôn snarled, instructing his guard without ever glancing his way. “If you wish to live after your betrayal, I need you to get the Zîv into a cage.” The kümdâr grinned at me again. “We can’t have him accidentally getting away.”

My attention flicked to the Serîk who blanched but otherwise didn’t move.

“Now!” Zerôn screamed.

The kümdâr and I kept our attention on the worst threat, but from my peripheral vision, I could see Basvîk shuffle off to do as instructed. I needed a distraction—no, I needed to immobilize, or better yet, kill the kümdâr. But I had no weapons. Ruin-Rünê was trembling beneath my hand, so I couldn’t count on him, and—

“Tell me, Dîsa,” Zerôn said. “How can a lowly magî bind a zeta?” He flicked two of his fingers in my general direction before returning them to the hilt of the blade. “What power do you have that would allow you to bind them?”

Like I would ever tell him. Let him think whatever he wanted; I would never do *anything* to aid him.

He glanced at my magî bands, and his eyes widened. “What’s happening to your marks?” When I didn’t reply, he pressed the blade to Zîyanâ’s throat until blood beaded beneath the dagger. “Zîyanâ, my *love*,” he emphasized the endearment as though it were a profanity. “What is happening to your sister’s marks?”

“What... marks?” Zîyanâ gasped between her sniffing.

I glanced down at my arm, and the air sucked from my lungs. My bands,

the blue lines surrounding my biceps, were gone, and even the bright golden zeta bands were fading, leaving a trail of moisture running down my arm like drops of water... or blood.

“Who bound you?” Zerôn asked, surprise blasting his expression into open wonder. “Zîyanâ?” he snarled, the blade biting deeper into her neck. “Did you mark her?”

My sister cowered back, but she didn’t move her neck as she squeaked out her denial.

Zerôn’s gaze slid to Rûnê... or Ruin... or the new creature I’d created. “The Zîv bound you,” Zerôn stated in breathless awe.

I could see him trying to put the pieces together, and I knew what would happen if he did. The only reason the markings would fade is if the one who gave them to me died. And if he died, but was no longer dead... I inhaled, pulling the swirling chaos of my thoughts together, only to have the wisps of rebuttal and defense flit away as panic thundered through me. I shook my head, willing him to guess wrong, because there was no way to deny what had happened.

“You’re a necromancer,” he said. Evil triumph oozed over his features like spreading oil. With a maniacal grin, he crowed, “Of course you are. Of course!”

I wasn’t sure what to do, what to say, how to get away. Even knowing the urgency of the situation, I couldn’t make myself move.

“The others died. They’ve always died. I thought it had to do with their strength—”

“It d-does,” I stammered, desperate to tell him truth and also mislead him. “It won’t work for just any—”

Stop talking, Dîsa.

I blinked, my surprise holding my tongue more than the voice in my head. I didn’t need to look to see who was speaking, for there was only one magî in the room with the capacity.

I’ll help, but we need to work together. I-I want to get Zîyanâ out.

I inclined my head; we all wanted to get out.

“Basvîk!” Zerôn bellowed. He shifted to look for his guard, and my sister shrieked as the dagger sliced into her skin.

Ruin jerked with the noise and then lunged forward, swiping his deadly claws across my sister as she stumbled. Caught off guard, Zerôn fell with her, the two of them landing on the ground in a series of thuds.

Ruin snarled at the kümdâr, and with a thwap, thwap, thwap batted the sovereign with his paw. The panthera shivered, released a low yowl, and then bounded out of the linox.

Shock delayed my response for only one deep breath, and I screamed, “Bîcav!”

He should know exactly what he needed to do, but instead of leaving, the magî guard rushed to me.

“I am to stay with you. It’s what Rûnê would’ve wanted.”

Grabbing the front of his tunic, I thumped him in the chest as I ground out, “If you don’t go find him right now, I’ll *never* forgive you.”

His eyes widened, and he dropped his gaze. “You better—”

“Get. Out!” *I’ll find you in the sanctuary... Find him and meet me there!*

“No!” Zerôn screamed.

I turned my back on Bîcav, still mentally screaming at him to follow Rûnê, and watched as Zerôn rolled my sister’s body over.

Dark crimson blood pooled beneath her, and Zerôn yanked the blade from her neck with a string of expletives.

“You cannot die now,” he snarled. “I’ll not allow it.”

My body and mind reeled. After so much intentional death, I couldn’t seem to process that Zerôn didn’t want Zîyanâ to die. Why? He obviously didn’t love her.

He knelt over her, placed his hands on her chest, and the air charged.

He always heals her, Basvîk said in my mind. *After he beats her, he always heals her.*

“Why?” I exhaled the question and scanned the room for the answer.

“He steals my magîk,” said Zîyanâ—or rather her soul.

I flinched, and the semi-transparent form seemed to solidify by my side. She was stunning. Just like with Rûnê, all the blood and gore was gone, only with Zîyanâ the fear and haunted look in her eyes was replaced with a wary regard of her bondmate. “All of his perversions here drain his magîk, but as his bondmate, he can *receive* aid from me.”

“You give him your *magîk*?” I asked. The very idea that she would give him anything... “Or do you mean he takes it?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Zerôn embrace Zîyanâ’s body, and my attention was pulled to witness his mourning. Only, instead of a hug, the kümdâr shook his bondmate and yelled in her face, “Wake up, Zîyanâ!”

“He siphons my energy, not my magîk. By stealing my power, he’s able

to heal himself... and his experiments.”

I couldn't fathom how she'd endured—

Can you help her? Basvîk asked. *Can you put her back?*

“What does Basvîk know?” I whispered, somehow knowing she'd hear me over the kümdâr's screams.

“I told him what you said, even though I didn't believe it myself. I didn't remember what happened when I was outside my body, but he... he believed it.”

“He wants you to come back,” I told her. But the very thought of putting her back inside her body to be used by Zerôn made me hesitate. Finally, I pushed out the words. “Do you want to come back again?”

“No,” she said, her brow furrowing. “Didn't you see?” She faced me and waved toward Zerôn and her corpse. “He healed my body, like he always does. I can't even tell you how many times he's hurt me; I've lost count. But making my body whole doesn't make me forget the pain he inflicts, which, incidentally, he doesn't want me to forget.” She tilted her head and pursed her lips before adding, “He's left a million scars on my body to remind me that he's the one with power—that he has control. Why would anyone want to go back to that?”

I couldn't argue with her logic.

Please? Basvîk begged, talking over the top of my sister's soul. Even in my mind, his voice broke with anguish. *If she's dead, please put her back. I know you can.*

“What about Basvîk?” I asked. “Why does he want you back?”

She frowned, her gaze shifted to him, and her eyes filled with pity. “He became my solace. In the very darkest of times, he gave me a taste of what life might've been like.”

Zerôn bellowed, and her form wavered. Time was ebbing away... and then... she would be born into another body.

Rot.

“What if we hid you?” I asked, my mind racing as I snatched her arm, and her form solidified beneath my touch.

“Zerôn would hunt me down. He would find me, and the torture would continue.” Tugging against my hold, she frowned. “Please, let me go.”

But I knew what would happen. Zerôn had already sent Serîk to find me. And if she were only a babe, he would still find her and take what he needed from her or someone else. I couldn't let that happen. Which meant I needed

to do *something*.

Holy Kânkarä. A desperate idea blossomed, unfolding in my mind, and I sucked in a lungful of air. Was it possible? Could I do it?

I was so distracted with my thoughts and talking to Zîyanâ that I didn't see Zerôn until it was too late. He crashed into me, throwing us all to the ground. Screaming for help, I clung to Zîyanâ's soul, knowing that if I let go, she would disappear.

Light flashed behind my eyelids and pain burst in my head as I bounced off the ground. A heavy weight landed on me, and I continued to scream.

"Do you see her?" Zerôn snarled, straddling me. "Is her soul here?" He shook me, bouncing my head off the floor again and again. "She said you see the dead," he growled, leaning over me so that three blurred images of the kümdâr swam through my vision. "Can you see her?"

Zîyanâ's soul trembled, and she pleaded for me to let her go.

"Tell me," he shrieked.

You better help me.

Basvîk's words registered a split-second before I saw him standing behind the kümdâr with a thick pole in his hands. With a heavy swing, the piece of wood connected with Zerôn's head, throwing him off me and into a slumped heap on the floor.

I blinked up at the golden guard. Hatred was etched in his twisted expression of defiance. As his gaze shifted to me, his features relaxed, and he dropped the makeshift club and held out his hand.

"You better help me," he said. "After that, you owe me."

Nodding, I held out my left hand, keeping Zîyanâ's soul in my right. He pulled me upright, and I exhaled with relief.

"Is he dead?" I asked, hopefully.

Instead of giving me assurances, the Serîk said, "No, and I can't kill him. I don't think anyone can." He took a single breath but gave no other explanation as he rushed on. "And we need to hurry. Zerôn is usually in the throne room by now, so his men are likely on their way here. There's one route that can get us out of here in time, but we need to be gone before the other Serîk are on it, or they'll catch us."

With a glance at Zîyanâ, his words about the guards were confirmed.

"If Zerôn catches Basvîk after that," she said. "His life is forfeit."

But to not kill Zerôn right now, with this opportunity... I climbed to my feet and scanned the room. Surely, a well-placed knife...

“Please don’t make me go back,” she begged. “Let me go and—”

I told her why that wasn’t an option, just in case I failed, and dragged her with me to her prostrate form. Scooping up the blade, I said, “I’ll cut off his head—”

“You don’t have time,” Basvîk snapped.

My attention bounced from her soul to him to the kümdâr and back to her. Her eyes widened, and she nodded.

“Put it in his heart,” she said. “By the time the Serîk arrive, hopefully he’ll be dead.”

We approached the kümdâr, my heart thumping against my ribs. His blond hair was matted with blood, and his skin was split by his ear. I shoved away the instinct to flee, as well as all the reasons killing was wrong, and drove the blade between his ribs, deep into his chest, until only the hilt was visible.

Zerôn’s body shook, and I stumbled back. My skin prickled, and my mouth dried. *I-I just... Oh rot. I just killed—*

“You need to leave now,” Zîyanâ said, interrupting my thoughts.

I blinked back to the emergency at hand. She was right. So right. “Not without you,” I said. “I’m not leaving you.”

“I’ll take her,” Basvîk said. “I’ll take her and hide her. Just put her back.”

“He’ll never stop looking,” she said. “He’ll hunt me until he has me again.”

“Stop,” I snapped, yanking at the threads of keeping-myself-together. I turned my back on the kümdâr’s body and said, “I have an idea.”

Both closed their mouths and waited.

I stared at my sister, thinking of all she’d had to endure. If I was wrong... No, I wouldn’t even indulge the thoughts. Failure wasn’t an option. This would have to work, but in the back of my mind a voice chanted *impossible*.

“You have to take us both with you, okay?” I said to Basvîk and, despite his nod, continued, “Take us to Terit. There is a magî there who can change our appearances—and make the changes permanent. Afterward, the two of you can go wherever you want.”

Basvîk nodded, and Zîyanâ murmured her thanks.

Impossible. Impossible. Impossible.

Taking a deep breath, I scanned the linoxa and let determination fill me. The wrongness of this place was so massive, and Zerôn so evil, I couldn’t let him win. So we *needed* to get out of here. I needed to accomplish the

impossible, and then we'd deal with the consequences.

Filled with righteous indignation, I closed my eyes, concentrated on the magîk within, and let my power flood me, from the top of my head all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes.

I would win, for me, for Rûnê, and for every other magî Zerôn had betrayed. And when we left the linoxa, I'd throw a torch inside to stop this madness.

But first I needed to put Zîyanâ's soul somewhere safe, where Zerôn wouldn't easily find her or her magîk. Checking my grip on her soul, I stepped out of my body so I could put her soul in.

Rot. I hoped this would work.



My memory is lost. *Gone.* I can't remember my name or magîk. I don't

know what happened to our ruler or why the jungle is transforming, becoming even more wild. Who is the guard and why is he angry? And why do I feel safe with a deadly panthera?

Arriving in Pûleêr, I hope to find relief among the magî and, hopefully, some answers. Instead, the laws of nature change before my eyes, and the dangers of the jungle are nothing compared to this twisted utopia.

When the panthera leaves, a new magî joins the outpost, and I know he has answers. But what if all of my questions were wrong?

As the jungle vines converge and tighten, I begin to wonder... Was my memory truly lost—or was it stolen?

You can continue the Magî Rising series now with Stolen. Click [HERE](#) to continue reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RAYE WAGNER hates writing bios. She'd much rather tell you a story. She's partial to fantasy, with dragons or magic or something so she can lie and not feel guilty.

When she isn't writing, dreaming, or *lying*, Raye is with her family... preferably at the beach.

You can sign up for Raye's newsletter, [HERE](#) to be notified of new releases and to get exclusive sneak peeks.



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