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RAYE WAGNER

MAGI RISING — BOOK ONE

STOLEN



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Magi Rising Book 1



RAYE WAGNER

Stolen
Magi Rising Book 1
by
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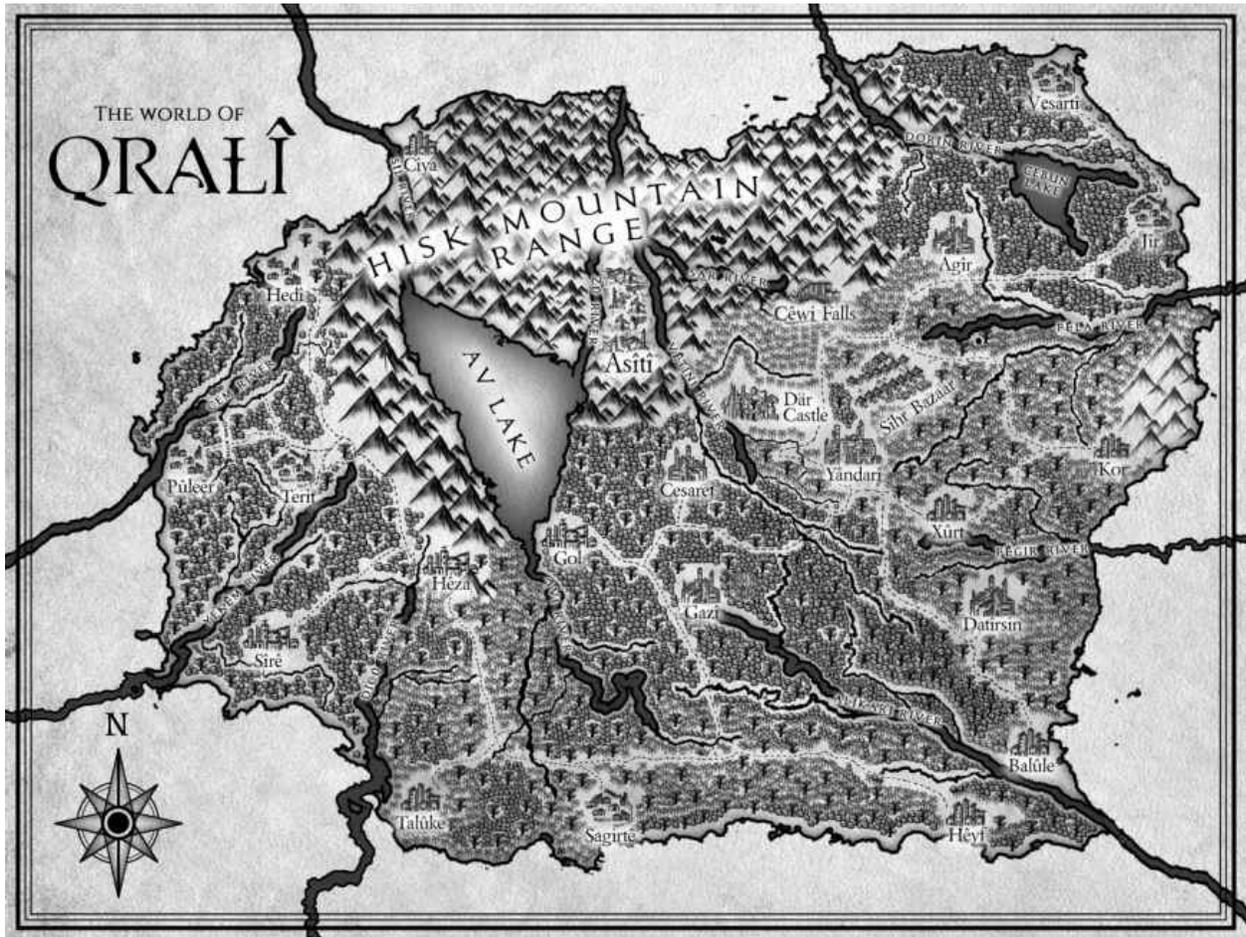
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For A.J.

Love knows no bounds



A panthera’s roar reverberated through my bones, echoed by the squawks of scattering macaws and parrots, and silencing the howler monkeys in the canopy above.

Mercifully, my attacker paused, and I writhed, batting blindly in a desperate attempt to get him to release his hold. The dark tangles of my hair obstructed my vision, but I didn’t need my vision to know I was in danger.

“Every fetid day,” he snarled, tightening his grip as he yanked. “It’s disgusting; you’re disgusting—”

I stumbled forward as a low growl announced the predator’s arrival. My heart leapt into my throat, and the male magî relinquished his grasp with an added shove. Tumbling into the mud, I caught a glimpse of him running through the dense growth of the jungle, his crimson leather pants forever seared into memory.

As my ribs screamed in agony, I bit my lip and lay as still as possible. Covered in blood, sweat, and dirt, I whimpered. Waiting for the great cat to make me his next meal, only one thought cycled through my mind: don’t use magîk.

I had no idea what it meant.

Fetid rot. I didn’t know *anything*. My breaths grew shallower as panic blossomed and bound me. I didn’t even know my name.

Not that it mattered, because I wouldn’t be here much longer.

After a short, stuttering heartbeat, the panthera’s breaths, so like my own, puffed out over me as he sniffed.

The warmth of his exhalations billowed over my skin, at my waist, then

my back, and finally returned to my neck. He continued to sniff, and, eyes closed, I waited for him to strike, crush my throat with his powerful jaws, or maybe even my skull. Only, he didn't. Instead, the panthera's rough, wet tongue bathed the left side of my face.

"If you're going to kill me, could you do it already?" I screamed. Pain seared through me with the movement, and my stomach heaved. Rolling to the side, I retched, rising to my hands and knees to escape the vomit.

When I had nothing left, I wiped moisture from my eyes and looked up to see where the predator was. My jaw dropped. The sleek black cat—a melanistic rarity—rounded on me, and I sucked in one shallow breath after another, hyperventilating with fear and pain. The cat's tail twitched back and forth as he stared me down, his prey.

Still holding my ribs, I bolted to my feet and managed to scream again. I'd intended to scare away the animal, to make him run off, but the movement shattered my mind with a wave of fresh pain, and my roar of anger became a shriek of agony. My knees buckled, and I collapsed into the sticky muck, gasping. Every twist, every flinch, every shift of my body pummeled an old bruise or poked at some fresh wound—none of which I remember receiving. More tears streamed down my face, making my skin sting.

At least death at the jaws of the panthera would be swift, and most likely a mercy, in comparison to whatever the magî who'd captured me had intended.

But death didn't come. Neither did the memory of how I got here.

A low, rhythmic sound startled me, and the large panthera plopped down next to me, pushing his head under my arm so my palm rested just behind his ears—nearly knocking me over the rest of the way. The sound reverberated up my arm and through my side, making me gape. The panthera was . . . purring.

I gawked, completely certain that a panthera's purr wasn't supposed to be a familiar or comforting sound.

Or was it? Nothing here was familiar. Especially not the hovel—partially collapsed with several broken branches on the side nearest me—resting in the middle of the clearing, slumped and dejected. Filthy scraps of fabric poked out from the splintered wood, maybe blankets or clothing.

I stared, fixated as a wave of shock threatened to pull me under. There was something wrong—really wrong. As in, worse than a-panthera-nuzzling-my-hand wrong.

I lived here? I wouldn't . . . Recoiling from the thought, I frowned. Even the idea was distasteful. I glanced up at the jungle canopy, through the leaves to the tallest trees now bathed in bright sunlight.

My attention stuck on the highest layer of the rainforest as I sifted through the emptiness of my mind. I should know something . . . I swallowed, my dry mouth working with the motion. My pulse raced anew with the dawning comprehension. I *truly* didn't know . . . anything.

I should know my name at least. Why didn't I know my name? Or how I got here? Or where *here* was?

I forced my gaze to the hovel, willing myself to remember, but . . . Nothing. My stomach churned, and instincts told me I didn't want to remember. "If you ever come across that magi," I said to the cat, "you have my permission to kill and eat him." As soon as the words were out, I recoiled, so I amended. "Actually, you don't have to eat him. Just gut him."

The predator hissed, and I chose to see it as an acknowledgment of my wishes. Not that my assessment made sense, but truly . . . Nothing made sense at the moment.

"Why can't I remember?" I muttered. My insides twisted and turned, not nearly as sedated as the rest of my battered body, and I couldn't get past the crawling, awful wrongness of knowing . . . Nothing.

The panthera nudged my hand, and I glanced down, forcing a shaky smile, because we were obviously friends—even if I didn't know it.

“Am I insane?” I whispered to the large black cat. “I might be, seeing how I’m here, talking to you. Somehow that doesn’t seem normal.” I swallowed and then asked, “Why are your eyes green?”

He closed his eyes and nuzzled my hand as he had before, possibly the panthera equivalent to, “We’re not going to talk about that.”

Rot.

As if to reinforce his point, he walked to the edge of the clearing and started sniffing at the plants.

I turned my attention back to the hollow in the jungle and tried to remember something from before my fight with the magî, something other than the nagging thought that I shouldn’t use magîk—whatever the rot my magîk was.

I could do this; I’d start with easy, like what I had for breakfast. I shook my head when memories of food wouldn’t surface and then tried to go further back, first by hours, then days, weeks, and years. But I had no memories—as in none. I couldn’t remember a single thing about me from before the fight with my captor.

I kicked at a mangrove root and recited dozens of plants and animals. I knew the names of all the posts and even their distance from Yândarî, the capital of Qralî. I was excessively knowledgeable, brilliant really.

The acrid stench of urine made me grimace, and I turned, my frown deepening, as the predator stalked several feet along the edge of the thick growth of plants. He stopped, faced me and, with his tail quivering in the air, kneeled at the dirt with his back paws.

“What are you doing?” With my next breath, I understood. “You’re marking territory?”

The panthera returned to me and started purring again. At least he was happy—and he might’ve saved my life. Unless he had a weird sense of humor about playing with his food. Then I should be scared.

Only I wasn’t.

“It stinks,” I muttered, glancing down as he dipped his head beneath my palm. A deep-purple bruise on my thigh caught my eye, and I gingerly ran my hand over the ghastly mark. Several more fading bruises were scattered on my legs, indicating something I wasn’t ready to face. I took another breath and, waving my hand to clear the air, said, “I’m going to take a look around. Please don’t kill me.”

The cat stopped purring, and when I stepped toward the dilapidated shelter, he blocked my way, rounded on me, and hissed.

I brought both hands up and shook my head. “We’re friends, remember?” I pointed to where he’d just peed; maybe he had a memory problem, too. “Don’t forget or . . . change your mind, okay? I like you.”

He stepped toward me, dropping low to the ground, and bared his teeth. His ears flattened as he padded forward, and my heart started thumping—again. Stupid moody panthera. I inched back, my terror mounting as he continued to press his advantage one step at a time.

“You better not be trying to eat me,” I muttered, my gaze darting from side to side. There was a path to my right, not that I had any delusion about escaping the predator, but—*Wait*. I stared at the panthera and snapped, “Are you herding me?”

He straightened, his ears perked, and his tongue lolled out between his vicious canines.

“Is that your idea of a joke?” I gasped. “You are not fun—”

After he crossed the distance between us, he rubbed against my thigh, sending me stumbling to the side from the force. I tripped over a few scattered branches and landed on my butt.

“You did that on purpose,” I grumbled, glaring up at him.

He stood over me then licked my face, and I swatted at him, trying to push his big head away. But he was huge and, apparently, all muscle. He continued to lick me, and I fell backward, arms flailing.

“Stop,” I said, giggling when his rough tongue tickled my neck. “Stop trying to groom me. It’s gross. I don’t want to bathe in your spit.”

He licked me again and then rested his nose on mine.

Whoa. I blinked up at him, captivated by his vibrant eyes, and ran my hands into his fur. “I’m sure it’s not normal,” I said, my voice suddenly hoarse. “I feel safe with you.” I pursed my lips and then added, “But maybe that is normal. Maybe that’s my magîk.” *What would I know?*

He stepped back, his tail twitching.

I sat up and surveyed the area, the normal sounds of the rainforest swelling around me: the trill of birds, chirp of insects, and bellow of frogs. I might be safe right now, but—even if I wanted to—I couldn’t stay. “Everything here is ruined, and judging by your territory habits, it’s not safe. I should go . . . or I’ll be ruined, too.”

He tilted his head to the side.

“What does that mean?” I asked, jerking my chin at him. “You obviously don’t want me to be ruined.”

He leaned forward and bumped me with his nose.

“You like . . . ruin?” I shook my head with disbelief, but the cat *had* leaned forward with the last word. I tried again. “Ruin?”

He licked me, his tongue brushing from my neck to my hairline, and then bumped me with his nose, the low reverberation of his purr filling the space between us.

“Well then, I’ll call you Ruin.” Weirdest name ever. I took a deep breath and ran my right hand over my ribs. They were sore, tender, but not painful anymore. I petted the cat and asked, “Did you do that? Do you have magîk?”

The cat snorted and turned away.

“Well, I don’t remember doing any magîk,” I called after him as he crossed through the rubble. “And no one else has been here.” Maybe I had healing magîk. Maybe I could talk to animals.

He walked to the narrow strip of path and sat, fixing me with his intense gaze.

I stood and brushed off my filthy, torn tunic. With my next blink, the great cat turned and growled at the fauna, near where he’d just sprayed—and close to where the magî had run. Fear prickled my skin, and I hurried to him. As I approached the panthera, I trailed my fingers over his fur and whispered, “Come on, let’s go.”

As we strode away from the clearing on the narrow path, my attention snagged on the growth of the undercanopy, slowing my pace. I stalled and studied the fauna, far denser than I remembered . . . almost a wall of plants. I grabbed the stalk of an aleph-ear and tugged, wrestling with the weighty shoot, bringing it down so I could see behind the leaf—

Rot.

I gawked at the stem in my hand—as thick as my wrist—and my jaw unhinged. Aleph-ear plants were big; a single leaf could easily be longer than my forearm and half that in width. But these plants were . . . *really* big, at least twice what they should be. Taking a deep breath, I crouched and scrutinized the ground. My heart skipped several beats as I watched the variegated leaves unfurl on a creeping nali vine—right before my eyes.

How? This made no sense.

I blinked and only then realized I might’ve been a dozen steps onto the path a few minutes ago, but now the path barely existed. *Rot.* I slowly spun around, my jaw dropping at the thick wall of fauna *right* behind me.

This was not the jungle of Qralî I knew. Something had changed. There was something wrong—with the jungle, the plants, the animals, and with me. Did normal even exist anymore? What kind of magîk was powerful enough to make things grow so fast? No, the question wasn’t what kind of magîk; it was *whose* magîk, and what had gone wrong with them?

Unease skittered up my spine, followed by a flash-flood of panic, as a rumble of thunder in the distance promised rain. I needed to get out of here—especially if it was the rainy season. I needed to find a magî. Specifically, one

I could trust. I needed to find out what was happening. *Right now.*

I sprinted down the narrow path, the leaves smacking against my legs and shoulders as I fought my way through, and nearly crashed into Ruin.

The panthera sat in the middle of the very overgrown path, but as soon as he saw me, he stood and led the way forward, tail twitching.

“Just don’t spray me,” I muttered. “I’m not like female panthera. I don’t think that smells good, okay?”

The panthera’s ears flattened with my words, but that was his only response.

“Well, don’t get your feelers all twisted up and make this awkward.” I laughed at my own pathetic joke, but Ruin obviously didn’t share my same sense of humor. Too bad. Was he actually walking faster? “That being said, I kinda wish you were a magî. I think we’d get along well—sense of humor aside,” I said, hurrying to keep up with his stride.

Minutes later, he stepped out onto the road, and I followed, taking in the width—at least fifteen feet of mud—with the jungle on either side.

“This is one of the Little Rê,” I said. The Rê, the main road leading into Yândarî, was thirty feet wide. More information I knew without knowing why or how. I sighed, staring at the vibrant leaves of bromeliads in red, orange, and yellow standing out among the lush, green foliage of the jungle. I looked left and then right, wishing I knew which way to go. I wanted safety and answers—something more than a hovel in an area infested with predators.

All of the Little Rê’s fed into the Rê. If I walked far enough, I’d eventually get to Yândarî. That thought made my palms clammy, but I knew answers were there; I just wasn’t sure what the questions were. If I stayed in one of the posts, would my memory come back? Or would I just be putting off the inevitable?

Fetid rot. I’m rubbish at making decisions.

I shifted my gaze, intending to ask the panthera—as if he would know—and then turned in a full circle, frowning when I couldn’t spot him. “Ruin?”

The rustle of leaves made me spin with anticipation. The black panthera poked his head out from the plants, his bright-green eyes glancing behind me before meeting my gaze. He let out a low yowl, more of a whine than anything I’d ever heard from him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, dropping to my knees in front of him. My heart clenched with the realization . . . He was saying goodbye. I buried my hands

into the fur at his neck and rested my forehead on his. “I’ll never forget you ___”

He pulled away and then disappeared between the plants, leaving me frowning. His sudden abandonment stung, but I had no time to examine the emotion.

Behind me, a female exclaimed, “Rot and ruin.”

I turned toward the wide-eyed magî walking toward me on the Little Rê, my heart thumping with her sudden appearance.

She was neither short nor tall, and her warm skin, the color of barely toasted coconut, was free of mud, except around her feet and ankles. She had dark, wavy hair, but the last six inches were a rich coppery color, likely bleached from the sun. Her tunic was a stylish sleeveless wrap, accentuating the three bands of tattoos on each of her upper arms. The markings were made with a strange white ink, in an odd pattern of triangles with a dot in the center of each.

“W-who are you?” I stammered, scrambling to my feet.

She halted a dozen feet away from me on the road, her gaze darting from me to the undercanopy and then back.

“Were you about to walk into the jungle after that panthera?” she asked, shaking her head.

“He saved me.”

She raised her eyebrows, perhaps a silent question, but when I said nothing more, her expression pinched into blatant disbelief.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced down and tried to formulate an approach to gain her trust—and maybe some help. *Gross*. My attention stuck on my filthy tunic, the once-orange fabric barely noticeable beneath layers of muck and blood. I ran my hands over the front of my garment, and a clump of mud fell. Mortified and blushing, I glanced toward the path I’d come out on, all but swallowed now by the prolific growth.

Had I been hiding, or had someone else hidden me? I gawked, speechless

with the thought.

“Are you okay?” she asked, waving her hands in front of my face. As soon as I met her gaze, she continued, “If you’re lost, I can help, but I wouldn’t recommend going that way unless you want the *bûyî* to get you.”

“The *bûyî*?” From her tone, *the bûyî* was bad, but I’d never heard the word used this way before, at least not that I remembered. “Are the swamps filled with *magîk*? Or does *bûyî* mean something different . . . now?”

Her eyes widened as I spoke, making it even more obvious I was clueless.

“Where are you from?” she asked, her incredulous expression communicating far more than her words. She shook her head, as if she couldn’t believe I would ask something so stupid, and then held out her hand. “Sorry. That’s rude. My name is Esi.”

I stared at her hand, her clean hand—attached to her clean arm—and then her. This close, I could see sparks of gold in the dark depths of her eyes, and I wondered if she would be an ally or an enemy. *What’s wrong with me? Who thinks like that?*

“Do you not want to tell me your name? I’m not a *Serîk*, and I promise I won’t turn you into them.”

The *Serîk* served as personal guards to *Qrali*’s highest ruler, the *kümdâr*, and were meant to keep peace. Why would she turn me into them?

Esi frowned again, studying me with that same look of disbelief. “Do you remember who the *kümdâr* is?”

I relaxed, a little, and gave Esi a tentative smile. “Zevn.”

She pursed her lips, and her brow furrowed. Her expression made it clear Zevn was not, in fact, the *kümdâr*. My insides squirmed, and I glanced behind the girl at the empty road, wondering where she’d come from and where she was going. I wondered what had happened since Zevn’s rule ended and—for the thousandth time—why I didn’t know anything.

“Do you know where you’re going?” she asked.

I debated lying, but something about her bluntness made me go with my instinct to trust her.

“Not really,” I said. Maybe someday I would remember where I was from, and then I could figure out where to go, but right now . . . I pointed at the almost invisible path I’d come down and said, “I was living in a hovel back that way, but I’m done living there now.”

She studied me, her expression tight, and then nodded as if this made perfect sense. Maybe now, in this *Qralî*, it did.

Esi glanced back and then stared at the road beyond me, squinting. The golden sparks in her eyes brightened, and then her pupils widened until they devoured her irises.

I swallowed, forcefully pushing the anxiety back down into my chest, and waited. Eventually, the rich brown reappeared, shattered by the gold. I narrowed my gaze but, even though I knew she'd just done her magîk—said nothing. How could I explain to her this feeling of trepidation about using magîk?

She took a deep breath and then said, “I don’t see any Serîk, but eventually they’ll pass this way. And I can’t leave you here to be discovered by them.”

I nodded, not because I understood what she was talking about, but because faint memories simmered just beyond reach. I still didn’t understand why being discovered by the Serîk would be bad.

“Fetid rot.” She whispered the familiar curse and shook her head. “You really don’t know anything?” Glancing up to where the sunlight filtered in through the canopy, she inhaled another long breath, and then her attention returned to me. “I think you should come with me.”

Helplessness crept down my spine and solidified in my stomach like a brick. My attention darted to the dense growth, where I’d last seen Ruin, and my jaw dropped when I met his gaze. I blinked, but his green eyes didn’t disappear. He was watching—waiting—and the fact he hadn’t jumped out to attack the young female magî reinforced my sense of trust.

I nodded, turning toward Esi with a tentative smile. “My name is”—I grappled for a name, blurting the first one that came to mind—“Taja.”

She raised her eyebrows and said, “Really? I thought you didn’t remember anything, *Taja*?”

I shrugged, offering a half-smile. “I made it up *because* I don’t remember my name. Do you have a different suggestion?”

She frowned and said, “You’re serious? You really don’t know who you are?”

Why did I feel guilty? “I’m pretty sure I didn’t forget on purpose.”

The dark-haired girl rolled her eyes. “That’s not what I meant. Sorry.”

She didn’t sound sorry, but maybe that was how she dealt with stress. Sarcasm seemed better than talking to animals on the coping scale. Both a lot better than crying—maybe.

“Maybe I should go look for answers closer to Yândarî. Travel to the

innerposts and see if any of the magî there know me,” I said, asking but not really asking.

“I’m not going to tell you what you should or shouldn’t do, but I’ll give you a bit of unsolicited advice. There are still at least three months of rainy season left, so getting to Yândaî is . . . risky. Flash floods happen all through the valleys south of Heza, and that’s the route of the Western Rê, not to mention the Serîk.”

She was right about the floods during the wet season. More information without knowing why or how I’d gained it, but the fact that she was honest about that did a lot to make me trust her about the rest. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Doesn’t cost a thing,” she said, pursing her lips.

I glanced away, awkwardness filling the gap of silence between us.

“So,” Esi said, drawing out the word as if there was a question attached to it.

Not much I could give her to that. “So?”

“How long have you been living back there? A couple weeks?” She raised her eyebrows. “A couple months?”

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head. Was she being funny or testing me?

“All right. You can come live in Pûleêr until you remember—or until you decide to leave. Just don’t do magîk.” She narrowed her eyes again as she stared down the road, the gold brightening and then disappearing because of her widening pupils. “We need to go now, though. There are Serîk on the road.”

The decision was easy, but not only because I had few other options. Ruin apparently trusted her, and more importantly, she understood the importance of not using magîk. Maybe she could help me remember why that was significant, too.

As Esi hurried down the Little Rê, I glanced back at the jungle's lush growth, a weighty feeling of loss in my chest, but I couldn't see Ruin. With a sigh, I rushed to catch up with Esi.

She set a steady pace, demanding but still manageable. I darted furtive glances at her, noting her furrowed brow, and she bit her lip again. Dread grew inside me, the sensation nauseating.

"Pûleêr is about thirty miles. If we stop for one or two fifteen-minute breaks, we should get there way before the supper bell. But if we have to stop for the night, we'd need to either get way up a tree or take the time to make a clearing—and I don't climb trees."

Pûleêr. One of the farthest outposts from Yândarî. The post was known for . . . I tried to remember, but . . . I frowned because I couldn't think of anything significant. It was a post of lesser magî, no artisans, no specific crops that weren't available elsewhere, nothing spectacular, but they did have *some* magîk.

"If we can't make it all the way to your post, couldn't we just camp on the road?"

"No, we'd be caught by the Serîk. So even though it takes hours to make sure we have a clearing, that's preferable to the certainty of the Serîk."

My thoughts jumped, and as I passed a giant aleph-ear plant, I pulled at the greenery, tearing off a large chunk. I ripped the leaf, intending to shred my anxiety through the plant, but Esi grabbed my wrist.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her eyes wide. "You can't just shred that and leave the pieces on the Little Rê."

I glanced behind me and then back to Esi, who was frowning. “Why not?”

Her features pinched, and she threw her hands into the air. “Were you not listening? First”—she held up a finger—“we don’t want to leave any traces the Serîk can track. Second,” she said, holding up another finger, “if you leave shreds of plants on the ground, what happens to them?”

“Eventually, they’ll decompose. It’s the circle of life, or has that changed?” The laws of nature seemed off, so there seemed some validity to the question. “Also, you keep saying the Serîk are bad, but I don’t understand *why*.”

She snorted. “Right. So, here are the big pieces. Five years ago, Zerôn became the kûmdâr and took Zîyanâ to be his bondmate. Before that, I’d never even heard of the bûyî, but other magî say it’s been around for over a decade. However, in the last five years, it’s become the second biggest concern for the magî of Qralî.”

“What is it?”

“No one really knows for sure. It’s like a bog of rot, only there’s no way to get out of it. If you get sucked into the bûyî, you die.”

“A bog?” I lifted my foot, the sticky mud falling in clumps from in between my toes as I wiggled them. “Like the ground isn’t already one?”

“Not like this. The bûyî doesn’t look different.” She pointed at the Little Rê. “It just suddenly appears and sucks whoever is there in. Their body disappears, and their soul moves on.”

“Have you seen bûyî before?” I pressed. My skin prickled with the thought, and the packed mud of the Little Rê offered little comfort, the grime seemingly crawling up my ankles. I shivered and shook one of my feet.

Esi chuckled, likely at my odd dance, and then answered. “Nope. We’ve had only one instance in Pûleêr.”

“So how do you stay safe?” I’d do a lot to avoid drowning in muck.

“The bûyî comes with the undercanopy’s decomposition. If we keep the growth cleared . . .” Esi shrugged. “At least that’s what we’ve been told in Pûleêr. There was a magî, Lea; her family let the borders of their area go—put off clearing it—and when she went into the decomposing leaf-litter to pick orchids”—Esi made a loud sucking sound—“her bondmate and sons saw her get sucked in. One of the boys ran to help her, and he got sucked in, too.”

My jaw gaped. “That really happened?”

“It’s been happening all over Qralî,” she said with a nod. “That one time in Pûleêr was two years ago though, and everyone knows about it. Since then, we keep our borders clear, and we’ve been safe.”

We continued to walk, and sweat trickled from my hairline down my neck and back. The muggy heat made the trek so much worse than just the distance. Wait. “What about the Serîk?”

Esi blanched, and her gaze darted ahead, side to side, and then she turned to check behind us. Even after confirming we were alone, she pursed her lips. “If I tell—and anyone ever asks—you didn’t hear it from me, right?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

She took a deep breath and then whispered, “It’s because of the kûmdâr.” She cleared her throat and, still keeping her voice hushed, continued. “At first we thought things would continue as they had under Zevn’s rule, but the sovereign and his bondmate spoke of the old Qralî—when the magî arrived from Kânkarâ. They touted the superiority of zetas and said we would see the strongest magî rise again.” Esi held up her hand to stop my questions. “I don’t know what they meant when the announcement was made, but two weeks later, Serîk arrived in Pûleêr, the kirinî was reintroduced, and magî started dying.”

I frowned because that made no sense. The kirinî was a trial to assess magîk, a way to filter out the best magî to be the kûmdâr’s guards. “Every kûmdâr has a kirinî; that’s normal.”

“That’s what we thought, too,” Esi replied. “For three seasons afterward, things were quiet—at least here—but then the Serîk came again. In the past three years, the Serîk have taken hundreds, maybe even *thousands*, of magî, from all over Qralî, and none of them return to their homes.” She must’ve seen my disbelief for her expression hardened, and she seethed. “Eventually, even way out here in the outposts, news travels. Whatever Zerôn is doing, the magî don’t survive.”

While I wondered why the kümdâr would kill his own, Esi continued to grumble under her breath as she walked, kicking at the occasional stones in her path. One of the rocks scuttled into the thick groundcover, and the surrounding croaks and chirps waned for several seconds before swelling back to their normal volume.

“Why is everyone going along with it?” I asked, throwing my hands up.

She looked at me like I was the post-idiot and shook her head. “Who’s going to usurp him?” she asked. “He’s a zeta, and so is his bondmate—and he has dozens of Serîk.”

“What about Zîvrünê? He’s a zeta.”

“The kümdâr’s brother? I don’t know what happened, but Zîvrünê didn’t contest his brother’s actions. I even saw him touring after the kümdâr took his bondmate. But the news I heard a couple days ago in Terit”—she jerked her thumb over her shoulder—“is there was a coup attempt, but Zerôn won. Maybe Zîvrünê was involved with it, maybe not, but allegedly he’s gone now. Not that it matters. I live in Pûleêr; the zetas don’t visit the distant posts, and we stopped using magîk so the Serîk can’t trace us that way.”

I’d only known Esi for a few hours, but the anger in her eyes and her pinched expression made it obvious she did care.

“Is there more I should know?” I asked. “Like why the jungle is growing so fast? Or is that not important?”

Esi huffed, and I hurried to keep up. She said nothing for several minutes, but eventually, she turned toward me and frowned.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Things have always been a bit different in

Qralî, right? At least that's what the legends say. Come on. We really only have a couple miles left, I think."

As we walked, she told me about Pûleêr, how they'd elected a council and the entire post worked together for the betterment of the whole. She purported no one went hungry, and the rules were fair and kept the entire outpost safe. "There's a sense of comradery," she said with a grin. "You'll make lots of friends."

I nodded, instinctively distrustful of any claim to utopia. She continued, detailing the layout of the post, including the two rivers, the latter with a beautiful waterfall.

"That sounds lovely." And refreshing. "Let's go there first."

She chuckled. "You do need a bath."

The anticipation drove me to pick up my pace for the better part of a quarter hour, but my legs felt like overcooked plantains.

As the afternoon sun dipped, I glanced up at the canopy. "How much longer?"

Esi snorted. "This usually takes me seven hours, and we've been walking for over eight. You're *definitely* not from a western outpost."

Which would mean I was from one of the innerposts, closer to the capital, or the other side of Qralî.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"By how slow you walk, your vernacular, and the quantity of worthless knowledge you spout."

I couldn't protest on my speed, but the rest? "What do you mean, vernacular?" I asked, grimacing. "You say fetid rot just as much as I do, and you haven't used a single word I didn't know—except bûyî. And I was familiar with the word, but the context . . . has changed. And what worthless knowledge are you referencing?"

The trail we walked on shifted from packed dirt to sticky mud. As we distanced ourselves from the Little Rê and drew near Pûleêr, the sounds of people crawled down the path toward us. We turned the bend, and ahead a guard post overlooked the lower layers of the rainforest.

"Partly, it's how you talk. I say fetidrot, as though it were one word; the d often never makes it into the conversation. You say, 'Fetid. Rot.' Two words, and fetid has a hard d."

I pursed my lips, just as a monkey hollered through the trees above.

"What?" she said. "You can't hear the difference?"

I nodded. “Yes, but that’s not vernacular—it’s diction. The way we enunciate our words.”

Esi snorted. “Exactly. You just proved both my points.”

We passed by the bell tower, and Esi waved at the male standing at the top. Around the next corner, we stepped into a massive clearing, and I froze, a tingling familiarity washing over me.

Examining the area, I searched for a reason why it felt familiar, even though I couldn’t remember ever being here. Somehow I knew the long building to my left, open on three sides, was a communal kitchen, even if the smell of roasting meat hadn’t given it away. Under the roof, a long counter ran the length of the structure where dozens of people talked as they chopped and stirred, preparing a meal. Close to fifty rectangular tables and twice as many benches occupied the space in front of the kitchen, enough to seat at least a thousand, with tall poles supporting countless thatched roofs over the communal space.

Finished scrutinizing the area, I realized nothing else—and no one—sparked that same curious feeling like I’d been here before. “Are all the posts laid out the same?”

“I’ve only been to a few—three to be exact—and yes, they are all laid out this way now.”

I jerked my head to the side to stare at her. “Now. As in they didn’t used to be?”

She nodded, answering my implied question. “When the world goes to rot, you either adapt and survive or cling to the past and die. In Pûleêr, we adapted,” she said. “The posts that didn’t change are gone, swallowed up by the bûyî.”

The bell behind us clanged, the sound ringing out in a wave, undulating beyond the borders of the post. As if the bell had released them from the jungle’s hold, the magî of Pûleêr spilled into the clearing. Males, females, and children all dressed in simple clothes—a short sulu wrap for the males; tunics, or skirts and bandeau tops for the females—were splattered and filthy with muck.

I scanned the clearing, rapidly filling with the population, and had an epiphany. Even in a post this small, there would be enough different abilities to need to barter and trade. Turning to Esi, I asked, “Where’s the market?”

Her gaze darkened, and she scanned the crowd before she turned to me and said, “We don’t have a market in Pûleêr.”

No market? Every innerpost and outpost had a market—where goods, services, and, most importantly, magîk were bought or exchanged. If one post didn't have what an individual wanted, they could go to a different post, and because everyone had magîk—to some degree—everyone had something to barter. I narrowed my eyes, but before I could ask, she reminded me.

“No magîk means the Serîk don't bother to come. It was the best way we could adapt.”

The people drew near, and their furtive glances and whispers crawled over to me. Esi remained where she stood, ignoring me and the growing line at the kitchen, as she studied the magî. I stood rooted next to her, feeling awkward.

The magî moved at a brisk pace, but a thousand—or even five hundred—took time, and I guessed the number to be closer to the former. Esi occasionally greeting one or two of the group, but not once did she introduce me. As the seconds ticked by, I stopped caring.

This close to the citizens, I noticed details I'd missed at first glance. Contrary to Esi's claims, the magî were *not* equally dirty, and not all of their clothing was equally worn. Some of the magî were even laughing and completely clean. I turned to say something to Esi, but her intense expression suddenly pinched.

Not even a minute later, the last of the magî passed inside the kitchen. Esi heaved a deep breath and said, “Let's go get dinner.”

Finally.

We stepped into the kitchen where Esi grabbed two wooden plates and then handed one to me. “You can eat as much as you want of anything grown in the jungle.”

I nodded and rose on my tiptoes, searching for the source of the delicious smell. “How much meat do we get?”

“None,” she said. “We didn't do any work; maybe we'll get cheese. Tomorrow, if we work hard and the supply is good, we'll get a fair portion.”

Fair? I was about to point out the disparity between the utopia she'd purported on our walk and what I'd seen thus far, but maybe I was missing the bigger picture. I snorted because obviously I *was* missing the bigger picture.

I followed Esi through the line and held my plate out for rice, beans, plantains, fruit, and *luckily* a scoop of cheese. A woman named Dostane worked in the kitchen, and she was responsible for the small mounded

desserts made of ground nuts, coconut, and sugar. The fare was simple but satisfying.

We found seats at an empty table, and a male magî, older than us but still young enough to be good-looking, got up and said a few words about work assignments. Esi scowled when he said her name, tossing a portion of her shade across the table to me. I ate silently, observing the magî, and less than a quarter hour later, Esi announced we were done. I shoved the confection in my mouth and chased after her.

She led me to the other side of the kitchen, where several large barrels stood surrounded by a dozen magî, and looked at me expectantly.

“You wash the dishes?”

Esi raised her eyebrows. “Yep. Let’s get to it so we can get back to my place. I’m ready to be done with the day.”

Almost in unison, five magî grabbed plates, scraped the remainder of food into a trough at their feet, and then turned to drop the plate in one of the barrels. Two to three people surrounded each barrel, some scrubbing and others rinsing, and a separate group of magî stacked the dishes on a wheeled rack. I watched and mimicked her actions, relieved when she nodded her approval of my efforts.

“Who’s your friend, Esi?” a male asked. “Did you finally convince someone from Terit to see the truth?”

“That post has more pride than Yândarî,” a female grouched. “They’ll never fully stop using magîk, and the Serîk will rape them of their best.” She turned to me and added, “Is that why you left? Or are you planning on going home after you see how we do things?”

The group quieted, and my heart thudded. I glanced at Esi, but she ignored me, keeping her gaze averted.

“I don’t intend to go back home until I know the truth,” I said evasively.

Esi harrumphed and then splashed me with the dirty water. “This is Taja. I found her wandering on the Little Rê and brought her home with me. Maybe she’ll figure out the meaning of the bûyî and get rid of the kûmdâr.”

My jaw dropped, and even though several people in the group chuckled, the tension didn’t dispel.

A female muttered, “Sure, and maybe the Zîv will come for a visit too.”

I grimaced with confusion, until Esi caught my eye and shook her head, mouthing *not here*.

I tucked my head and let their voices swell around me while I worked.

“You better hope the Zîv doesn’t ever come here, or he’ll bring the Serîk with him—”

A magî grunted, and then another one of the group said, “We live in Pûleêr; he won’t ever come here.”

But then they all looked at me, as if maybe he would—and it would be my fault.

Maybe I was safer with Ruin.

“Here’s my home,” Esi said, waving at an enclosed structure, the front door made of metal from a bygone era, warped and stained in a plethora of colors: pink, blue, green, and gray. She grinned with apparent pride, and I forced my lips upward as I cringed inside.

The house—could I even call it that?—was no more than fifteen feet wide, and it didn’t appear to be any longer than its width. The other three sides were wood, mostly planks of the same size, hammered to support beams. The roof was thatch, and I anticipated wet nights when the rain would seep through the barrier to wake me.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Esi said.

There was no possible way she could know.

“Why is she out here all by herself?” Esi asked in a high, nasally voice. “Why not be closer to the center of Pûleêr? Especially because of the bûyî . . .”

Glancing around the clearing, I noticed the new growth was glaringly obvious against the backdrop of established plants, but with her words, I whipped my head toward her and found her grinning, but was I reading her well? Forcing a smile I didn’t feel, I said, “I do not sound like that.”

“But that’s what you were thinking,” she said. She stepped past the house and gestured for me to follow. “Rull was supposed to have someone keep it clear. We’ll have to do it in the morning now. Come on, I’ll show you the real reason I live out here by myself.”

A low bleating sound greeted us as we rounded the corner, and a real smile blossomed on my lips. A small pen, empty except for a lean-to and its

occupants, was tucked up next to the back of the house. “You have goats?”

“Just the two. There are only a few left here, so it’s a real privilege.”

I followed her, much like a lost kid, grinning when I saw the nannys, identifiable by the engorged udders, waiting behind the gate. Whoever I was, I clearly enjoyed the company of animals.

A mottled black goat stood at the entrance, crying, and the other, brown and white, moaned as she got to her feet. The growth of the forest floor and undercanopy beneath them was shorn to less than an inch by the goats’ obvious voracious appetites—which was good, considering what Esi told me of the *bûyî*.

“What the rot?” she grumbled after she opened the gate and slipped through. She grabbed a pail and, grouching about not trusting some jackass to tend the goats ever again, pulled up a stool and began milking. “Go grab another stool from inside, and start with Bizi. Poor dears.”

I dashed back to the front of her house and yanked on the metal handle. The entire structure trembled, but the door barely moved an inch.

Esi shouted, “Just slide it open, *baja!*”

Rolling my eyes at her insult, I pushed against the handle and slid the thick piece of metal open. I grabbed the first box-like structure I saw and then squinted into the darkness for a pail.

“Hurry up, Taja. Bizi isn’t feeling patient right now!”

“Neither are you,” I grumbled. I scoured the darkened interior of Esi’s home, but the space was filled with mounds of stuff. The clink of metal rang with my next step. *Ah-ha!* “Found it!”

I jogged back to the pen, and the brown goat hobbled to me, nosing my leg as she passed to settle near the pail.

“Uh,” I stammered, staring at the teats. “Do I just pull?”

“Don’t you dare!” Esi glanced over her shoulder, and her panicked expression faded when she saw me sitting still. After a loud exhale, she said, “Wipe the teats first, so we don’t have to drink the mud. Either that, or you can explain to Rull why the milk tastes terrible.”

There was bite to her warning. A lot. “Who’s Rull?”

“The head of the council,” she said, raising her eyebrows. When I said nothing, she continued, “The old magî who assigned us dishes. He announces all the assignments.”

But her tone indicated that he did more than just announce them.

“He didn’t seem that old,” I said, reflecting. Nope—not a single male or

female with white, or even gray, hair. If I had to guess, the oldest person was maybe forty. Old, but not that old. And with the amount of magîk in Qralî, the lifespan was greater, or it had been. “Where are the old magî? Why aren’t there any here?”

Esi swore. “The older magî were the first group called to Yândarî. Zerôn wanted to gather the ‘wisdom of experience.’ We were told great honor would be heaped upon them. Pretty sure the only thing heaped on them was dirt.”

She stated the information with the dispassionate tone of ancient history, but all I could do was stare. The idea that a ruler would slaughter the older generation was unbelievable—even if only because of their knowledge.

“Did they all die?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” she said, keeping her expression blank. “Anyway, Rull is one of our eldest now.” She narrowed her eyes and then huffed. “Do you want to learn how to milk a goat or not?”

No. Yes. Maybe. What I wanted was my memory or, better yet, for something—anything—to make sense. Even more, I wanted to believe I was lucky Esi found me and not a Serîk, but her mood swings made me wonder. Not that I had another option right now. I took a deep breath and said, “Yes.”

Esi proceeded to walk me through the process step by step, and a few minutes later, the splatter of warm milk hit the bottom of the pail. I continued to knead and squeeze, losing myself in the rhythmic activity. Roll-squeeze . . . roll-squeeze.

“Clearly, you’ve milked a goat before,” Esi said from behind me several minutes later.

I glanced down at the milk, not even an inch from the rim, and grinned, feeling as if I’d learned another thing about myself. I patted and thanked the goats and then followed Esi over to a rock filled basin in the enclosure, watching as she built a small fire and heated the milk to make cheese.

“It tastes really good if we add herbs,” she said, stirring in some lemon juice. “But it’s too late to grow or even harvest any today,” she said, darting a glance into the darkened jungle.

Indeed. We were both squinting as we finished scooping the curds into a thin fabric sheet. Esi tied up the bundle and then motioned toward her house.

“Grab the other pail and come on,” she said, hefting the pack of cheese and one of the pails. She waited for me at the gate, looking out at the jungle. “Ah, Taja?”

“What?” I asked, stumbling toward her, my eyes barely open.

“Is that panthera your pet?” she asked.

I jolted upright, my eyes wide as shock woke me from my stupor.
“Panthera?”

“The black panthera that was with you on the road. He followed us all the way to Pûleêr. I just saw him”—she jerked her chin toward the wall of plants—“*again*. I don’t want him thinking the goats are an easy snack.”

What could I say? “I’ll tell him, but he’s not really mine. I don’t think you can own a panthera like you do a goat.”

“Probably not.” She took a deep breath and hefted her load of milk and cheese. “Either way, since he seems attached to you, will you tell him not to eat the goats—or me?”

I blinked, stunned with how casual she was acting, and stammered, “Of course.”

She pushed open the gate, and the goats followed her toward the front of the house, and I walked to the edge of the verdant growth.

The black panthera stepped out from the jungle, his wide eyes luminous in the low light. My heart jumped as he approached. I crouched and looked him in the eye. “Hey, Ruin. Don’t eat Esi or her goats. I have a feeling she wouldn’t forgive us.”

He responded by dipping his head and purring, the low rumble in his chest soothing my frayed nerves.

I stroked his head and then kissed where I’d just petted him. “Goodnight,” I whispered. “If you want to stick around and make sure we’re safe, I’m not going to protest.” Guilt zinged through me. “But make sure you’re taking care of you, too.”

Ruin pressed his nose to my cheek, and I stilled. I had no idea what the gesture meant, but it was obviously significant, and it felt like he was telling me yes.

“Thanks,” I said. Then I stood, dusting off my tunic. “I’ll see you in the morning.” With that I lifted the pail, reconsidered, and then set it down. “Here you go,” I said. “You can have this. I don’t think we’ll need it.”

After all his watchful care, feeding him was the least I could do.

The clang of a bell startled me from sleep, and I sat up blinking in the near darkness. The room swam and then settled, solidifying around me as the world of dreams ebbed and my memories of the last few days flowed. At least I had that going for me now.

I glanced at the other side of the pallet, but Esi and the goats were already up. The single room house was not much more than a large bedchamber with a cheese-making space included. Almost half of the space had bags of curds in various stages of firmness hanging from the ceiling. The thatch on the roof was misleading, likely intentionally, for two solid pieces of wood were pitched angles to keep rain out of the space.

“Are you up yet?” Esi hollered, her voice penetrating the wall. “We’ve got to be out to breakfast in the next few minutes or we’re going to miss all the good stuff.”

My gaze went to the cheese. “Can’t we just eat here?”

“Ha-ha. The cheese is for everyone, and we have to turn it in, so let’s go.”

I scrambled out of bed, cringing at the smell of my tunic. “Are we going to get a bath today?”

My stench, sweat, goat milk—going sour—and fruit juice mixed with mud had officially passed rancid. I pushed my hair away from my face and climbed over the crates to the door. Stepping into the filtered dawn light, I grimaced up at the tall trees of the canopy. The top layer of the jungle still hid in the shadows of morning.

“Why are we starting so early?” I grumbled.

“Best to work when it’s cool. We need to regain lost ground. The

rainforest is impinging on the perimeter of Pûleêr, just like here, and no one wants to give up the land—especially not to the bûyî.”

Still groggy, I asked, “Why can’t we just use magîk to clear it?”

She huffed and said, “Because some of the Serîk can sense it. If we don’t use our magîk, they won’t come here. No one wants to be taken by them.”

I nodded my agreement with the reminder; I didn’t want to be taken by the Serîk either.

Jerking her head toward the path, she said, “Let’s go.”

After morning ablutions, I followed Esi, my eyes still gritty with sleep. “I need a real bath.”

“We’ll wait until the end of the day’s work,” she replied over her shoulder. “It’ll be late enough then the caiman won’t be hunting at the Cem.”

The thought of caiman had me nodding again, even more aggressively this time. “I hate caiman.”

“Me too.” She slowed her pace and glanced over her shoulder at me. “Hurry up.”

My stomach growled, demanding nourishment, and a few minutes later, we were back in the clearing of the town center. I followed Esi to the kitchen where she handed the bucket to a female with a scar down the side of her face.

“Where’s the other one?” she asked.

“That’s the cheese,” Esi replied.

The other magî frowned, her eyes narrowing. “I can see that. Where’s the whey? No way you made all this cheese and drank the whey.”

I grimaced, remembering how Esi grumbled when I told her I’d let Ruin have all of it. “It was my fault.”

“That so?” The female turned her glare on me. “Then you won’t need more protein today since you’re all filled up.”

“I didn’t drink it,” I said. “I-I spilled it?”

“Are you asking or telling?”

I shrugged, not sure which was worse in her eyes. “Sorry.”

Apparently, plain rice and fruit was the consequence of not bringing the whey after making cheese. Even so, it was worth it for Ruin. At least I thought so. Esi didn’t agree.

We finished eating, and the “older” male I’d spotted yesterday got up and announced work groups and locations for each of the units. As soon as he was finished, Esi grabbed me.

“Let’s go,” she said, tugging on my arm. “The council needs to talk with you and decide if you can stay.”

Wait—“What?” I called after her as she stomped toward the older magî. Even though she couldn’t see, I glared at her retreating back, feeling betrayed, and said, “You said I could stay.”

By the time I caught up, Esi stood next to Rull. Another young male soon joined us, followed by Dostane and then several more magî. My anxiety spiked, and their faces became almost indistinguishable—four male and four female magî were going to decide my fate. What-ifs assailed me, and I tried to calm my wild pulse. Shifting my weight from foot to foot, I felt my hands prickled as my palms moistened with sweat.

“Relax,” Esi whispered next to me. “You’re hardly a threat. They’ll let you stay or I wouldn’t have invited you.”

I wanted to explain, but I couldn’t make sense of my own reaction.

Rull cleared his throat and jerked his head toward one of the tables. “Let’s talk over here.”

Esi slid into a seat and smiled up at me, patting the place next to her. I didn’t deserve their kindness—*no*. I forced the self-deprecating, insecure voice into a box and locked it away. Everyone deserved kindness—except psychopaths. They deserved justice, which would be a kindness to everyone else.

“Esi said she found you on the Little Rê,” Rull said, his eyes narrowed as he studied me. “Where are you from?”

I told them the same thing I’d told her yesterday. My story didn’t take very long because it wasn’t long. After I finished, Rull asked several follow up questions, but we circled right back to where we started. After the second time through the same queries—albeit in a different order—I cut him off.

“I’m not hiding anything from you,” I said, glancing to Esi as if she could confirm. “I said I don’t know because I don’t.”

“Fine. But *if* you do remember anything, you must let us know immediately,” Rull pressed, his dark eyes hardening.

“You can just tell Esi,” Dostane said, smiling at me as though her friendliness would make up for Rull. Or maybe she thought it would encourage me to remember. “If you tell Esi, she’ll keep us in the loop.”

“Sure,” I agreed with a shrug.

“And don’t do any magîk,” Rull added. “That’s the most important rule in Pûleêr. Hopefully, Esi already told you.”

I nodded just as someone grunted. I glanced down the row, trying to spot the dissenter.

The youngest of the males sat on the very end of their row, and he leaned over the table and stared at the magî on the opposite side of Rull and said, “What would you have us do, Delo? Throw her out of Pûleêr? Then the Serîk would get her for sure.”

“How do we know she’s not a spy?” the other magî snapped. He was younger than Rull, maybe in his late twenties, and his expression was fierce. “What if her magîk allows her to communicate with others and she brings the Serîk?”

I shook my head. “I already said I don’t know what my magîk is.”

“Then how do we know if you’re using it?” Delo snapped.

“Esi, you brought her, so you’ll have to remain with her until the council is in agreement,” Rull said, frustration oozing into his tone. He fixed my host with a hard gaze, everything about him reinforcing her responsibility for the problem I presented.

Only, I wasn’t going to be a problem. “I’ll work and do whatever I need to—”

“She’ll have to sleep in your home; you’ll have to work with her. If she’s always supervised”—he pursed his lips as he glanced first at Delo then the rest of the group—“will you be satisfied?”

The magî nodded, all except for Delo who glared at me.

“She doesn’t even know who Zädîsa is.” Delo stood and spread his glare around to the rest of the council, finally turning his bitterness back on me. “Or what she stood for. Why let her join the safety we’ve built?”

Zädîsa? I looked from magî to magî, trying to remember a zeta by that name, but my mind came up blank again.

“Because that’s exactly what Zädîsa stands for, rot-brain,” Esi snapped.

“And where is she now?” Delo demanded. “When’s the last time she bothered to come out to any of the posts and give an update?”

“It doesn’t matter if she never comes. We believe in her ideals, or at least we did. Some of us still do.” Esi grabbed my arm but addressed Rull next. “I’ll keep Taja with me, but we need to clear my border today. Tomorrow, we’ll join a unit. Somehow, *nothing* got done yesterday, and the growth by my home is *at least* three days old.”

Rull clenched his jaw, and the pulse in his neck feathered against taut muscles. He exhaled slowly and then said, “Understood.”

He dismissed the meeting and, after everyone else had left, walked with us toward the path that would take us back to Esi's home. "It's been rough the last few days," he said, keeping his attention elsewhere. "We lost Trine yesterday—Ero's partner—so I forgot to send anyone to milk the goats."

Esi stumbled although the path was free of obstruction. I glanced at her then to the male who suddenly seemed much older than forty. His attention shifted my way, but he never looked me in the eyes either. Trepidation slithered over my skin, and I glanced away.

Esi slowed her pace, and her expression darkened. "Lost her? As in the *bûyî*? Or did she run away?"

He shrugged. "No one knows for sure, although I assume it was the *bûyî*. She just disappeared. Ero came to supper asking if anyone had seen her after her work unit dispersed, but the last time she was seen was on her way to their home."

"Any indication of a struggle? Did someone look at their home?"

Rull shook his head and glanced at Esi, his lips pulling up into a half-smile. "You're the only one who would even think that. Everyone liked Trine—especially Ero. No one in *Pûleêr* is going to kill another. We're all fighting for the same thing. We need each other." His smile softened, and then he waved toward the path. "Go on, you two. Clean up your border. Then take the rest of the day off. We'll see you for supper."

Esi nodded, and Rull turned and started back toward the tables. So much about him seemed practiced and insincere. Beyond him, dozens of *magî* still sat at their tables, laughing and eating. While I could understand why the pregnant females might get a pass at physical labor, there were plenty of young males there—including Rull's son.

"Hey," Esi called out to the head of their council. "Have Dostane tell the serving *magî* we get protein. I'm not going to starve because Taja's new."

Rull's pace didn't slow, but he waved his hand overhead and said, "Noted."

Esi marched down the path, muttering to herself, and I ran after her.

"Don't be nervous," she said as I caught up. We took several steps, the only sounds between us the distant jungle and the dripping moisture from the canopy above. I wasn't sure what she was referencing, so I didn't try to assure or dissuade her regarding my feelings. Finally, she added, "It's only been four days, not enough time for the *bûyî* to be a risk."

Rot. I'd been thinking about the council—still sitting at the table after we

left—not the labor or risk ahead. Suddenly I wasn't sure if her words of assurance were intended for me or her.

“Who's Zādîsa?” I asked, both to change the subject and seek information.

Esi slowed her pace, and her eyes lit with adoration as she spoke. “The sister of Zîyanâ, the kümdâr's bondmate. Zādîsa defied the sovereign to warn the outposts about the Serîk and the kirinî. She also told us Serîk can track magîk.”

Which explained the rules. Zādîsa was obviously Esi's hero, too. “Did she also tell you how to avoid the bûyî?”

“No,” Esi said with a small shake of her head. She inhaled, her features contorting with conflict. “Maybe a little, but mostly about the Serîk taking magî. She suggested everyone be treated fairly, equally, and that we stop using magîk.”

I wasn't sure that what I'd seen in Pûleêr could be called either. “Where is she now? Since she's not here, enjoying all this fairness, I mean.”

Esi shot me a dirty look and then laughed. “Probably in Yândarî with the rest of the royal family, but I don't know if that's true.”

Yândarî, the capital, where they did magîk and nothing was remotely fair or equal. More knowledge I couldn't explain. Not that any of it mattered to me beyond losing my respect. I couldn't tolerate hypocrisy, and thus far, there was nothing *fair or equal* in Pûleêr. Despite my amnesia, my instinct was to distrust those in power until *after* they'd proven themselves worthy of more—not the other way around.

I followed Esi's lead, and we spent all day tearing out the new growth around her home. While Esi had no problem walking for hours, by the time we finished, we were both out of breath from the labor. The light had faded, the bell calling us to supper long gone. I was so exhausted I couldn't muster the energy to protest the meager bowl of water she offered to wash up for dinner. We ate yogurt, cheese, mangoes, lychee, and I drank my fill of goat milk before collapsing on my cot.

“Tomorrow won't be so easy,” she said, pulling off her sweat-soaked tunic.

“I think I used muscles I don't really have,” I grumbled. My entire body ached. “I might die. Do you really not have a healer?”

“No magîk,” Esi said wearily, her shoulders slumping as she sat on the edge of my pallet. “No magîk; no Serîk.”

She said something else, but it was lost as I drifted to sleep.

The next morning, we joined the rest of Pûleêr for a community meal again, only this time, after breakfast, Esi led me out of the clearing and down a path, trailing behind the twenty other people assigned to our group. I eyed the other members, catching a few sideway glances. Not that I didn't understand the curiosity, but my previous self-consciousness grew. *New girl, who happens to be filthy, gave away the whey.* Not the best way to make a first impression—or second. I tried to brush off the feeling and instead focused on the growth ahead of us.

The plants ranged from ankle to waist high and were at least four feet in width, far more of the lush vegetation impinging on the border of Pûleêr than at Esi's house.

"We need to push it back to the red bromeliads," Esi said to me, pointing at the vibrant plants clinging to the branches of trees farther back in the jungle.

I frowned at the near impossibility of the task. "How many days do we have to clear it?"

A girl next to me laughed, a harsh barking sound. She was petite and pretty, but her lip curled with a look of disdain.

"What? I'm just asking," I said.

"Stop it, Nebe. She's not from Pûleêr, so how would she know?"

"She's not from anywhere near here then because most of the posts in the southwest are clearing the plants by hand." The girl shook her head and glared at me, her lip curling in a sneer. "It's her fault I'm stuck in this group." She leaned closer to Esi and whispered, "Don't tell me you don't mind."

What? I frowned at the accusation and looked to Esi for an explanation.

"Leave her alone," Esi snapped at the other magî.

"Stop talking and get to work," a male bellowed. "You two can jaw about fault at supper. Five feet ain't going to clear itself."

The group moved forward, and all at once, the work commenced. Everyone pulled, tugged, dug, or yanked on the stalks of growth. The sticky mud clung to the roots, and clumps flew through the air as plants were torn from the ground. Talk resumed, speculation about the gender of a young couple's still unborn baby and who might partner next. One young male magî challenged another to a contest, and bets were made. After we pulled up the growth, we threw it back into the jungle.

The temperature rose as the day went on, and two boys scaled coconut

trees for fluid and a snack. Esi accepted one of the green fruits, and we slurped down the water and scooped out the flesh with a dried piece of shell before returning to work. The day dragged. My hands grew raw and chaffed, and my back, thighs, and arms ached. Next to me, Esi wasn't faring much better.

"Are we close?" I groaned as I straightened to look at the tree line. My eyes burned, but I flushed with triumph when I saw we were less than six inches away from the bright-red plants. My exhaustion waned just enough to renew my determination.

Someone let out a whoop, followed by several more. I raised my head to see the two male magi who'd made a bet in the morning slap each other's hands.

"Done!" one of them yelled, kicking mud at the other. "I beat you by a foot."

Another young male, maybe twelve or fourteen, scooped up a handful of mud and flung it at the other. "You liar. I beat you. You didn't—"

"Come on," Esi said, grabbing me by the arm and dragging me away from the mud fight. "If we leave now, we can take a bath before we eat. The Cem is always crowded, but I know somewhere we can go now."

I whirled about and grinned. "Finally."

Esi snorted. "You're more excited about taking a bath than about food?"

"So?" My stomach growled, denying her conclusion—or maybe it was telling me I had my priorities wrong. "Don't you want to be clean?"

She tilted her head as she studied me. "Clean is a luxury." Frowning, Esi continued, "Keep talking, Taja, and we'll sort out where you're from."

We walked through a narrow path, and the sound of splashing water tickled my ears. "Is that a waterfall?"

I pictured a crystal-blue, shallow lake with smooth river rocks lining the bottom. On one side a waterfall cascaded through the surface, filling the air with its mist. The flow over the rocks was just enough to beat the dirt off my skin and rinse my hair. I could almost taste the verdant growth and the sweetness of orchids on the tip of my tongue. And behind the falls, a deep cavern that smelled of . . . I frowned as the dream, or maybe memory, evaporated. The pounding roar of water beat against my eardrums, and the heavy moisture clung to my skin. Following Esi, I rounded the corner and stepped into a large gap in the flourishing fauna.

"This is the Cemik," Esi said.

There was a waterfall, but it was much taller than I'd anticipated—at least fifty feet high—and the cascade crashed over a stony cliff, the rocks jutting out through the gush of water. Ironically, the waterfall fed a lazy river, the current moving out of the pool at a snail's pace, and the water lapped at the edges of the muddy bank. I stepped to the border and tested it. The temperature was cool and the eddies translucent enough I was confident there weren't any caiman hiding in hopes of chomping me.

Without waiting for Esi, I tugged off my tunic and strode into the meander—almost a pool—and sighed as the water swallowed my calves, knees, then thighs.

“Whoa,” Esi said, and then she burst into laughter. “Why'd you take your tunic off? You need to wash it, too.”

The delicious prospect of an unhurried bath filled me with joy, and I twirled in the pool to face her. Esi's smile slipped from her face, and her eyes widened in horror as her jaw dropped.

Dread rushed into me, and I spun with a scream on my lips, anticipating something terrible behind me, open jaws or a conda about to strike, but there was nothing. The water continued to cascade from the cliff above, splashing into the river upstream of the bend. The surrounding banks were empty, no terrible animals lying in wait.

“What?” I snapped, spinning back toward her, irritated because she'd scared me—the emotion unnecessary when there was no danger.

Esi stooped to pick up my tunic and then waded into the water, saying, “I'm sorry . . . I just . . . I've never seen scars like that.”

Scars? My gaze dropped, and for the first time, I noticed my chest and abdomen. I traced my fingertips over the red, ropey marks, raised in some spots and dipping into shallow depressions in other areas. The wounds weren't tender, but my stomach turned with the gross evidence of the severe trauma I'd endured.

“Someone tried to kill you,” Esi whispered, suddenly standing next to me. “Why would someone try to kill you?”

I shook my head. What could I have done to make someone want to hurt me? The totality of the mutilations indicated something more than just a will to kill. The gashes were too wide to be claws, too spread out to be a single wound—

“Like someone tried to stab you in your sleep,” she murmured, shaking her head. “And all those other ones . . .”

I glanced at her, and while her eyes were still wide, her lips were contorted in a sympathetic smile of pity. She swished my tunic in the water and then held the garment out to me.

“If someone wanted to kill you, and you got away, there’s a chance they’ll be looking for you. Better keep those scars hidden.”

I nodded and accepted the soaking fabric. Was that what had happened? I wouldn’t be surprised. But then why did my amnesia affect everything about me, not just the trauma? With a squeeze, muddy water dripped from the tunic.

“I guess this means I can’t wear those little bandeau tops like that one girl—Nebe was it?” I joked. Dunking the material into the water, I scrubbed the piece together and swirled it around.

Esi spun in a circle next to me, stopping with a grunt. “Nebe is trying to get back at Rojek for choosing to partner with Dawi. That being said, I’d recommend against the wrap-top, but not only because of your scars.”

“There’s more?” My gaze went from the clear water to my mutilated skin and then to Esi. Every time I thought I was catching my breath, another hit came, and yet I felt partly detached or removed from everything I’d learned. “What else?”

She pointed at me, waving her hand up and down the length of my body. “I already said you were pretty, and you had to notice all the attention you were getting today from the boys. I just think you should settle some of your questions before you add anymore to the pile. Your scars . . . There used to be a healer in Terit, where my cousin lives, and to heal that many wounds—ones that were obviously big and deep—would take really powerful magîk.”

My heart pounded as I thought of the magî in dark-red pants. “Five days ago, there was a male in leather pants in the clearing where I lived. I don’t remember why, but we were fighting. That’s when Ruin saved me. He jumped out . . .”

Esi’s eyes widened again, and her warm brown skin turned ashy. “Were they red or black?”

I stopped washing and grimaced. How would she know it was either-or? I hedged, wondering if I should be more careful. “I just know they were dark. Why does it matter?”

“Only the Serîk wear leathers now, and those in red serve the kûmdâr.”

“And those in black?”

“Served Zîvrünê—the Zîv.” She narrowed her eyes and studied me.

So only the Serîk wore pants—*rot*. I thought of all the male magî I'd seen—all of them in sulus—and my insides churned. Talk of the kûmdâr made me nauseated, compounded by my empty stomach. I closed my eyes and sucked in a deep breath to stop the dizziness. All this plus the shock of my mutilated body . . . I returned to scrubbing my tunic and grumbled, “That better not be my luck—to be tortured by the Serîk.”

“No,” Esi said, wading farther out into the water. “Those scars aren't new. We get plenty of injuries, and without magîk to heal them, I can tell your injuries are at least months, and some of them even years, old.”

She dunked under the water and then relaxed, floating on the surface. I rinsed my tunic again and then pulled it over my head; the wet fabric clung to my body. There was nothing I could do at this point about the Serîk, my scars, or my amnesia. And Esi's wisdom was sound: I needed to get a firm understanding of Qralî and get my head on straight before I went on the search for more answers.

We splashed and swam in the pool, and the minutes floated away unheeded. At one point, I wondered why we were the only ones here, especially as this place wasn't infested with caiman, but I was happy and didn't want to risk hearing more bad news. I lay on my back, drifting in the water, and the bell in the middle of Pûleêr clanged. Esi splashed me in the face, and I sputtered as I turned upright.

"Come on," she called with a wave. She swam toward the shore, shouting at me to hurry.

Treading water, I inched my way forward reluctantly. I was hungry, but I was also tired, and the fatigue was currently winning the battle over my body.

"If you don't hurry, I'm leaving without you," she hollered as she waded to the bank. "I'm not going to get stuck with rice and fruit again."

I grimaced at the thought and pulled my arms through the water with powerful strokes as I kicked. Less than a minute later, I joined her on the rocky shore, and she turned and started down the path toward Pûleêr.

"I thought you said if we worked, we got to have a portion of meat," I said, jogging to catch up.

She glanced back at me, her eyebrows raised. "I said if there was enough *and* we did our portion of the work."

"Exactly what constitutes enough?" I pressed. "Who determines that?"

Shaking her head, she said, "Not everyone is happy I brought you back. I think some of the magî are punishing us."

Guilt flooded me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Don't apologize," she said, waving away my words. "Considering

everything, I would say you need the help. I can handle a few grumpy magî.”

We crossed the outskirts of Pûleêr and into the main perimeter where most residents chose to build their homes. Like Esi, the magî here had built structures made of wood or a combination of wood and stone. The roofs were exclusively thatch—or, at least like Esi’s, they appeared to be. Some of the dwellings had small pens for animals—mostly chicken and goats—and I wondered if everyone in the community had the same integrity as Esi or if there were those who skimmed off the top.

We approached the center of town, and a young male magî sidled up to Esi with a wink.

“I’m glad you took a swim,” he said. “You definitely needed one. Hopefully you washed the uppity attitude of Terit off too.”

I frowned and glanced at the male magî and his hypocritical words. Dried mud was stuck in his dark hair and across his chest, partially covering his massive tattoo of a conda mid-strike. The magî was tall and wiry, and his sulu was saturated with grime. Like everyone I’d seen in Pûleêr, his feet were bare. I studied his face and pursed my lips as I recognized him; he’d been sitting at one of the tables when we left the communal area this morning.

“You should go for a swim, Velt,” Esi grumbled, brushing by him. “Wash off the smell of rolling-in-the-mud.”

I wrinkled my nose because he was filthy. I’d never seen someone so coated in grime. “Do magî fall in the mud a lot?”

Esi snorted. “They like to wrestle.”

I stuck out my tongue and said, “Yuck. I would not want to spend my time off intentionally rolling in the mud.”

Esi didn’t respond, so I flicked my gaze her way. Her expression was drawn, and my mind jumped to fill the gap in my understanding.

I followed, but as we drew closer to the communal area, we merged with the collective crowd and their chatter and gossip. Initially, I heard meaningless snatches of conversation, drivel. Then an anguished keening crawled out to us. The initial talk diminished, and the mourning grew, expanding and spreading with hushed whisperings.

“All of them,” one male said with the shake of his head, his eyes glistening with tears. “Rull went to check, but—”

Esi started walking faster, and I rushed to keep up.

Another male magî said, “They were sucked into the bûyî.”

And as we passed a group, I heard several magî bemoaning how help had

arrived too late.

I caught Esi by the arm, but my questions died on my lips at the ravaged expression she wore. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her chest heaved with emotion. I'd managed to piece together one of the units—the entire group—had died. While the idea was incomprehensible to me, it clearly devastated her. Twenty-five magî gone. No fire, no attack, just sucked into a bog.

The citizens of Pûleêr congregated in the dining area, but no one moved toward the kitchen. Some of the people collapsed onto the benches, curling into themselves, and others clung to one another. The sound of loss pierced me, driving their anguish deep into my soul until my eyes burned with the pain of their loss.

Esi turned to me and choked out, “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head; she had nothing to be sorry for. She stepped toward me, my arms went up instinctively, and I fumbled as she pulled me into a hug. Not knowing what else to do, I ran my hand over her hair, and she sobbed into the crook of my neck. Her grief pulsed between us, and I wanted to say something to make her feel better, but I didn’t know these magî. While I understood their mourning, my grief was only for Esi’s pain.

Morbid curiosity plucked at my heartstrings, the tune a desperate call to see the wretched bûyî. I ignored the callous desire and continued to whisper hushing sounds to soothe Esi. But the twisted desire to investigate clung to me, *repulsive* yet intriguing at the same time.

“Oh, Esi,” a female wailed. “I’m so sorry.”

Esi turned and pulled the magî into an embrace. The two young women sobbed, and I stood, momentarily dumbfounded by their commiserating. I patted Esi and told her I’d meet her later. She mumbled a response into the other girl’s shoulder, and with a final glance at the mourning community, I passed through the kitchen, collected my dinner, and followed the nagging pull toward the other side of Pûleêr.

The houses I passed in this section were noticeably nicer than I’d seen elsewhere in the post. Instead of structures cobbled together in a haphazard way, the baked-brick homes had carved, wooden doors, and while the roofs were thatch, the sloped angle—as well as the visible wood—declared the solidness of these dwellings. For the first time since my arrival, I felt a spark of anger on behalf of my friend. Because even though she’d spouted rhetoric of equality here, the evidence to the contrary was *everywhere*.

After two rows of houses, I crossed into the outskirts, noticeable because of the occasional frond or plant springing up in the mud. Here was the perimeter road, the one Esi had said traversed the entirety of Pûleêr. The density of plants increased on the opposite side of the road, and there was an occasional path that disappeared into the undercanopy.

The afternoon light dwindled, and I headed north on the wide path, the area we'd been clearing on my right. Every twenty to thirty paces, the border of the bright bromeliads made it clear where the lines were for the groups to work, but more often than not, the bright plants weren't necessary. I thought of Rull's words this morning, how the growth had increased and we would need to work harder and faster than ever to keep up, but Esi said assignments were random and everyone rotated areas to ensure the work was *fair*. Yet, the areas weren't equally clear, not by a long shot. Some had five or more feet of newer growth, and others mere inches, despite the footprints in the mud declaring activity in each section. I passed a segment of road that had less than a foot of new growth, but the next—

A low growl behind me stopped me in my tracks, and I pivoted to face the cat, sighing with relief when I spotted his green eyes. Ruin crossed the remaining distance to my side, the low, guttural sound turning into a hiss as he crossed in front of me.

"Where have you been?" I asked, resting my hand on his shoulder.

His attention remained fixed ahead on the perimeter road, this section with more than three feet of newer growth. I frowned, wondering if this was close to where the magî had disappeared.

"Did you come to see the bûyî, too?" I asked, inching to the side so I could go around him.

A breeze eddied past, carrying a putrid stench of rotten meat. Ruin hissed again and then blocked my path, pushing me back with his body.

"He sees the death-trap," a male said.

I jumped, startled by the unexpected company, but when I scanned the area, no one was there. My heart thumped, and I clenched my hands. This better not be someone's stupid idea of a joke. "Hello?"

"No need to shout," he answered. "I'm right next to you."

My skin prickled, and fear danced down my spine. I swallowed back the urge to scream and turned to my right. Nothing. To my left—nothing. "I'm losing my mind."

"No," he said. "You need to free the rest of your magîk so you can see."

“See what?” I whispered, closing my eyes. I wasn’t sure I wanted to see.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I saw you with Esi this morning. Will you tell her I’m sorry, please? She was right.”

I opened my eyes, and for a split-second, I thought I saw the transparent form of a magî beside me on the path.

I blinked, and he was gone.

Fetid rot. The heat, work, and hunger must’ve made me hallucinate. I shook my head to clear it and shrieked when a lizard darted out from the plants, scurried into the road, and the ground *dissolved* beneath it. One moment the bright-green reptile was here, and the next, gone.

Ruin pressed against my legs again, hissing at the empty space in front of us, and I finally understood. I squinted and noticed an oily sheen, and—was it a trick of the light?—the edges of the bûyî were tinged black. Otherwise, it was just as Esi had said, invisible and deadly.

“Let’s go back,” I said to Ruin, no longer curious. “I want to go to bed.”

I returned to Esi’s with a little help from my furry companion, milked the goats, and shortly after, Esi returned and shooed me off to bed. When I opened the door, I nearly toppled over as Ruin pushed past me into the home. Too tired to care, I collapsed on my pallet, drifting into unconsciousness as the cat settled next to me.

Consciousness teased my mind, and I ran my hand over Ruin’s silky fur, pausing mid-stroke because . . . I brushed my fingertips over warm skin and then pushed my hand against—

Skin?

Warm, human skin and taut muscle beneath. I blinked, but the dark was so thick I couldn’t see. Inching closer, I breathed in the smell of sandalwood and ylang-ylang wafting nearby—which was impossible because I was inside—in bed no less.

I sucked in an unsteady breath and closed my eyes. Was I losing my mind? The possibility seemed to be gaining merit, and if I went insane, how would I ever figure out—

Ruin started purring, the sound like balm. This time, when I stroked, his silky fur tickled my palm. Fur—not skin. I exhaled, releasing the breath slowly through pursed lips. Hallucinations were not good.

I needed to figure out what was happening to me.

Several days passed, and I kept hoping the work would get easier. Only it didn't. Every morning, we were assigned an area of the undercanopy worse than the previous day. Each time, the rest of the group rotated, Esi and I the only constant—for three days—but the other group members talked. Over those three days, I heard the same complaint of “worst bit of work, ever” at least a hundred times.

I asked Esi, but she just shrugged.

“Everybody complains,” she said. “It won't always be so hard.”

Yeah, because we'll have cleared the entire border.

After yet another long day, aching with exhaustion, we tended the goats. As soon as we'd finished, I stumbled to bed. I hadn't believed Esi when she said I had no stamina, but after a few days in Pûleêr, I believed her.

“I have to go to sleep,” I said, shuffling toward my pallet. “My aches have pains they're so bad.” The stiffness hadn't improved, and the blisters on my hands were raw and oozing. I peeled the bandages off and rewrapped them. “I seriously need some help, and you're not doing much better.”

She didn't have quite as many blisters, but Esi's movements were stiff. She might have stamina for walking, but she wasn't used to all the weeding. As if to reinforce my thought, she grunted as she shuffled the pails of cheese together to clear a wider path from our beds to the door. “Do you want to take a bath?”

“No,” I mumbled into the coverlets, my eyes drifting closed. I didn't want to do anything but lie here until forced to do otherwise.

I startled awake, heart pounding, completely confused. Sitting up, I

listened for what had yanked me from my dreamless slumber, but there was only silence. Profound, *weighty* silence. I glanced toward Esi's bed just as the low yowl of a panthera ripped through the night. Not even a heartbeat later, the goats cried.

"My goats," Esi hissed. "Your panthera—"

Another growl was followed by the sound of splintering wood, and the bleating of the goats became a scream. The panicked sound cut off, and I cringed. There was another bleat, short and pathetic, and I hoped the other animal would be smart enough to flee.

The seconds dragged, and I shifted onto my knees, thinking we should investigate. I opened my mouth to say so, and a threatening snarl sliced the air. The vicious sound was followed by an answering shriek, and then the night air was filled with the violent screeches, rumbles, and wails of savage animals. My heart leapt into my throat. "Ruin!"

The commotion continued, and I wanted to crawl out of my skin. The minutes seemed like hours, and my lungs and heart battled against my ribs. The inside of the hovel smelled of sour milk, fruit, and sweat, the stench filling my lungs with every breath. I needed fresh air. I needed to feel Ruin's silky fur. I needed him to be okay because I owed him. After an eternity, there was huffing and scratching on the wall near the goat pen. A few minutes later, there was more scratching on a different wall, and then again.

It's over! I scrambled toward the door, stumbling to get to Ruin.

"Stop!" Esi snapped. "Don't you dare open that door."

"It's Ruin—"

"You don't know that. You don't know if it was one panthera or more, or a pack of wild dogs. That scratching is something marking his territory. If you open that door, you remove the only defense we have. Even if it is Ruin . . ."

I swallowed, understanding what she didn't say: he might not know me. And worse, if it wasn't him, I'd be risking both our lives. I crawled to bed eyes burning, as I felt my way through the crates and pails, sniffing back the tears and hating that Esi was right.

"Just wait. In the morning, we'll be able to see."

Esi's caution was not only reasonable, but it was the only option to ensure our safety. I flopped onto my pallet and stared up into the darkness, waiting. I tossed and turned, twisting the bedding into a heap with my impatience. The patter of rain filled the room, but there was no comfort in the sound.

Eventually, the thick layer of night melted into the gray predawn light. The silence stretched my nerves, thinning them, and when Esi nodded my way as she arose, my stomach flipped.

“Let’s go see the damage,” she said, her expression grave.

I tugged the door open, and Bizi squeezed through, bleating desperately. The poor creature stayed inside the hovel even after we stepped outside. The morning air was pungent from the fresh rain. The scents of orchids mixed with the rich loam of the forest, but underneath the clean smells of the jungle, I could pick off the coppery tang of blood. I scanned the clearing, spinning toward the back when I didn’t immediately spot Ruin. My chest was tight. I couldn’t breathe. Tears burned at the back of my eyes.

Just before I thought I might pass out, he rounded the corner of Esi’s house with lithe, liquid movements, striding through the mist. I dropped to my knees, releasing my worry with a loud, shaky exhale. Lowering my head to his, I whispered, “You scared me.”

Esi grunted and stepped past us, disappearing around the corner.

I took another breath, this one steadier, and sat back on my heels. Relief tugged at the corners of my lips, and I ruffled Ruin’s fur.

Esi swore, a loud string of expletives followed by the crash of a pail hitting a tree.

“What happened?” I asked, leaping to my feet. The world tilted, and I patted Ruin’s head to reorient and then inched forward, halting when Esi rounded on me. She stopped a few paces from me, her expression contorted with rage.

“I have to tell the council,” she snapped, pointing to the mangled fence. No, not the fence. There in the mud was one of Tebi’s legs, part of her bone jutting out of the mud.

Defensiveness flared through me. “Tell them what?” I asked, balling my hands and meeting her emotion with my own. “That the goats were attacked? Fine, tell them. Just make sure you tell them Ruin won that fight.”

Esi glared at me, her expression becoming even more fierce as she threw shade at Ruin. “First, you don’t know if there were animals fighting or if it was just him slaughtering my goat. If he’s killing our animals, he can’t stay. The goats don’t belong to me, Taja, and we can’t just go to Yândarî’s market to get another.”

“Then go to a different outpost!” Even if Ruin did kill their goat, it would take a couple weeks to travel to another post and back, and someone here had

to have had enough magîk to be able to trade for a few goats. “Qralî is big. The magî wouldn’t have to say where they’re from.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “You still don’t get it! The entire point of eliminating magîk from our lives in Pûleêr is to make sure the kûmdâr doesn’t bother to find out if we still exist. No one wants to go to anywhere that might jeopardize that.”

“I heard you, and I get it.” I seethed because I refused to believe there were no options. “But—”

“They’re doing the same thing!” She kicked the post which was now only a foot high, the top a jagged shard of wood. “They won’t trade with us because we have nothing to offer them—none of us are using magîk!”

The pen was in shambles—what I could see. The fencing lay scattered on the ground, and Esi fixed me with her glare. Her frustration pressed against me, and I kept quiet as I processed the world around me. For a goat to be worth more than a magî, even if I was an amnesiac, was incongruous with the Qralî I knew.

“The goal is to be self-sustaining,” she said, grabbing a pail and crate. “Pûleêr takes care of Pûleêr.”

She brushed past me and returned to her home, setting up a milking station right there where Bizi stood trembling in the middle of the hovel. I followed her inside, and Ruin kept pace, my fingers still in his fur. She started kneading Bizi’s teats and, after several moments of silence, spoke in a controlled voice.

“There’s plenty of food, so we won’t starve,” she said. The milk zinged against the metal pail. “And if we can keep the jungle back, we’ll have plenty of space for our people.”

The smell of warm milk filled the stuffy air, and Esi continued to work on Bizi while I watched, waiting for her to fill me in on the rest of the plan, something that would make sense long-term. But the silence stretched, and I wondered if there was more. Eventually, I couldn’t take it.

“And then what?” I asked. I ran my hand over Ruin, my own irritation rising. “I really want to know. What is the end goal? Are you just waiting until the kûmdâr dies—eventually?”

She nodded.

“That’s it? That’s your plan?” Before she could say anything else, I snapped because that plan was beyond banal. “And what if the next one is worse—or Zerôn’s soul comes back to rule again? Hiding isn’t a solution—”

“Really?” she growled. Glancing my way, she sent the next squirt of milk to the side of the bucket, spraying her foot. “You have something better? Tell me—what would you suggest?”

“Fight—”

“With what?” she grunted. She continued to milk Bizi, keeping her attention fixed now on her work. “Magîk? The kûmdâr has all the most powerful magî as Serîk, and he’s killed thousands of his own people. We. Can’t. Beat. Him.”

I stared at her, stunned. “You haven’t even tried—”

Esi threw her hands up in the air. “Taja, the best we can hope for is to save Pûleêr. And if your pet panthera is killing our animals, we’ll have no choice but to hunt him—either drive him away or kill him.” She darted a gaze at Ruin and clenched her jaw. “Eventually, we have to kill him.”

No way was I going to let that happen. “Fine,” I said, absently running my hand over Ruin. His fur was stiff with mud, and I decided I’d take him to the pool with the waterfall on our way out of Pûleêr. “We’ll leave. If he can’t stay, I won’t either.”

Esi finished milking Bizi then stood and dug through a pile of fabric. She pulled out a long rope and looped the lead over the goat’s head. “Be my guest.” Storming to the door, she dragged Bizi behind her, the milk sloshing over the sides of the pail as she snapped, “Just don’t steal anything on your way out.”

This Esi was nothing like the nice girl who’d helped me—was that only days ago? “I wouldn’t dream of stealing anything from you. I wouldn’t return kindness with betrayal.”

She paused mid-yank on the door and then released a forceful exhale, dropping her chin to her chest. Even so, she gave the metal handle another heave and slipped out without another glance or word my way.

I shook my head, trying to brush off the caving emptiness hollowing out my chest. Why her sudden switch in personality—over a goat? The hurt refused to budge, so I did the next best thing. Rolling my shoulders, I pretended the sting fell to the ground behind me. Turning to Ruin, I ran my hand back over the clump in his fur and said, “You need a bath, and I know ___”

He whimpered at the same time Esi shrieked. The subsequent string of expletives trailing through the air made it apparent she was alive and very much intact, albeit surprised.

Still angry, I kept my attention on Ruin, looking closer at his coat. I rubbed part of the clump between my fingers, and the dried mud flaked off. Looking at the sediment, I gasped. His fur wasn't matted with mud but blood.

"Shh," I said, pushing the fur from around his wound. "I just want to see."

He growled but held still while I examined the deep gash along his side. I ran my hand over his head and noticed another wound on his cheek—both caked with blood.

"Oh, Ruin," I said.

"Taja!" Esi bellowed. "Come here."

I jumped up, my dawning horror leaping into a panic with her call. Darting out the door, I hollered at Ruin, "You stay."

The morning light cast the clearing around Esi's home in muted hues now, but the mist was gone. The pail and Bezi sat at the head of the trail we used to get to the perimeter road, but Esi wasn't there.

"Oh my soul," she gasped, coming around from the back of her house. Her face was ashen, eyes wide and filled with tears as she met my gaze. "I'm so sorry," she whispered before covering her mouth. She shook her head and blinked, the moisture spilling down her cheeks. "I didn't know."

I wasn't so sure I wanted to know either, but whatever remains lay at the back of the house had to do with Ruin and the commotion last night, so I stepped past Esi and tramped around the corner.

"Rot and ruin," I said, exhaling my surprise into the heavy air.

The entire goats' pen was destroyed—all of it. The wood fencing near the jungle was bit clean through, leaving a gaping hole on top of the portion I'd already seen. Another piece of Tebi's leg lay in the churned muck, dropped by the now-deceased spotted panthera whose meal had obviously been interrupted—by Ruin.

The dead animal occupied much of the rest of the space, slumped on his side, his one visible golden eye glassy in death. The ground around him was saturated, and a small, dark puddle remained under the gaping wound in his neck. The edges of flesh were ragged, and his fur stained with blood. I stepped closer and noticed half of the animal's skull was crushed, its contents spilled into the muck in a gruesome display of Ruin's power.

I reeled on Esi. "He was protecting us—and the fetid goats."

She nodded, still pale, her entire body trembling. "I can s-see that," she stuttered. "I'm s-sorry."

“So you’re not going to tell the council—”

“No,” she murmured. “I wouldn’t dare. He can stay as long as he—you—want.” She tilted her head toward Bizi and the pail. “I’m going to take them to Dostane, but the council will want to know what happened to Tebi, and then they’ll investigate. It’s probably a good idea to hide Ruin in the jungle—at least until tonight.”

The bell clanged, calling us to breakfast and our daily work.

“I’ll tell them.” She shook her head, her hands still trembling. “I don’t know what I’ll tell them, but I’ll come up with something for now. Just get him out of here, and then come find me—in our group—wherever that is.” She glanced up at the canopy and muttered, “This is never going to end.”

“All right,” I said, my heart torn between sympathy and the thrum of irritated vindication. I liked Esi, and given her compounded loss, perhaps her reaction wasn’t unreasonable. I pushed away my resentment and said, “I’ll see you in about an hour. Tell them I went to wash off the blood.”

“Okay.” She gave me a tentative smile and added, “I’m sorry I turned on you, too. It’s just . . .”

Her eyes filled with tears, and any remaining bitterness I had dissolved.

“Go on,” I said, offering her a sympathetic smile. “I’ll forgive you, if you forgive me for messing up your life.”

“Of course. But you didn’t mess it up. I mean, you did, but I don’t care.” She left, her steps slow and shoulders slumped, and I hurried back to Ruin.

The large cat stood at the doorway, waiting for me. I refused to process why he’d listened; I was just happy he did. Resting my hand on his head, I said, “Let’s go get you cleaned up. There’s a pool of water not too far from here, and then after the magî leave, you can come back and go to sleep.”



I WASN’T sure what Esi said, but tension radiated with the magî’s movements, and several of them kept their eyes averted when I joined the group. The area we’d been assigned was north of Pûleêr, not too far from where the bûyî had appeared. Most of the magî attacked the growth with viciousness—as though revenge on the jungle meant anything. I approached the line and noticed a cluster of five off to the side, not even pretending to work.

“You made it,” Esi said with a too-bright smile. “Thanks for cleaning up.

I saved you some cheese from breakfast.” She held out a bit of oiled cloth.

“Thanks.” I ate the small ball, forcing each swallow, for my appetite had dried up while giving Ruin a bath. His wounds were deep, and without magîk to bind the gashes, he ran a significant risk of infection.

The hours blurred in the constant drizzle of rain, but we reclaimed the border from the jungle by early afternoon.

“I have to talk with Rull and the council,” Esi said after we’d finished for the day. “They want another report about you.” She rolled her eyes and added, “You know, to make sure you’re working hard and not using magîk.”

I curled my lip as she spoke and then blurted, “Don’t they get tired of their pretenses? For as much as they tout being different than the sovereign —”

“Shush,” Esi hissed, her gaze darting to the departing magî. She shook her head and muttered, “I’ll save you a seat at dinner.”

Exasperated and tired, I merely shrugged, not particularly interested in eating dinner with the citizens of Pûleêr. If all of the realm was like this, Esi was right.

After washing the still oozing blood from Ruin’s fur, I left him lying on the river bank in the sun and went to supper. Hurrying through the line, I collected a small plateful of food. When the female behind the counter passed over the cheese spoon, I gave her a big fake-smile and said, “Pûleêr is truly the standard of moral justice, isn’t it?”

Then I went to an empty table and scarfed down a few bites before leaving.

I sighed when I saw Ruin stretched out on my sleeping pallet, relieved that he’d made it home before me. I stepped toward the hut, and he opened his eyes and then yawned, stretched, and kneaded the bedclothes before collapsing again.

“You think that’s hard work?” I called to him, standing just outside the open door and rubbing a cloth down my muddy legs. My fatigue tonight was just as much emotional as physical, and my head throbbed with need for sleep. “I think the system the council is using is rot. Any guess as to which group was nearest the spot where the bûyî was today?”

I finished cleaning up and entered, only to be stopped by Bizi, bleating. The council must’ve brought her back at some point and left the door open—which would explain how Ruin got inside. I stooped to press on her udder and rolled my eyes. Why was I not surprised no one had milked her?

“All right, girl,” I said, pulling up a crate. “Sorry about Tebi,” I told her, squeezing out a stream of warm milk. “I know she was your friend, but I’m glad Ruin saved you. You were always my favorite.”

I closed my eyes as I continued to work, dreaming of yogurt and cheese.

“Taja?” Esi said, shaking my shoulder.

I straightened, squinting to see through the blurriness of my fatigue, but that wasn’t the only problem. I couldn’t even make out her features because of the darkness.

“Go to bed,” she chided, pushing me to vacate the stool.

I let her take over, too tired to fight. “I was trying to be helpful,” I mumbled as I shuffled to my pallet. “I didn’t want you to have to do any more.”

“It’s fine,” she replied, her voice filled with weariness. “It’s not your job to make things right.”

I knelt on the edge of the bed and pushed against Ruin—the cat was at least three hundred pounds.

“Move over,” I muttered as I fell forward with my eyes closed. I ran my hand over his shoulder, drifting to sleep to his rhythmic purr.

Sometime in the night, Ruin shifted on the pallet next to me. I reached out and, instead of connecting with Ruin’s fur, ran my hand over the warm skin and hard muscles of a male’s shoulder and then his chest. He turned, facing me, and ran his hand down my side. A warm, honey-like sensation spread through me as he traced sparks of fire over my skin.

“Shh,” said Hallucination-magî.

I wanted him to be real, so I kept my eyes closed and drifted back to sleep, pretending that he was. The fatigue was almost worth the dream.

Two weeks slipped by, the days blurring into one another, my measurement of time passing recorded by Ruin’s healing wounds. The gashes knit together faster than I’d anticipated given their depth, and within a few days we found ourselves in a routine of working and sleeping—me working and him sleeping.

Ruin was laazy—at least by magî standards. He slept most of the day away on my pallet but would frequently disappear at dawn or dusk, returning with a wet muzzle. Twice, he brought us presents, once dragging in a newly-dead seven-foot caiman still oozing blood from Ruin’s crushing bite. Esi fetched Rull and a couple other members of the council to divvy up the meat. When they asked how we’d caught the animal, Esi diverted the question.

We continued to fight back the flourishing growth, and my suspicions about the rotations also grew. We moved to a different area each morning and worked hours to strip out the four to five feet of fresh growth—every single day. But when Esi and I pushed back the growth near her home, something we did no more than twice a week, it was never more than a couple of feet. When I brought my concerns to Esi, her pursed lips turned into a frown.

“Rull wouldn’t allow that to happen,” she said, although there was little conviction in her tone. She swallowed and then continued, “He’s always been about being fair; it’s why we elected him to be the leader of the council.”

“Of course,” I replied, scowling. “You mean fair as in you getting to go to Terit”—I held up my hand to stop her from interrupting—“Oh no. You mean fair as in the males getting to go through the line first? Or you getting stuck in work units with me?”

She chewed on the side of her cheek while I spoke, her expression darkening.

“First,” she said, holding up a finger. “I’m the only one who *wants* to go to Terit; I have family there. And second, the men weigh more, and they clear more of the jungle. Fair doesn’t mean everything is equal for everyone, Taja. It means equal distribution based on need.”

I listened, awed by the absurdity of her arguments. No, not hers, Rull’s. But did she believe his spouted rubbish? I held my hands up in surrender, not that I agreed, but because the argument was futile. *I* wasn’t going to change how Esi saw things; she needed to.

But I would do everything I could to help her.

“**Y**ou need to be friendlier,” Esi said as we tugged our bedding from the line. “You spend all your time with that animal, and while it’s almost like he can understand you, there’s something not right. Especially, because you’re dreaming he’s a magî.”

I bit my lip while she spoke, regretting having shared that tidbit with her. “I know he’s not—”

“Maybe you should stop sleeping with him,” she said with a waggle of her eyebrows. “Maybe he’s as confused as you are.”

“Neither of us are confused,” I retorted, grabbing the last coverlet.

She snickered. “I swear it felt like I was touching skin,” she said in her nasally, mimic-Taja voice. “I know that’s not possible, but I promise . . .”

“That is the last time I tell you anything.”

Her eyes widened and lips formed an O in a look of mock horror. “Please, not that. How would I live without knowing if you’re going insane?”

Wait. “Do you really think I’m going insane?”

She snorted. “No. I think you need to give the cat the foot and have a real male in your bed, make you forget all about Hallucination-magî.”

“Har-har.” I wasn’t going to get involved with anyone in Pûleêr; I had no intention of staying, not long term. Even if it wasn’t the rainy season, I just wanted a little bit of calm to catch my bearings and, hopefully, get my memory back.

“You think I’m kidding, but you spend more time with that creature than anyone else.”

I looked at her and pointed. “Pretty certain I spend more time with you.”

“True—besides me then. And it’s odd how well he understands you. Is that your magîk? Are you using magîk?” Esi’s eyes widened, and she grabbed my arm in earnest. “You can’t do that. Rull will . . .” She gulped. “It would be really bad.”

“I’m not using magîk, at least I don’t think so. I don’t really communicate—or it’s not two-way. But I do feel a bond with him; when he’s near, my soul feels calmer, if that makes sense.”

Esi snorted and released my arm. “If I believed in soul mates, I’d say it sounded like that, but”—she held out her hand to stop my interruption—“I don’t believe in soul mates, and there’s no way your soul mate is an animal.”

While I didn’t agree with her on the former point—I did believe in soul mates—there was no debate on the second. Magî and animals couldn’t bond, and a magî spirit couldn’t inhabit an animal. Reincarnation didn’t work that way. The soul was both species and gender specific.

“Have you ever heard of a magî that could shift? As in take on another person’s or animal’s skin or appearance?”

Esi nodded. “I’ve heard of magî who can look exactly like another person, but they just looked like another person. I’ve even heard of magî who can change the appearance of another magî, weave their magîk into their soul, so the change of appearance is permanent in this life. But you can’t be an animal because your soul is magî. What you’re suggesting . . . Wouldn’t that mean two bodies, both a magî and animal, would have to blend?” She shook her head. “That’s impossible.”

Her deduction was all I’d come up with too. And if there were two bodies, there would need to be two souls, impossible on top of impossible. I sighed, disappointed that she’d reached the same conclusion.

“You know what you need?” she asked as we took the clean tunics and bedding inside.

I pulled one of my hand-me-down tunics out of the pile and put the rest in a crate. “Tell me, O Wise One, what do I need?”

She laughed, but the sound was tinged with sadness. “You really do need to spend some intimate time with a male magî, if you know what I mean. I wasn’t kidding. If you have a real male in your bed, you’ll be less likely to lose yourself in dreams of impossibility.”

I nodded, and part of me wondered if her words were just as much for her. What dreams had she been chasing?



RUIN SETTLED NEXT TO ME, his weight tugging the bedclothes to his side of the pallet, and I rolled with them. I threw my arm over him, his soft fur like silk on my skin. My mind must've been processing the previous conversation with Esi because one minute the body next to me was all fur and lithe muscle, and then suddenly a magî. His toned, bare chest was before me. I blinked and ran my hand up his warm skin, breathing in the intoxicating smell of sandalwood and ylang-ylang. He tugged me closer, his touch searing, and I gasped. The dream *felt* real, and I told myself that here, in the darkness of the night, a dream wouldn't matter.

I pressed my body to his, murmuring his name, as I skimmed my fingers across the rise and dip of his muscles. He tilted his head, and his exhale caressed my scalp before he pressed his lips to my head.

"I've missed you," he murmured, running his thumb down the small of my back.

Desire ripped through me, and I grabbed his arms to steady myself.

"You were right," he added. "But my soul needs you, it always will." He traced his fingers down my arm and then dropped his hand to my hip. His grip was firm, and the warmth of his touch soaked into my skin as he tugged me closer.

Sliding on the fabric, my body collided with his. He wore fitted trousers, supple and soft, but from the waist up, he was naked—smooth skin over taut muscle—and his intoxicating scent surrounded me. My breaths grew shallow with want as I stroked the planes of his abdomen and chest, my touch growing bold when he didn't protest. Was it wrong that I wanted a male who would protect me, who would be loyal and not only follow, but walk by my side—no matter where life took me?

Pressing my feet against his legs, I slid upward, savoring the feel of his body—his very male magî body—as I drew even with his face. Our skin melded at the waist, and I caressed his neck, jaw, and then brushed my finger over his lush mouth. His eyes were closed, as if he were dreaming, too, but his lips parted, and he trapped my finger between his teeth and then gently sucked the tip into his mouth. The gesture was oddly arousing, and I couldn't stop the soft moan escaping.

He released my finger and shifted, running his tongue up the side of my neck, and then sucked on my earlobe, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin. My

breaths grew shallow, mere panting, hot with desire. He varied the pressure with his teeth, his tongue, and the pads of his fingers, making me gasp. The tension between us grew, the ache of wanting, and he trailed kisses over my jaw, drawing out the sweet agony. His lips hovered over mine, and our breaths mingled.

I ached for him, yearned for him to close the distance, and the longing—like a magnet—drew our bodies together until no space remained. A whisper of warning buzzed in the back of my brain, but as he slowly, softly swept his lips over mine, the caution was swallowed by a roar of need. He repeated the move, tantalizing and tormenting, heightening my desire for him, and I whimpered. Lust swirled between us.

He slid his hand over my waist and caressed his thumb over the small of my back. A bead of sweat trickled over my skin, and he brushed the drop away. He groaned and slid his hands to my sides, gripping my hips. As he wet his lips, his tongue brushed against my mouth, and I gasped. This desire was so strong; it clouded my mind. And all that existed was right here, right now, with him. As though he felt the same, he pressed his lips to mine, tenderly at first and then more firmly. Our kisses deepened, and I met him stroke for stroke and touch for touch. His soul was mine and mine was his. He growled and nipped at my lower lip, sucking it into his mouth. His teeth scraped over the sensitive skin, and I arched into him with a moan.

Our tongues tangled, the heat of passion burning between us, desire and want spreading low in my abdomen, and I thrust closer, needing more. I clung to him, to this dream, willing it—him—to be real. Was it wrong that I wanted him? This dream, so vivid and tangible. I'd never felt so alive and alert.

He gripped my hips and then, suddenly, stilled.

I tried to draw back, to pull away enough to look at him, but he held me firm, one long shuddering moment, and then gathered me in his arms.

“Shh,” he whispered, his voice rumbling through me. He kissed the top of my head and tucked me close, whispering a promise to steal me away to safety, describing a sanctuary with a waterfall and clear pool hidden away from the touch of poison in the land. His voice lulled me, painting the scene so clearly I saw it in my mind, and my heart yearned to be there with him—again.

The fevered dream faded, and I was suddenly aware of Ruin's low purr, his heavy presence and furry body lying next to me. My lips felt swollen, and

I brought my hand up to touch them. The ache of lust still tinged my consciousness, and I stared at the great cat nervously, the dream fresh in my mind.

Maybe Esi was right. Not that I needed to bring a male to my bed, but . . . What? Kick Ruin out? The thought squeezed my chest and turned my stomach. I sat up, my attention riveted on the apex as I tried to reconcile the dream in a way that didn't make me feel weird.

Not even a minute later, Ruin arose, going through his morning stretches as he always did. When he finished, he fixed me with his gaze, and, for a split-second, his eyes appeared bright blue and then went green. He leaned forward slowly and touched his nose to my cheek.

I sat there, once again trying to puzzle out the meaning. Did he have a weird cat dream? Did cats even dream? Did he know I was feeling unsettled?

"That is exactly what I'm talking about," Esi said, standing in the open doorway.

Ruin slipped past her, out into the morning mist, his tail twitching.

"You're plenty attractive to have a real magi in your bed," she added.

I snorted and rolled off the pallet, grabbing a clean tunic to pull over my thin undergarments—it was too hot to sleep in anything else. "Don't worry about me," I replied. "Maybe you should be looking for someone."

Her grin faltered, and I winced.

"Sorry," I said. "It's just . . ." I thought of the weird hallucination and decided to improvise. "I think our loved ones want us to be happy."

Esi offered me a small smile. "Thanks." She jerked her head toward the open doorway. "Let's go get breakfast before all the cheese is gone."

I crossed the room, pointing at the pail in her hand. "Isn't that the cheese?"

"What the rot?" She feigned shock, hefting the bucket. Laughing, she tugged back the cloth and scooped out a large portion. "Here you go."

Whoa. I narrowed my eyes. "Why are you breaking the rules?"

Esi sighed and handed me the lead with Bizi attached. We took the goat with us everywhere now, the edict from the council easier to follow than debating it. "You might be right about some of what you're seeing. Rull has a lot of regulations and statutes. And new eyes tend to be free of fettered bias."

I accepted the cheese, my mouth watering as I eyed the basil dotting the soft mixture. I took a bite and let the creamy texture coat my tongue, chasing

away the taste of passion. With a nod, I reluctantly admitted, “You might be a little right, too.”

Esi raised her eyebrows.

“About Ruin,” I said, explaining. “Last night, I dreamed he was a magî . . . again.”

Her lips parted then she closed them, repeating the process a moment later.

“Just spit it out,” I said, rolling my eyes toward the canopy. “Unless it’s I-told-you-so; you can keep that to yourself.”

We stepped onto the perimeter road, and Esi leaned over and bumped me with her shoulder. Her dark, golden hair swayed, tickling my bare shoulder, and she laughed.

“I’m not going to say ‘told you so.’ No one ever needs that. I just wanted to make sure you knew Ruin isn’t really a magî. Just because you dreamed it doesn’t mean it might happen.”

“Yes,” I said, trying to convince myself the disappointment filling me wasn’t related to the truth. “Which is why I said you might be a little right, too. I should make some memories with other magî.”

Unfortunately, Esi thought my admission meant she needed to tell me about every eligible male in Pûleêr over breakfast. Every. Fetid. One.

I leaned forward, planted my feet in the mud, and yanked on the lush, green stalk. The soft, moist ground of Qralî released the roots, and I stumbled backward with the four-foot tree in my hands, the muck splattering my tunic, neck, and face. I marched to the edge of the road, the exposed line of orange bromeliads finally exposed—our daily assignment. We’d spent almost nine hours today working in this area, longer than any other day.

We were just north of where the bûyî had appeared after my arrival. There was talk of abandoning that portion of the perimeter road to the jungle, but after one of the children ran over the area—without incident—an inspection revealed the ground had solidified once again. Even so, Rull reminded us daily that we couldn’t slack or we’d risk the rotten bog. I threw the plant into the dense growth, glaring after it. The only mangoes I would eat now were the green ones, still firm and tart with no possibility of being overripe.

“What about Velt?” Esi asked, standing next to me. She tossed a small mango plant, maybe a foot tall, past the bromeliads, and then tugged on a palm frond.

“The lazy guy who likes to play in the mud?” I asked, incredulous. “Please tell me you aren’t trying to get me to take your cast-offs.”

“Sorry,” she replied with a big frown. “You’re right; he’s an ass.”

Nine hours later and she was still trying to sell me on the idea that sex would solve my problem. I might have had amnesia, but that didn’t mean I was stupid. History had plenty of lessons about how physical intimacy could tie people together—even if both hadn’t intended it. I didn’t need anything

that might mess with my already muddled mind.

“What happened to the advice ‘find some answers before you get tangled in more questions?’” I asked, throwing her words back at her. “You think if I —”

“Wha—?” a male bellowed from the other side of our group, and a collective gasp pulled our attention to the unit we were working with.

Esi and I both spun, but the group seemed bound where they stood, a line of magî blocking us from whatever held them transfixed.

“Get back,” someone yelled.

“Help him,” a female screamed.

Had they been magîked so they couldn’t move? My mind raced, skipping from thought to thought as to what would hold them riveted until I knew. Dread swirled around me, coating my skin in slick sweat.

“Please,” the magî sobbed. “Drav!”

Esi was already pushing through the line, so I scurried after her.

“No you don’t,” a male magî said, grabbing my arm and jerking me to a stop.

He wrapped his arm around my waist, but I didn’t even look at him. I couldn’t. Because there in front of me was a magî waist deep in the ground. *Oh, Rot.* This was the bûyî. I squinted, and an oily, black sheen surrounded the mud where Drav was caught, his mouth gaping. He was being consumed, the soggy land making wet sucking sounds like smacking lips. Drav’s eyes were wide with horror, and—with our movement—he found his voice and bellowed again. Flailing in panic, his activity only increased the rapidity of the swallowing maw, the darkness greedily ingesting him. Within seconds, no more than a breath or two, he was gone.

Several people gasped, a collective inhale bouncing through the group. Someone bumped my shoulder and then darted past. The female magî who’d been screaming. She’d broken free from whomever held her and raced forward. She stumbled—as the ground dissolved beneath her—pitching forward. The sound of her body hitting the bûyî was a gluttonous gulping, and in the blink of an eye, she’d followed Drav into the belly of death.

After another blink, the dark, greasy luster evaporated.

Stunned silence fell over our group. I blinked, waiting for my mind to make sense of what I’d seen. My gaze slid to Esi, but her eyes were as wide as mine. The bell clanged, and the crowd’s stupor fractured. All at once, the group broke, running back to the post-center, several women screaming. Esi

and I remained, my heart thundering against my ribs.

“That’s the bûyî,” she whispered.

I nodded, putting my arm out to stop her from advancing. “Did you see the darkness of it?”

She frowned, still staring at the muddy ground before facing me with the look of confusion. “Darkness? I don’t see anything. Can you see something different?”

“Not now, but there was a dark gleam around the edge.”

Esi studied me, her eyes filled with doubt. “I didn’t see an edge. Are you sure?”

Had I really seen that sheen or imagined it? Uncertainty crept in as I considered my recent hallucination about Ruin, and I shook my head, knowing she would assume it was agreement. But even as I acquiesced, my instinct was insistent. I’d seen that sheen twice. What is the bûyî? “Is it coming back to this area because it had already appeared once close by?”

Esi cocked her head to the side, and her attention shifted to the ground where the bûyî had been. The wind rustled through the trees, and the seconds stretched as she regarded the mud and then she said, “I’d never considered that.” She looked at me again, but her gaze remained unfocused as she continued. “I don’t know if anyone’s thought of that.”

What were they discussing at their council meetings? I pursed my lips to keep from insulting her and instead said, “Maybe you should have a map.”

This wasn’t like trying to sort out if two magî who wanted to bond had incompatible magîk. If they tracked where the bûyî appeared, they could see if there was a pattern.

“Did you go to the other one?” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. “After that group died, you disappeared. Is that where you went?”

“Yes,” I said. There was no reason to hide what I’d done. “I wanted to see if it sparked anything.” I sighed, my shoulders sagging with the memory of her grief, of everyone in Pûleêr. And now they’d be mourning again.

My gaze drifted back to churned terrain; the glossy glint in the mud I’d seen was gone. I wondered if the ground had solidified yet, not that I was going to try. “You know, if the bûyî has appeared here every time, you might want to just close this area off. Let the undercanopy take this space back; move the road inward a couple dozen feet. It might be safer.”

Esi stared at me as though I’d grown another head.

“Or not,” I hedged. “Just thinking out loud, since you’re on the council

and all.”

“It’s a good idea,” she said. “I’ll tell Rull.” Turning her back to where the *bûyî* had been, she jerked her head toward the communal area. “We better hurry, or there will only be rice and beans left.”

I squished the mud between my toes. There was no sense in saying what we both already knew: beans were all there was going to be anyway. I stared at the ground again, wishing for better understanding. At least she hadn’t pressed about my memory—again. Instead of getting answers, I seemed to be collecting more questions.

As I turned to follow Esi, a breeze whispered past, the air chill, and the skin on my arm prickled with the odd sensation. *Qralî* was hot, the air muggy, but it felt as if someone were running their cold fingers up my forearm. I flinched, jerking my head up. “Do you feel that?”

Esi stopped a mere six feet away and frowned. “Feel what?”

“Just . . . the wind seems colder, or it did there for a moment.” I felt someone behind me and glanced over my shoulder, even though I knew there was no one there. I sucked in a breath, but it caught when I heard a voice.

“It’s poisoned,” a female stated, very matter-of-fact, her voice strangely familiar.

Rot. The same *magîk* who’d been yelling at us to save *Drav*.

“Trying to take back what was stolen.”

I spun around, but she wasn’t there.

“Her *magîk* is all mixed up,” a male said.

I studied the surrounding area, looking for him—her—both of them. Was this . . . My stomach turned with the thought of hearing the dead, but what else could it be? *Oh rot*. Was this my *magîk*? I liked it better when I thought my *magîk* was talking to animals—even if it was just *Ruin*.

“She’ll need to fix it before she can do anything more,” he said with a huff. “Come on, *Gert*. She can’t even see us.”

“*Taja?*” Esi said, stepping beside me. “Are you—what’s the matter?”

I closed my eyes. Whatever this *magîk* was, I didn’t want anything to do with it. I didn’t want to talk to the dead or hear them talking to me. I wanted really good vision, like Esi, or *magîk* that could burn back the new growth so we didn’t have to spend all day clearing it. After taking a deep breath, I released it with a shudder, unwilling to admit that I’d inadvertently done *magîk*.

“I’m fine,” I said, spinning toward the center of *Pûleêr*. “Let’s go have

dinner.”

We approached the communal area, and I felt Esi’s questions hanging between us. I needed to figure out a way to distract her—just until I had a few minutes to sort through what this meant. Following the wide path between the homes on the northside of Pûleêr—the nicer homes—I slowed as unease crawled up the trail to greet me. Instead of the expected sounds of mourning, or even the normal sounds of supper, the cacophony of heated disagreement sang the air.

I pulled Esi to a stop, but her furrowed brow and faraway look indicated she wasn’t really hearing. I leaned toward her and said, “Why would they be fighting?”

Her eyes cleared, and her frown shifted from me to the road. “I don’t—”

We both strained to hear, but I couldn’t distinguish any specific words, not from this far. Still keeping my voice low, I asked, “Is there danger? Should we . . .”

What could I suggest? Go home? This was her home. Leave?

She pointed at the bell tower, visible from all of Pûleêr, the magî on top a small figure but present. The fact that he stood in plain sight and wasn’t ringing the bell like mad made it seem logical that Pûleêr wasn’t under attack.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” she said with a huff, as if my reaction were unreasonable. With a dismissive wave, she added, “You worry too much.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. Her snide comment pushing past my boundary of tolerance. “We both know that isn’t true.”

She inhaled, straightening as she fixed me with a glare, but her expression shifted from defensive to defeated as she exhaled, and her shoulders slumped. Shaking her head, she said, “It’s been a fetid day, and I’m done with being strong—or even pretending like I am. I just want my dinner and bed. Is that too much?”

She brushed by me and trudged up the path to the kitchen. I followed, but the unease refused to leave, and my pace slowed. As I drew near the kitchen, I caught a break in the congregation of Pûleêr and halted mid-step. My mouth dried, and my heart flipped, turning over and then skipping a beat. Instead of moving forward when I brought my foot down, I’d unconsciously stepped back. I swallowed, frozen in the moment as I stared. There, in the middle of the clearing, stood a male magî—in pants. Deep, crimson leather pants.

He was strikingly handsome with rich golden hair, and his smooth, bronzed skin dipped and curved over well-defined muscles, no fat or flab on

his svelte frame. His head was bowed, but his spine was straight, and his broad shoulders were back, as if even the act of humility was a challenge. His chest and abdomen were on full display, the small silver charm on a leather cord around his neck accentuating his athletic prowess. My heart flipped again, something familiar and yet not.

Rull asked him something, and whatever red-pants said must've pleased the leader of the council because, a moment later, the stranger brought his hands to the front of his body and rubbed his wrists. He raised his head, and with a jerk of his neck, flicked his hair away from his face, revealing chiseled features: a strong, square jaw, straight nose, and high cheekbones. His lips parted with an inhalation, and then he grinned, revealing straight white teeth. My mouth dried, and panic seized me.

I should go. Hide. Run.

"Taja?" Esi said, waving at me to join her. When I didn't move, she returned to me once again and grabbed my arm. "Is it the one who attacked you?" she asked in a low voice. "Tell me now if it is because I'm sure we're going to meet after supper."

I tore my gaze away from the mob of magî surrounding him. "I don't know." Shame welled up from my stomach to my chest. "I don't remember what he looked like."

How could I not remember? Self-loathing gnawed at me, worse than useless, destructive. And yet, even knowing my feelings were irrational, I couldn't quite push them away. "Does this mean the kümdâr is coming?"

Esi's gaze slid to the Serîk, and she muttered, "I hope not."

Rull stood on top of a table and pounded a spoon against a metal lid. The clanging noise was enough to draw everyone's attention away from the Serîk and to our leader.

"He's not from the kümdâr," Rull announced, and the crowd tittered with the information, forcing Rull to bang on the lid again. When the noise diminished, he added, "The council will convene after our meal. Announcements will be made tomorrow."

Esi yanked me into the line for food as the crowd flowed away from the Serîk and toward the kitchen. The line shuffled forward, and Esi and I both grabbed trays. Dostane smiled as she and her team slopped rice, beans, and fruit onto our dishes.

"What does that mean?" I asked, glancing at Esi. "There wasn't an announcement the morning after I came."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a fist-sized mound of herb-dotted cheese on her plate, and I stopped, forcing the person behind to bump into me. A quick peek was all I needed to confirm that I didn't have any cheese—and I wanted some.

I spun around and stared down the stunning girl behind the counter. "I want cheese too."

"Oh, uh . . ." The young female dropped her gaze.

A moment later, the person behind me bumped me again. "Come on," he said. "Just go."

I glanced down at his tray. He had cheese, and so did the magî behind him. Even though my appetite was abysmal, I was angry with the injustice. Clenching my tray, I tried to convince myself cheese wasn't worth fighting over—not with the recent deaths. But as I turned, my gaze skimmed over his hands—his very clean hands—all the way down to his cuticles.

"Where did you work today?" I asked, glaring at the male. He flushed, and I sucked in a seething breath. "I thought the rules were no work no meat. And if there isn't meat, like today, then no cheese."

His expression hardened, but I merely stared him down, my emotions ratcheting up with my pulse. Suddenly, Esi slid between us and someone dropped a scoop of cheese on my tray.

"I'm sorry," the young female said from the other side of the counter. "I misunderstood."

Misunderstood? I scanned the surrounding magî and met with a dozen similar expressions of discomfiture, but not a single one of support. What was wrong with these magî?

"Sure you did," I grumbled, setting the tray down on the long counter, my stomach now filled with disgust. "Never mind. I'm suddenly not hungry. I'm sure one of you can redistribute my portion fairly." I stared at Esi and said, "I'll see you when you get home."

I strode out of the kitchen, my chest tight. The people around me blurred, and I tuned out their murmurs. I didn't care what they thought, not really, but the hypocritical touting of equality was getting old—or was it just because I was new?

I bumped into someone, but my apology stuck in my throat when I saw his leather pants.

"Pardon me," he said, his voice deep and warm. "I wasn't watching where—"

Keeping my head down, my gaze on the packed dirt of the covered eating area, I scooted to the side of the Serîk, completely ignoring him. I wanted nothing to do with him, whether he stayed or not. Red-pants and I wouldn't see eye-to-eye, not if he'd chosen to swear fealty to a crazed sovereign.

I continued my measured stride on the path until I was out of sight of the crowd and then sprinted back to Esi's hovel. Even after arriving, my heart continued to race. I searched the area for Ruin, wanting the comfort he provided. I circled the clearing, yanking up small shoots of green and tossing them into the undercanopy as I surveyed the jungle, calling his name. He didn't appear, and even though it had only been a few hours, a bereft ache settled under my ribs.

Stop it. I steeled my heart, eschewing my feeling of desperation—ridiculous considering the circumstances. After a deep breath, I found a pail and a crate, but then rolled my eyes when I remembered how I'd led Bizi to the center and left her with Dostane just this morning. I cleaned up the remaining pieces of the fence, piling them up close to the border of our clearing. I forced myself to drink coconut water, but the churning of my insides wouldn't let me eat, nausea hitting me with the very thought. After a couple hours with nothing left to do, I sat on the crate, the pail between my legs, waiting for Esi or Ruin to return.

The canopy layer disappeared into the descending darkness, and then the jungle blurred into the shades of night. Ruin still hadn't returned, and I tried to tell myself I didn't care—he was an animal, not a magi—but the frequency with which I thought of him as opposed to anyone else called me a liar. And what was taking Esi so long?

Even so, my concern about him increased as my irritation toward Esi likewise grew. She wasn't an animal with animal instincts and uncontrollable urges, so she should've been back by now and with Bezi, no less. What could

be taking her so long? Had the Serîk magîked the citizens of Pûleêr?

“If you throw up in that bucket, you’ll need to take it to the Cemik tonight and clean it out,” Esi said.

I jerked upright and met her gaze.

“Do you know him, the Serîk?” she asked, stepping closer. Her voice lowered, and she added, “Recognize him?”

I shook my head. Working the mud with my feet, I tried to ground myself. My unease was not because I recognized him. “Did he come because someone used magîk?”

Esi grunted, pulled the other crate next to me, and sat. “No. He said he’s hiding, actually.”

I jerked upright and shifted toward her. The thick air of Qralî pressed on me, pinning me to my seat. “Hiding from whom?” But as soon as I asked, I realized there could only be one person. “And the council believed him?”

She shrugged and started toward the door, and I drew back with a frown, realizing she was alone—without our goat.

“Where’s Bizi?”

Her shoulders slumped, but she didn’t bother to turn around. Jerking the door open, she huffed, “Gone. Rull wanted me to have a think about privilege.”

Then she disappeared into the darkness of her home.

I suppressed my desire to march into the post center and yell at Rull. It wouldn’t do any good. Instead, I spent the next hour worrying about my friend, and several more worrying about Ruin. As sleep tugged away my consciousness, a strange thought flitted through my mind: *What if the Serîk is Ruin?*

With the morning light, Esi seemed to shake her gloom from the night before. We sat in the communal area with our breakfast of roasted plantains and coconut water, waiting to get our unit assignment.

“You’re staring,” Esi said, her voice weighted by an odd tone, something heavier than harmless teasing but without any bitterness.

Even so, I turned, my face flaming for having been caught. “Just looking.”

She snorted. “You and every other single young female in Pûleêr—maybe even some who aren’t young or single.”

I studied her face, trying to see past the impassive mask she now wore. I’d never seen this side of Esi. She was older, wiser; this was the Esi who sat

on the council and helped make decisions for the rest of the community. My urge—instinct even—was to keep my attention on the young male. But first, I needed to explain something to my friend.

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” I said, keeping my voice low. I waved away her expression of disbelief and continued. “Yes, I know he’s good looking, but there’s something more. I don’t know if I recognize him or if it’s because he’s Serîk . . .” How could I explain? I didn’t even know what I was trying to tell her; there was no way to make it clear when it wasn’t clear in my own head. I picked at my food, dropping the pieces of plantain back onto the plate. I couldn’t eat because my stomach was so full. Finally, I forced my gaze to meet hers and stated the barest truth. “I feel like . . . What if he knows something—about me?”

Esi snorted again and shoved a bite of cheese in her mouth. Chewing, she studied me, and even though I felt uncomfortable under her scrutiny, in this regard, I had nothing to hide. She swallowed and then shrugged. “Okay. But you know every other young female here is hoping he wants to know more about them. You’ve got some stiff competition for his attention—although you’re attractive enough.”

“No,” I protested, shaking my head. I set my fork down on the table. “I’m not interested in him like that. It’s just . . .” I turned the other thought from last night over in my mind, but here in the daylight, the reasoning in the early hours of between darkness and morning seemed a lot less . . . reasonable. The coincidence of the Serîk showing up the very same day that Ruin disappeared had made me wonder if it was possible they were the same, but the magî was nothing like Ruin.

Rot. There was something wrong with me. Ruin was an animal—and an absent one at that. He still hadn’t come back, and I’d called for him for well over an hour last night. I needed to get my head on straight. There was no such thing as a magî who could shift.

I glanced back over at the golden-haired Serîk sitting next to several young male magî. His smile from yesterday was gone, replaced by a more somber expression. He said something to Riv, the magî next to him, and the male from Pûleêr glanced at me. I turned away, the strange tug-of-war inside making me irritable.

“He’s probably an ass,” I muttered.

“No. He’s nice enough,” Esi said. “Maybe a little arrogant, but that goes with being a Serîk, I would think.”

I narrowed my eyes and studied her. “You don’t like him either,” I said, not sure if I was stating a fact or asking a question. A bit of both, truthfully. But Esi didn’t deny or confirm, so I fished for more. “If you don’t like him, why did you let him stay?”

“Like it’s my choice? I’m on the council, not the entirety of it.” Esi raised her eyebrows and, staring at me intently, asked, “Do you even know what you’re asking?”

I shifted under the weight of her question. “The way you ask makes me think I don’t.”

“First, he’s a Serîk, which means he’s powerful. We didn’t know what his magîk was when we interviewed him, and even now, there’s no way to know if he’s lying. We don’t have a truth-diviner in Pûleêr.”

“More reason to kick him out.”

“We couldn’t really kick him out,” she explained, her voice soft so it wouldn’t carry past the people on either side of her. “If the concern was he might report us to the kûmdâr, we’d have to kill him to ensure that didn’t happen. And really, we wouldn’t want him wandering Qralî and telling other places about Pûleêr, either.”

Kill him or let him stay were the only options? “I guess I didn’t really think that through. So, are you waiting until he proves himself worthy of either death or life?”

She sighed. “Something like that.”

I startled in my seat, jerking with her admission. “What? Are you quite serious?” The impact of her meaning hit me, and my jaw dropped. “You mean . . . Am I alive on a trial basis? Is that what’s going on with me?”

The tension in her expression slipped, and this time Esi’s smile was genuine. She snorted and then said, “Your probation time was pretty short. You don’t even know what your magîk is. You’re definitely not a threat here.”

That didn’t make me feel better. Not at all. What if I wanted to leave? “And him? How long is his probation going to be?”

“The thing is, he knew about us. He specifically came here, to Pûleêr, because he knew we’d adopted a no-magîk policy, that we were trying to avoid detection by the kûmdâr.”

“How would he know that?”

“Maybe from one of the other posts,” she said.

But the way she said it indicated something more. “But?”

Esi mashed the rice and beans on her plate, making a sticky, brown paste. She grunted and continued her vehement pulverization of the remains of her breakfast.

Several seconds passed while she worked. Was she frustrated because of him? The council? The council's decision? I had no idea, but her feelings were apparent, even if the reasoning behind them was not.

I turned my attention back to my own plate, staring at the food. The mounds of rice, beans, and fried plantains still sat in the same place they'd fallen from the serving spoon. There was even a blob of nasty taro paste. Talk about going through the motions.

I picked up a starchy plantain and took a bite. Normally I could stomach the fruit, even when I couldn't stand anything else, but the greasy piece was unseasoned, and the texture made my mouth fill with saliva. I spit the food out and then dropped the remaining bit back on my plate.

"He said Zādîsa told him—about Pûleêr."

I grimaced. "I thought you said she disappeared—or was that her sister?"

"Her sister, Zerôn's bondmate, disappeared. Svîk said Zādîsa is still in Yândarî—which matches what I heard in Terit and gives me some relief that she's still fighting for our cause. She sent him here to escape the kûmdâr."

"Do you believe him?" I wouldn't believe him if he said we were going to clear the undercanopy today—which was an established fact.

She shrugged and dropped her fork to her plate, looking at me with weary eyes. "How else would he have known?"

"Torture—like I said before."

She shook her head. "Zādîsa is a zeta."

Right. Torturing a zeta would be near impossible given the strength of their powers—regardless of which type of magîk they wielded. I took a deep breath, letting her explanation settle. I couldn't put my finger on why I felt the need to poke a hole through this rationale, to prove he was hiding something—like that he could turn into a panther. Or maybe I was just tired and irritable because Ruin was gone. I turned her words over again and then shook my head. "I don't like it. Something's off."

Esi grabbed her tray and stood. "That's just it; you don't have to like it. It's what the council decided. And there are a lot of things that are off—including your memory."

I grimaced with the dig, and she paused and pursed her lips.

As she exhaled, her shoulders sagged. "Sorry, that was uncalled for. I'm

not sure I like it either, but his story does sound pretty in character for Zādîsa, and she didn't trust blindly."

I wanted to argue with her; how well did she know Zādîsa? And if the zeta was okay with this level of hypocrisy, how could Esi or anyone else trust her? But what would be the point of arguing? Neither Esi nor I could change anything the council did. After everything she'd said, it was clear she didn't trust the Serîk either, but with such limited options, I could even understand the council's hesitation to execute a complete stranger.

After we dumped our plates into a barrel, Rull stood and announced assignments. My attention bounced from table to table as he spoke, but I tuned him out. I still didn't know many of the people of Pûleêr, at least not well, and I told myself it didn't matter. I was always with Esi. Over a dozen people were still in the kitchen, Dostane among them, as well as the girl who'd refused to give me cheese, Doli. The two were standing next to one another, and when Doli turned, her profile was so similar to Dostane's I wondered how I'd missed their relationship.

The young female was likely in her late teens, maybe even past her second decade. I'd seen her with Nebe and several other young women who all flocked together. My instinct was to avoid them as well, although this time, there was no question or doubt of the thought—my fatigue wasn't impacting my intuition in that regard.

"Come on," Esi said, flicking her finger against my skin. "We're on the east side, over by the Cem today."

The Cem was the big river where most magî bathed, also frequented by caiman. Esi had said more than once she didn't like the Cem, but we weren't headed there, so I didn't know why she sounded irritable. I shifted my gaze back to her while Rull continued to list off names.

Her lips were pursed, and her eyes flashed as she muttered under her breath. "Fetid rot. He did not put Svîk in our group."

"Who?" I asked, but my question got lost in the surge of magî flowing out of the communal section and toward the paths leading to the perimeter road.

Esi said something and began wading through the crowd, going upstream, back into the center of the dining area, and I pushed my way through the crowd, weaving in and out of the waves, trying to catch up to her.

"Why are we going this way?" I hollered.

Someone bumped into me as they passed, and I grimaced with the discomfort. I was definitely stronger now than a month ago when I'd arrived,

but I still went to bed sore every night.

As I drew closer to her, I asked, “Did you forget something at our table?”

But Esi stepped right past where we’d been sitting and marched toward Rull, her hands balled at her sides.

Wait a minute.

I slowed my pace and then took a step back. Had she invited me to follow or instructed me to leave? I wasn’t sure, but the tension made me think that she’d said the latter. Ironic considering my previous thoughts on intuition—

“What are you doing?” Esi asked Rull, her face red.

He turned toward Esi, his expression tightening. “What do you mean?”

“You’re making me take him in the work units?” she snapped.

She spun, lifting her arm to point, and her gaze collided with mine. She stiffened, and I followed the trajectory of her index finger . . . to the Serîk.

The young male magî stood several tables over, his fists pressed onto the wooden top as he leaned, his gaze fixed on us. His expression darkened with Esi’s heated comments, and I noticed he was no longer wearing the red leather pants but a sulu like the other men. His little charm rested between his upper pectoral muscles like an eye-magnet. He stepped around the table, revealing he was also barefoot, and the wrap exposed the ropey muscles of his lower extremities. I shifted, uneasy, as said extremities drew closer, along with all that was attached to them. He passed me, stopping only when he was near enough to both Rull and Esi that he towered over them.

He was tall—really tall.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, staring down at Rull.

Rull’s gaze remained on Esi as he said, “Nothing. This is Esi.” He glanced up at the Serîk. “She’ll take you to the work area. Help you get a feel for how Pûleêr runs.”

The young male nodded, and the lull in conversation stretched to awkward. I wasn’t sure what Esi wanted, but it was clear she was waiting for something more.

“Is there something else?” Rull asked, nodding toward one of the other members of the council. “Otherwise, I need to get some work done.”

Esi sucked in a ragged breath, but before she could say anything, either insulting the Serîk or Rull, I jumped in.

“Excuse me,” I said, “Serîk . . . guy.” I waved for him to come. “Let’s go.” I glanced at Esi, but she was riveted by Rull even when I said her name. “All right then . . . We’ll just meet you at the site, Esi—whenever you get

finished here.”

I looked from Esi to the Serîk but avoided Rull’s gaze. The more I got to know him, the less I liked him, as in not at all. I huffed, hoping Esi appreciated this because the sacrifice was real, and when she didn’t even acknowledge me, I narrowed my eyes.

The Serîk grunted and stepped back, away from Rull and Esi who were having an intense stare-off. Behind them, I noticed a few other members of the council still eating their breakfast and a dozen magî scattered about the empty tables.

“Let’s go,” the Serîk said, oblivious to the conflict under his nose. He took two long strides and then halted, waiting for me to join him. “Which way?”

“Left, once we get to where the path branches,” I muttered, scooting around him to lead the way. We wove through the tables before exiting the communal area and into the paths leading toward the perimeter road. We walked side by side, the discomfort as pungent as the heavy air. I grasped for something to say as we strode through the verdant growth, but I didn’t really want to know much about the male next to me. The trill of the birds and chirp of crickets swelled but did nothing to dissipate the uncomfortable gap between us.

We were approaching the split on the perimeter road. Only a few more minutes . . . five at most. I picked up my pace. Golden boy had long legs; he could keep up.

A beautiful blue-and-black butterfly fluttered across the road, the movement catching my attention. I stopped to watch as the insect dipped then rose in the air, the stunning colors of the wings reminded me—of Ruin. The butterfly glided toward the jungle, and my smile disappeared at the same time as the vivid creature.

“Do you like panthera?” I blurted, watching for his reaction out of the corner of my eyes.

He shrugged. “They can be very territorial and even a little temperamental. Why?”

“Just curious.” No way he was Ruin. Instead of feeling resolved, the knowledge made me grouchy.

We walked another dozen feet, my glower growing deeper with each step.

“Why are all the magî here so distrustful?” the Serîk asked, his low voice soft like the touch of a butterfly. “Zădîsa said this place would be a haven,

that the people here were warm and friendly—”

“Probably because they’re all trying to cover up their hypocrisy,” I muttered, disgusted. Shaking my head, I resumed our pace and led him onto the road encircling all of Pûleêr. The discomfort crawling through my chest might have been interpreted as guilt, and after a sigh, I muttered, “Never mind. Sorry.”

We passed a unit, their backs bent as they worked to clear the emerging growth. Two young women giggled as we stepped by, but the rest of the group ignored us. There was a gap then, a section of uninhabited road, and I glanced back toward the group and frowned. Why was there a gap here? *Shouldn’t there be a unit working to clear this area of growth?*

“You’re not from here either,” he said, like a sudden epiphany.

We walked for a few steps, just enough for me to think he was done.

Then, in a tight whisper, he asked, “Are they not friendly to you either?”

He needed to stop talking. I extended my palm with a snap of my wrist.

At the same time, he said, “Or are you going to tell me I don’t understand?”

The way he said the word sounded exactly like Rull when I first met him, all the way down to his condescending tone. I dropped my hand to my side, my lips parting with surprise at the vivid memory of the council leader, and then asked, “Did Rull say ‘you might never understand’—and then dismiss you?”

Rot. I hadn’t meant for that to come out. Without waiting for his answer, I jerked my thumb east and said, “Let’s go. We’re almost there.”

“Yes,” golden-boy said, walking beside me. He ran his hands along the foliage, the leaves slapping back against each other as he released them. “Rull is an ass, but so is almost everybody on that council—if you can really call it that.”

We rounded the bend and then stopped. There was our unit, twenty magî from Pûleêr, and almost all of them were standing around, talking, eating guava—spitting the seeds.

What the fetid rot?

“Hey!” I snapped, running toward the group of young adults all in their late teens or early twenties.

Two girls, Rumi and Lis, and a young male laughed. Rumi spit a mouthful of pink pulp and white seeds onto the ground. My growing irritation flared as she scooped up a mound of mud with her foot and buried the fruit.

Nearby, two more young men, Teso and a guy I didn't know, threw a round, green pomelo back and forth. Not gently tossing, but as though trying to peg each other with the fruit.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

Just then the large, green fruit connected with Teso's abdomen. The skin burst open, and the large citrus splattered juice, pulp, and seeds all over him and then dripped to the ground.

I scanned the group, searching for someone with sense, but apparently Rull had sent us out with a group of fools.

"Why so uptight?" the young magî who'd thrown the pomelo asked. "Tomorrow, Rull will send a group of the lower magî to clean up the area, so no need to get your tunic in a twist."

This confirmed what I'd suspected. I didn't anticipate finding any sympathy here among the group of elitists, but I no longer cared. "Do you not ever work?"

Teso wiped the juice and snorted. Rumi, the one spitting fruit on the ground, tossed her half-eaten guava into the jungle and faced me.

"Do you really think it matters what we do? If the bûyî is going to come, it comes. It took that whole group, and the spot they'd been in had been cleared the day before," she said.

I frowned, wondering if they were right. Did it matter if they stayed on top of the undercanopy's growth, or was the bûyî independent of it?

"Then why bother?" I asked.

"Well, somebody has to keep the growth back," the young male who's name I didn't know said. "The new growth isn't going to just clear itself."

His explanation was beyond disgusting and riled my ire. "Then what is this rubbish about everyone being fair or equal?" I snapped. "You lazy asses get meat when you do nothing, and other magî—who actually work—get rice and beans?"

Rumi rolled her eyes. "Haven't you picked up on that yet? They don't deserve meat." She looked down her nose and added, "You probably don't either."

"Don't deserve it?" I asked, fists clenched. "How is that determined?"

"They're lower magî," Teso said. "Beans and rice are good enough for them."

My vision went red. I took a deep breath, but before I could launch my verbal assault, the Serîk spoke.

“Apparently, there’s some confusion.” His voice was low but cold, and he stepped forward, past me, closer to the young magî. “Didn’t Rull instruct everyone to work?”

“He didn’t mean us,” Teso said with a nervous smile.

The Serîk ignored Teso and glared at the other magî. Standing next to each other, the contrast between the two became evident. I’d always thought everyone in Pûleêr was in good shape; we had to be, given the amount of activity we did every day. But the evidence to the contrary stared me in the face.

“Did you get different instructions?” the Serîk pressed.

A tamarin screamed above, and the tension climbed. The young male glared at me, like it was my fault.

“What’s your name?” the Serîk asked, the corded muscles of his arms flexing as he clenched his fists.

The young magî’s lip curled. “Pilk.” He glanced to either side at his friends. Two more magî joined his ranks, making five against one. “What’s it to you, Serîk? Zerôn kick you out for being limp?”

“It’s Svîk,” the previous guard for the kûmdâr growled. “And I’m ex-Serîk. I certainly wouldn’t be in this magîk-forsaken hole if I worked for the kûmdâr—unless he’d ordered me to kill you . . . prick.”

“My name is Pilk,” the magî from Pûleêr said, stepping forward. “And maybe you need a lesson in manners, Svîk.”

The humid air swelled with the strain, and my stomach flipped.

Pilk and his friends were close to the same age as the ex-Serîk, and by numbers, they far outweighed the one magî. However, the thin layer of visceral fat around the midsection of each of the group was distinctly different than the cut muscles of the professional guard. Whatever his power was, he’d obviously spent plenty of time training his body. Not only was he more toned, but he was far more muscular. He also stood half a head taller than any of the young men from Pûleêr, and his shoulders were broader—much broader.

“Are you offering lessons?” Svîk asked, raising his eyebrows. He straightened, and his muscles tightened in his neck and upper chest. “Because I don’t believe you exercised the discipline to learn any.”

I glanced down, seeing Svîk’s hands clenched, the muscles of his forearms corded and taut.

Pilk sneered, but his hands trembled at his sides—just a small quiver, and

I only noticed because I was staring.

“Are you challenging me?” Pilk asked, his voice trembling much like his hands. “You think you’re better than us, rot-face?”

I held my breath, waiting for one of them to break. Pilk took a deep breath and stepped forward, his actions slow and projected. Svîk moved, a blur of activity that registered a fraction of a second late—far too fast to stop. The tall magî closed the distance between him and the group of young magî, hunching as he brought his elbow up behind him.

While Pilk appeared to be moving through water, Svîk was water, both smooth and fluid, running right over the top of the stones in his path. In an explosive uppercut, Svîk’s fist connected with a resounding crack against Pilk’s chin. The young male dropped to his knees with a wet splat in the mud. Someone gasped, and at the same time, a female magî squealed.

Wanting to see, I scooted to the left, to the side of Svîk and Pilk, just as the latter pitched forward, only the whites of his eyes visible in unconsciousness. But Svîk didn’t stop moving. He danced to the right, kicking the passed out magî to the side as he fell—toward me. I jumped out of the way of the collapsing body, but my attention snapped back to the former-Serîk.

Like a waterfall, Svîk crashed into the group with his assault. With his next step, he twisted, bringing his left hand up and across his body as he stepped in front of another young male. With a grunt, he rotated his torso as he swung his left fist . . . into the head of the other magî. I blinked as Svîk’s right fist followed, a hook punch landing on Teso’s jaw when he moved behind his fallen friend.

“Stop it!” Rumi screamed from the group, and another magî echoed her.

One of the remaining two young men darted forward, a huge branch in his hands. He swung the makeshift club, but Svîk ducked the wide arc and shifted to the side, popping up from behind the still moving assailant. The former guard delivered two jabs to the boy’s back, and the young male dropped to the ground with a bellow of pain.

Svîk took a deep breath and rose to his full height. He scanned the crowd, his dark gaze challenging anyone else courageous or stupid enough to fight. The last of the original five young male magî backed away, and Svîk turned to me.

“I understood Rull to mean that everyone gave an equal effort to keep Pûleêr running smoothly,” he said, wiping the sheen of sweat from his brow.

He took another deep breath, but the short fight apparently hadn't winded him. He jerked his chin toward me and said, "Pretty much what you just said."

His blue eyes were wary as though he was unsure of what I might do. I wasn't insane; nothing was going to make me fight him. However, to say he'd won my friendship with the fight would be an oversimplification. He didn't have my trust, but I respected his ethics. I nodded my agreement. "That was my understanding," I said. "If anyone spits seeds in the mud, someone is going to have to pull the plants up later. And I was told that the *bûyî* shows up in areas previously cleared, then grown over and cleared again."

"Anyone want to tell us differently?" he asked, his lip curling in a sneer. No one else was stupid enough to challenge him, and he gave a curt nod and announced, "Then everyone knows what they should be doing."

Several people shuffled into action, and I opened my mouth to tell him thanks.

"What the fetid rot?" Esi hollered.

My gratitude dried up as I spotted her running toward us on the perimeter road, her golden hair flowing behind her, and the lush jungle on her left side, the leaves rustling as she passed. Esi's flushed face was contorted with anger.

I tore my gaze from her and glanced around at the group—seeing what Esi would.

Rot.

Three of the four young men were still unconscious. Rumi and another young female were kneeling by Teso—the third to go down. Six members of our unit stood rooted to the ground, eyes wide, still staring at Svîk. A few other magî were yanking up plants, some actually making an effort to clear the undercanopy’s new growth, others just stripping the leaves from the stalks. Their pathetic attempt made it apparent they hadn’t been working to restrict the growth possibly ever since the rules of Pûleêr had changed.

“What happened?” Esi growled, fixing Svîk with a glare. “What did you do?”

“They started it,” I said. “Pilk threw the first punch.”

She turned her wrath on me. “Why would he do that?”

I understood the implication—much better than I had an hour ago. To attack Svîk bordered on being suicidal. Did the council all know this? I frowned, contemplating if Rull’s placement was intentional. And if so, was Esi’s delay likewise? Were the lot of them that manipulative? The idea didn’t seem so far-fetched. But were they trying to kill Svîk or the lazy magî?

I watched Esi as I spoke, looking for any indication that she’d known what would happen. “Rumi and Lis were spitting guava seeds into the mud, and Teso and Pilk were throwing fruit at each other. No one was working. I got mad . . .” I inhaled and shrugged. “Svîk said he understood Rull’s instructions the same as me. Pilk offered to give Svîk lessons in manners—I think it was manners.”

Esi closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“It was manners,” Svîk said, crossing the last couple of feet to my side. “Although there was nothing sincere in his offer.”

I flinched, nervous to have him at my side and just as nervous with the idea that he could’ve been on the opposing team. As a Serîk he had to be used to some elitist favors.

Esi opened her eyes and glanced upward at the canopy. She mumbled something about patience as she shook her head before fixing me with her gaze. “I think you’d better go home—”

“What?” I asked as disbelief punched me in the gut. “What did I do?”

“Enough,” she said, the golden flecks in her eyes dancing with emotion. “We can talk about it later. And you can stop in the center of Pûleêr and pick up Bizi for tonight.”

I nodded, frustrated because she was dismissing me, as if this was my fault. Even if she was giving me the day off, the message she sent to the rest of the group was not that we were united, but I was separate, even more than the Serîk.

“Sure,” I said. I turned to leave and then thought twice about what had happened. “Thanks,” I said to Svîk. “I’m glad to know someone has my back.”

“Right is right,” he said, jerking his attention from Esi to me, but his brow was still furrowed when he faced me. “It wasn’t a problem.”

His words and expression didn’t match, and maybe the fight wasn’t a problem—not for him. But apparently, it was for me. I took a couple steps on the perimeter road, feeling the resentful stares of the members of Pûleêr burning into my back. I turned the sequence of events over in my head as I walked, and the more I thought about what happened, the more incensed I became. Why was I being ostracized for calling them out? Shouldn’t some of the magî be glad? Or was the status mentality so ingrained that disrupting the balance wasn’t appreciated?

The rumble of thunder overhead announced another shower, adding more moisture to the soggy terrain. The rivers and tributaries would be overflowing, making it impossible to get out of western Qralî. I was stuck in this twisted status-game until the rainy season passed which might not be so bad if I understood the rules of this place.

“Oh, and milk Bizi later this afternoon,” Esi called after me just as I stepped around the bend.

I stopped walking, the desire to lash out so great I could barely move. But

underneath the wrath was the sharp sense of betrayal. Esi had been my friend—I thought she'd been my friend—and friends should have each other's backs. But when it came time to stand up for me, to defend me to the members of Pûleêr, it was the Serîk who'd stepped up. And my friend had dismissed me.

Maybe she wasn't my friend after all.



I SPENT the entire day at the waterfall, the banks of the slow river higher even than I'd anticipated. As the light faded, I heard Esi calling my name. I wasn't ready to go back, to forgive her and pretend that nothing had happened.

"Come on, Taja," Esi hollered. "If I have to traipse all the way back there to fetch you, I'm going to make you do my laundry for a month."

"I'm coming," I shouted, rising from the river bank. I turned toward the path, barely illuminated now, and grumbled under my breath, "And I'm not doing your laundry."

I shuffled through the jungle, heedless of the fronds. Something sharp sliced into my arm, and I hissed with the pain and scooted away from the razor grass. Stupid grass—I should've remembered the cluster of sharp blades. Clutching my bicep, I marched after Esi, the warm wetness of my blood oozing between my fingers and making my hand sticky. I paused to tear a strip of fabric from my tunic, bound my cut, and then scurried down the rest of the path, stepping out onto the perimeter road right in front of Esi.

She reached forward and pulled me to her, hugging me as she whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Here, in the dark with no one around, she hugs me? Like that's going to make up for what she did in public?

A break in the clouds above the canopy allowed for ample light. I leaned back to look her in the face, to measure her sincerity. Her features were twisted in a tortured grimace, and I tilted my head to the side and asked, "What?"

Esi laughed, and the tension between us waned, but only a little because I didn't understand.

"Come on," she said, throwing her arm around my shoulder and tugging me toward her house. "I'm sorry I snapped at you like a viper. I was scared,

and all I could think to keep you safe was to send you away.”

“Safe?” I ran through the events for the thousandth time. “Safe from what? Or who?”

“You mean well. I can see that you do,” she said, and then she sighed. “And I admire your beliefs. But some of the magî are strong, and a few of them have tempers.”

I narrowed my eyes, waiting, for I could feel the *but* behind her words. “I’d rather you just tell me,” I said. “Whatever’s going on would be easier and safer to navigate if I understood. I’m doing exactly what you said and taught me was necessary to stay safe in Pûleêr. You told me it was fair and equal—but it’s really not. And those other magî weren’t just not working; they were making more work. So sending me away—the public shaming—makes me feel like you’re hiding something. Incidentally.”

“I can see that,” she replied.

We continued on the perimeter road until we got to the path leading back to her home. Rain started to fall again, the soft pattering of drops filtering through the canopy above and dripping onto the thick fronds around us.

“And?” I pressed, waiting for her to step onto the path. “Why send me away from the group? Why yell at me like that? Why make it look like I’m in trouble when I’m not the problem?”

She took a deep breath and then strode forward without answering.

No. *Fetid*. Way.

“What’s going on?” I asked, following her with raging determination. “I thought we were friends. First, Ruin leaves.” I held up my hand when she turned around, like I’d seen her do to stop me from interrupting. “I know he’s just an animal, but he was with me ever since I woke up, and now he’s not. And then you kick me out of a unit when I was the only one advocating for work, but the Serîk—who knocked out four of the group—gets to stay, and —” Her jaw hardened, and I changed course. “—then you all but tell me not to bother coming for dinner. This whole fair and equal thing obviously means something to my soul because it really makes me want to beat Rull, maybe even kill him, for being a hypocrite, and if you’re in on that, I’m not even sure what to say. So will you please tell me what the *fetid rot* is going on?”

Esi tugged me close again and smacked her lips against my cheek. “I’m sorry about Ruin because I know you like him. But he is a predator, and I was always afraid he was going to kill me while I slept.”

“Liar,” I said and then pushed my lips out into a pout. She was distracting

me, but I couldn't move on without coming to his defense. "He fought another panthera for your goats."

She bumped her hip against mine. "No, he saved Bizi, the one you always milked."

This was true, so there was no reason to deny it. But I was done with the distraction. I stared at her until her faux smile fell.

"Listen," she said. "Rull is the head of the council, but truthfully, he *is* the council. He's the strongest magî here, and he picked the rest of us. I only got the spot because my mom died while working for him. And while I liked the perks of being on the council, you're right: it's not fair." She dropped her arm and faced me. "Svîk basically marched into the dining area and ousted the council on their rotten fair and equal policies—that's literally what he called them. You've already been so vocal with your criticism that I was worried what might happen."

"What did happen?" I asked.

"People were in an uproar," she said. "At least at first, and then Rull and Svîk talked most of them down. The council reviewed the rules before dinner, Rull read them aloud, and everyone got to vote. After all that, Svîk announced that if anyone misunderstood and took their frustration out on you, he'd deliver justice, like he was meting out today. Anyway, I think he's interested in you."

I shook my head, shocked by the turn in conversation. Because what she said, and what she didn't say, I couldn't believe it. Everyone in Pûleêr, even Svîk who'd just arrived, got to vote on the new rules—except me. And somehow Esi thought I would be distracted by his interest in me?

"Are you joking? This isn't—I don't even care about him—not like that. How could you send me away?" I took a deep breath, grimacing as I struggled to formulate sentences from the frustration raging within. "And don't insult my intelligence by saying you were trying to protect me. I have amnesia not stupidity. Did you know about all the hypocrisy—all this time—and do nothing?"

Esi threw her hands up in the air in an extravagant display, but the hurt etched on her face seemed sincere. "I admit, I've liked going to see my cousin in Terit, but I already said no one else was willing to go, so that's not why I told you to go home. I wasn't trying to protect my place on the council; I didn't want you to get in any trouble."

What? My heart thumped against my ribs, aching to be free to pound

some sense into her. “Why would I be in trouble?” When she didn’t answer, I ground my teeth in frustration and added, “Did Svîk get in trouble?”

“There’s different kinds of trouble,” she said with a grunt. “Besides, who’s going to punish him? It would probably take more than a dozen magî . . . and then how would he even be punished? And what for? He basically defended you when you called out the rest of the unit for being lazy and entitled.”

I was glad for that, but her worry on my behalf rankled more because it seemed like a double standard . . . Seemed like? No, it *was* a double standard! “So, what exactly would I get in trouble for? And how is me not being there ___”

Esi shoved the door open, the loud grating sound too much for me to compete with. The smell of goat and sour milk billowed out of the enclosed space, and I grimaced. My frown shifted to a smile as Bizi got up from the pile of rags and bleated her welcome on her way over to greet us.

“I understand your frustration,” Esi said, stepping into her home. “And I never said it was fair. But you’re a girl, and even though no one uses magîk, there are plenty who judge a magî’s worth on their power. No one even knows what your power is—including you.”

“So everyone who used to get away with doing nothing is now upset?” I shook my head, and the water in my hair splattered through the air. I gathered up the ends and twisted them to expel the moisture. “But the majority has to see this is a better way, right? Instead of just saying fair—or whatever—it will be.”

“Calling those magî ‘upset’ would be an understatement,” she said with a sigh. She ran her hand through her golden waves, splitting her hair into sections before twisting it into a braid. “There were plenty of those who worked to clear the jungle who knew and said nothing for various reasons—”

“Like you?” I asked, staring at her.

She shrugged and then leaned over to pet Bizi.

Or to hide a blush of guilt. I cleared my throat, impatiently waiting for her to speak.

She kept her attention downward as she said, “Most of us on the council rotated into a work group on occasion.”

“Are you saying you haven’t always rotated in?” I asked, tilting my head for a new perspective. How could an on-occasion-pretense make anyone feel good about a lie they’re perpetrating. Indignation flared, and I tugged my wet

tunic off and wrung it out with fierce energy. Part of me wanted to march into the communal center tomorrow morning and scold any and all who were in on the sham of equality. “So how many magî are angry?”

“Rull is a good leader, charismatic, especially when he needs to be. He wouldn’t be the leader if he wasn’t.”

Her defense of him sent an ominous chill over my wet skin, and a different question pressed to the forefront as I grasped the magnitude. “What percentage of Pûleêr is upset with me?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she replied. “But Svîk is going to be assigned to the same group as you for a while, to make sure you’re safe.”

“Wait,” I shook my head with disbelief. “You want me to believe the council decided to help me stay safe by assigning a Serîk who just showed up to protect me?” The wrongness of her implication fueled my ire, and I tossed my tunic, with excessive force, over a line strung from a tree to the corner of Esi’s home. The wet fabric looped around twice, smacking me on the chin. I glared at the offending garment and then spun to face her. “Because I’m a girl with unknown magîk who ousted an inequitable and unethical system—”

“I know how it sounds—”

“I don’t even care how it sounds!” I snapped, my heart thumping in my chest and my face flushed. “I’m talking about what it is! Wrong is wrong—no matter what.”

Esi nodded, but her slumped shoulders contradicted the gesture of agreement. “I’m not disagreeing with you. Sometimes real life doesn’t follow the rules of ideology, and people do what they have to do for survival.” She swallowed, and her features hardened. “But maybe you’ve forgotten how things work in the real world.”

Stunned by her cruel dig at my amnesia, I drew back, blinking rapidly to clear the burning sensation. Esi’s verbal assault settled, a heavy weight deep in my chest. Hurt, mine and hers, all mixed up in my heart and in my head.

She turned her back to me and, just in case I couldn’t take the hint, pulled off her tunic as she stumbled to her bed. Dropping the wet garment on the floor, she walked away—from me, from our disagreement—as though my feelings didn’t matter. Heaving one more sigh, she collapsed onto her cot, burying her face into the bedclothes, and released a frustrated groan.

It doesn’t matter what she thinks. I sniffed before scrubbing the moisture from my eyes. Swallowing the plug of emotion, I ducked into the hovel and pulled the door closed behind. Darkness swallowed us, and in the belly of

Esi's home, swirling with the acrid smells, bitter tension tugged at my heartstrings. But I wasn't wrong, and I couldn't apologize for what I'd said. So, I silently shuffled, by memory, to my own pallet and waited for sleep to claim me.

Hours crawled past, the seconds measured by the chirping of bugs and hooting owls. I turned the events of the day over and over in my mind again, looking for what I could've done different, and I still felt honorable. Eventually, fatigue scattered a fine layer of gritty dirt between my eyelids, and the remaining moisture glued them closed.

Esi was gone when I awoke, as was Bizi, and the door was open. I got dressed and checked outside, but they were nowhere to be seen. I stood in the middle of the single room home, and the space felt bigger. I spun in a circle and frowned. Esi had taken every pail and lined them up by the door. More than half of the containers were gone already, all of the empty ones and the ones with ripe cheese. There were a few buckets left, one each of yogurt and whey, and a couple with cheese. My heart sank, and when the bell rang for breakfast a moment later, uncertainty held me fast. Esi had implied there might yet be trouble.

Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and then grabbed the pail with cheese and the one with whey, determined to act as I had every other day since I'd arrived. I wasn't going to change—I was about fairness, so I'd continue to act with honor—regardless of what anyone else did.

I stepped into the kitchen and handed the whey to Dostane. She smiled, a small, sad expression of pity, and handed me a ball of rice and cheese, deep fried and golden brown. She was the best cook in all of Pûleêr. I thanked her, knowing I would've never gotten one of her special treats without her consideration—not this late in the morning.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Dostane asked, offering me another rice ball. “Did you and Esi have a fight on top of everything else?”

I fidgeted, feeling awkward from her bluntness. “Does everyone know?”

Dostane nodded, her lips thinning. “Maybe not about the fight, but everyone knows you had something to do with the new rules. There was a council meeting yesterday and again early this morning.”

Of course they had a council meeting. Not that I should've known, but that would be the normal thing to do to make decisions for an entire post—if the council wasn't guilty of selective exclusivity. “Does everyone hate me? Am I really going to get attacked if I go out there?” I frowned and added, “Do they blame me?”

Dostane pursed her lips, her expression remaining drawn while she considered her answer. “No, maybe, and not everyone,” she said in rapid succession. “Esi and the Serîk have persuaded most of the magî that you didn't know and it was your shock and Svîk's misunderstanding that caused the fight in your unit. And those who haven't been working will have to rotate in now—everyone. That's what was decided. I'll get to work in the kitchen, but then so will everyone else. But Esi's the only one who ever traveled the Little Rê to Terit during the rainy season, so I'm not sure what

will happen with that. How can they make that fair when no one else wants to do it?”

“Fair doesn’t have to mean equal,” I stated before biting into my breakfast. I’d heard Esi say the phrase at least a dozen times since I’d arrived, so why couldn’t they actually follow their own stupid axiom?

“Maybe not,” Dostane said with a shrug. “But at this point, equal is what everyone wants.”

I grimaced. *So stupid.* Why not utilize magî based on skills and capabilities as much as possible? Sure, some might be stuck doing a job they didn’t like, but why take Dostane out of the kitchen and put someone like Lis in there? At least everyone gained equally by having Dostane work in the kitchen.

“You’re still young enough to project your thoughts,” she said with a dark chuckle. “And I don’t disagree with your assessment, but with over a thousand people in Pûleêr, majority ruled on this one.” Her smile shifted back to pity again. “You have a good heart, Taja.”

“I wasn’t ever trying to hide my feelings,” I said. “Esi said everything here was fair—not equal, fair. Yet over and over again, all I’ve seen was the evidence to contradict the statement. And I don’t care, not like you think. I’m not from Pûleêr, and I’m definitely not going to stay here. I’m grateful for your hospitality, but not everyone has been gracious—or honest. And the amount of discrepancy in the words and actions far exceeded ‘taking a little advantage’—which is the excuse I heard.”

“Justice is in your core. In that way, you’re a lot like Zâdîsa,” she said, wiping down the counters. “She stayed in the inn I ran in Heza . . . it seems like a long time, but it wasn’t even a year ago. She told us to come here, told me the truth—even when it couldn’t have been easy—because it was right. And Doli still hates her for it.” She exhaled and then added, “Justice is a double-edged sword. It damns and liberates—sometimes at the same time and to the same person.”

Of everyone I’d met, she’d been the most forthright, and yet she’d been on the council, so fully aware of what was going on. “Why did you put up with it? What did you get out of it—besides working in the kitchen? Or was it just the extra food?”

I wrinkled my nose because the question didn’t settle well. Dostane had been nice—in every interaction—and she wasn’t overweight like some of the women who worked with her.

“I really do like working with food,” she said. “But I was trying to give Doli enough time to grieve her brother. The cooking was an extra perk.”

Raising her eyebrows, Dostane pulled a plate from beneath the counter where she stood. Half of her plate was empty except for the glistening of oil from the two rice-and-cheese balls. The bite in my mouth turned to dirt, and I held out the uneaten one.

“No,” Dostane said with a smile. “I meant to give them to you.” Pointing to her plate of rice and beans, she winked at me as she grabbed a spoon from one of the dishes. She took a heaping scoop of cheese from a pail under the counter and plopped the creamy blob onto her plate. “What you see is very rarely the entirety of the story—for anyone. I don’t have the right answers for you about what you saw, or why Esi said what she did, and I never felt right about the disparity within Pûleêr, but sometimes what’s right isn’t what is best. Sometimes there aren’t any easy answers.”

Her candid responses drew me in, and I braved another question. “What do you think of the Serîk?”

She took a bite of the pîderîne she’d made, and I waited, nibbling on the rest of the first dumpling.

“I haven’t made up my mind. His story about Zädîsa won most of the council, even Esi, eventually.” Dostane tapped her finger on the counter as she continued. “Everything Esi learned in Terit, the Serîk confirmed. Zîyanâ disappeared from Yândarî, and the kümdâr has captured Zädîsa.”

“What about you? Do you trust him?”

She shrugged. “He said Zädîsa told him Pûleêr was a safe place—off the map of the Serîk because they—we—were told to stop using magîk almost two years ago. Zädîsa came to Pûleêr and warned them about the kirinî. Those are all the same things she told me. I think he’s telling the truth about that. Zädîsa would only tell someone she trusted.”

“Or if she was tortured,” I muttered. “Or maybe someone pulled it out of her head.”

Dostane laughed. “You might be right, but I doubt it.”

This time I was the one who laughed, a short bark at the pathetic truth.

She pointed at the population of Pûleêr, scraping their wooden plates as they sat in rows at long tables, following the rules. “You be you,” she said. “You’ll find those who get you—eventually. It might not be here in Pûleêr, but you’ll find them.”

“Everyone, listen up,” Rull shouted, climbing on the table at the front of

the roofed area. “I’m going to read off the work assignments in just a minute.”

With a wave to Dostane, I scooted out of the kitchen, my gaze landing on Esi standing next to Svîk, both stiff and awkward. Their faces were pinched with grim determination, and they each stared at me with an intensity that made my stomach churn.

The urge to turn and run surged from within, but I took a deep breath and marched toward them, my gaze darting back and forth. Esi’s lips twitched and then contorted into a forced smile so wide it seemed painful. A low murmur swelled from the crowd, but I ignored it. I was irritated with all the charades too. Besides, Rull would start any minute.

“Hey, Taja,” Esi said, her smile faltering at my raised brow. She sighed, the smile disappeared, and she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Rull began, and most of the magî turned to listen as he issued our work orders.

I tilted my head to the side, stopping directly in front of Esi, and gave her my full attention. I didn’t care a drop about what Rull had to say right now.

“You’re sorry? For what exactly?” When she furrowed her brow, I softly said, “Are you apologizing for what you said last night? For leaving this morning without saying anything?” My indignation swelled, the feeling spreading through my chest, fresh and unchecked. I clenched my hands and continued, my voice trembling with emotion. “Or are you saying sorry for taking Bizi and all the pails? Or ‘sorry’ for going along with the system here in Pûleêr? Are you sorry for telling me to go home yesterday—like a pathetic child who can’t be trusted to make her own decisions? Or . . . something else?”

She closed her eyes as her chin dropped to her chest and whispered, “All of it.”

I snapped my mouth shut with a click of my teeth and blinked, no longer sure of what to say after her humble admission. I was still angry—hurt really. Part of me wanted to lash out, make her suffer worse for making me feel so bad, but to what end? Even so, I wasn’t quite as certain of her reliability, both as a friend and a member of the council.

Rull continued to announce the unit tasks, droning on in his dispassionate voice as he did every morning. I scanned over the large congregation of people, all of them back to acting as if nothing happened yesterday. I had yet to see Rull be charismatic and wondered if it was really possible—maybe Esi

was lying again.

My gaze caught on a young female, Nebe, and she curled her lip at me. She said something to the female magî next to her, who rolled her eyes and then pulled a face. Nebe never really liked me anyway, so I wasn't about to take her actions as confirmation, until I met with similar sneers on three more peoples' faces. Four . . . Five . . . Six.

Sighing, I stopped counting, stopped looking at the residents of Pûleêr, and glanced at Svîk.

"You're not everyone's favorite right now," he said, his features hardening as his gaze slid to Esi. "Not that it makes a sliver of sense, but then these posts aren't known for their intelligence."

I snorted, reluctantly agreeing with the Serîk. "Why don't they hate you?"

He raised his eyebrows and then said, "Oh, I'm sure they do. But they're more scared of me."

"Even if that's true," Esi said, turning to glare at him, "it doesn't go for everyone in Pûleêr."

"Of course not," he replied, facing her. His eyes narrowed as he stared down at her. When he spoke, his voice was hard, cutting, and filled with derision. "If everyone was equally stupid, there wouldn't have been an advantage to take, right?"

He said exactly what I was thinking, but when Esi's eyes filled with tears, my heart softened a bit. I opened my mouth, my mind scrambling for words that were both compassionate and honest, but before I could speak, she gasped, pivoted, and then darted out of the clearing.

A low murmur rolled through the nearby crowd, and a sticky sense of dread settled on my skin—like walking through spiderwebs. I looked up at Svîk, wracked by the conflicting emotions inside.

"If anyone tries anything," he said, raising his eyebrows. "I'll disembowel them—if you'd like."

I gaped in horror, and he chuckled.

"That's it," Rull said. "Everybody dismissed."

The magî of Pûleêr rose, and the clatter of wooden dishes and murmur of voices swelled around us as the magî cleared the tables and moved into groups. I stood rooted, not sure where to go, and equally certain I didn't want to ask the unstable Serîk at my side.

"I was kidding," he said, leaning into my line of sight. The left side of his mouth pulled up into a half-smile, and the silver charm hung in the air from

the cord on his neck.

I nodded and closed my mouth. Obviously, I didn't know how to read his humor. "You have a sick sense—"

"Actually," he said, wincing as he straightened, "not really kidding—at all."

My thoughts derailed, and I froze, blinking up at him. *How am I supposed to respond to that?* Thanks? No thanks? See-ya?

"We should get going," he said, motioning with his chin. He strode toward the paths leading out to the perimeter road, turning back only to wave at me to join him. "Unless you want them to get to the site before us," he called. "Though I don't think that's a good idea, personally, what with grudges and all."

I tripped on my next step and stumbled into the open air. Sighing, I looked up. Without the roof overhead, the morning light bathed the layers of the rainforest, showcasing the vibrant colors of the orchids, bromeliads, and other fauna, but my attention locked onto Svîk, my chest heaving. "Wait. Are you serious? Who's in our group?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "I don't get it either. Same as yesterday: same group, same location. Why do you think it only took a couple minutes for Rull to make the announcements?"

Was this somebody's idea of a joke? I gritted my teeth and shifted onto the balls of my feet, ready to pivot and return to the pavilion, when Svîk grabbed my wrist.

"Don't do it," he murmured. "Don't play their games. If you say anything right now, Rull will toss you out. Suck it up, buttercup, and let's go."

"Buttercup?" Something strange and familiar about the name zinged through me—there and then gone. I tugged against his grip, but the wisdom of his warning held me just as much as his hand.

He shook his head. "You have nowhere else to go right now, and neither do I. So what if it's the same rot-hole? This entire place is a hole. We're not here to play in the mud and get along. Let's go clear the plants in our assigned area. Then we can do something fun. Do they have anything fun?"

Really? Something fun? We weren't friends, but there was no way I would say that now. He was my only ally. What else could I do? "Not really—at least not that I know of."

"Rot. Maybe we can make our own."

We approached the group, and I kept my gaze averted, doing my best not to instigate any trouble. Someone bumped my shoulder, knocking me to the side. I stumbled, grunting, before righting myself. I turned and faced the offender.

“What?” demanded a young magî, meeting my gaze with a glare. A dark bruise blossomed over his swollen jaw.

Next to him stood Teso, one eye wide, the other swollen shut. He inched back, away from his friend, holding his hands up, making it clear he wasn’t a part of his friend’s actions.

Svîk stepped between me and the young male who’d bumped me, leaned over, and muttered, “If you so much as address her, I’ll shove my fist so far into your skull you’ll never see anything else again.” Svîk looked over his shoulder and said, “Let’s go, Taja. We’ll take the section on the end.”

Svîk dropped his shoulder and bumped the guy—hard enough that the magî fell on his butt. Before he could stand, Svîk pivoted, his lip curling as he glared at the young male. I held my breath, probably true for the entire unit, and the young magî pursed his lips before raising his arms in surrender.

“Do you have something to say?” Svîk asked the other magî.

“Sorry,” he said, angling my way though not meeting my eyes.

I didn’t want his insincere apology, especially not when it was obviously pushed out of him. Shrugging, I said, “Sure.”

Without waiting for a response, I moved past Svîk and the rest of the unit to the edge of the rainforest. Ignoring them all, I leaned over and grabbed the stalk of an aleph ear plant that was almost knee-high. I yanked it out of the

mud and threw it back into the wall of growth. Behind me, the wet sounds of foliage being cleared indicated the rest of the unit was likewise getting to work.

“You handled that well,” Svîk said, appearing next to me.

I grunted as I tugged another plant loose with a sucking protest from the ground. Tossing the stalk into the jungle, I peeked at him, frowning as I saw Rumi and Lis approaching.

“You might want to be careful,” said Rumi, sidling up to Svîk. “You don’t want to align with someone like her.”

“Really?” Svîk faced her. “Why is that?”

“She has nothing.” Rumi replied.

Lis nodded in confirmation. “No family, no name, no memory”—her gaze slid to me and hardened—“and probably no magîk.”

“That so?” Svîk tilted his head as though examining me anew, and one of the girls giggled. The tentative softening I’d felt toward him turned rock-hard in a flash before melting into confusion as he pursed his lips and gave one small shake of his head.

“Completely worthless,” Rumi said. “Except to clear the jungle. She’s probably no better than an animal.”

Lis snickered, but I cut her mirth off.

“You two are so funny,” I said, laying on the sarcasm as thick as I could. “Incidentally, I think it would be fantastic to be a bird and fly away.” I met Rumi’s glare with one of my own. “I bet your magîk is amazing.” I turned to Lis and continued. “If only Rull and the council would let you use it, you could go to Yândarî and take the kirinî. Then you’d become Serîk—and you’d never have to return here, to Pûleêr, or pull weeds.”

Lis’s big brown eyes widened as I spoke, and by the end, she was nodding her agreement. Rumi merely persisted in her glare-of-hatred.

“What is your magîk?” I asked. “Are you allowed to speak of it? Or is that all hush-hush now that we’re supposed to be ‘fair-and-equal?’”

“Rumi can start a fire, and I—”

“Lis!” Rumi snapped. “Don’t be stupid. You can’t trust her.”

“Sorry,” I said with a shrug. “I wasn’t trying to stir up any more trouble.”

I faced the wall of foliage and returned to the arduous task of pushing it back. Several members of the unit grumbled, about me, the Serîk, and the two young women’s pride, but eventually the murmur of complaining shifted as everyone turned to the work.

“You didn’t win their friendship,” Svîk said, throwing a bush into the jungle and rustling the leaves.

Mud hit my legs and the edge of my tunic as the ground gave up on our tug-of-war. “Nope,” I said, straightening with my prize. I heaved the plant into the undercanopy and then sighed. “I wasn’t trying to win their friendship.”

“Why make it harder for yourself?” he asked, followed by a grunt.

Mud splattered Svîk, the dark muck leaving a trail from his legs all the way up his body, one dot on his cheek. “How can I make friends with someone I fundamentally disagree with?” When he furrowed his brow, I added, “They think they’re better than me, but I don’t see it.”

He chuckled. “I’m not saying you have to agree with their stupidity, just try and get along. Instead, you’re shaking things up—a lot.”

Pursing my lips, I took my frustration out on the next several plants. *Shaking things up?* Why was calling out hypocrisy shaking things up? And I’d been considering liking that ex-Serîk-ass. I’d rather have no friends than friends I couldn’t trust.

“You’re mad,” he said, stating the obvious.

Maybe he was attractive but an idiot. Too bad looks weren’t as important as brains.

“Or have you just made up your mind you don’t like me, too?” he asked with a huff. “Because that would be stupid on your part.”

Touché. And I couldn’t even wiggle out of his accusation or his statement—which meant he wasn’t an idiot. *Rot.*

“I don’t know you, not really.” I darted a quick look at him. His core tightened, and he heaved, extracting a six-foot mango tree from the ground. My insides felt funny, like my stomach had something fluttering inside, and I blurted, “I’m not sure what to make of you.”

He tossed the plant into the jungle, and the cacophony of breaking branches implied . . . What? Protestation? Frustration? Did he really care what I thought? And if so, why me?

Straightening, he met my gaze, a tentative smile on his lips. “Really? You seem like the kind of person who makes up her mind quickly, and I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“You’re calling me impulsive and judgmental?”

He laughed, a loud, carefree sound that made the magî around us stop their work and glance our way. I glared in response.

“You might like me,” he said, his laughter trailing into a low chuckle. “We might even become best friends.”

My thoughts immediately went to Ruin, and I shook my head. But Ruin was an animal—and he was gone. Over Svîk’s shoulder, I could see Esi coming up the perimeter road, face splotchy from tears. Was I being a hypocrite? Undoubtedly.

“Fine,” I said, facing him. “I’ll give you a chance, but—” I held up my hand at his answering grin. “—you need to give Esi a chance. She saved my life. Maybe we should all just start fresh.”

Svîk nodded, his faltering expression blossoming anew as he slid his gaze from Esi toward our unit. “Does that mean you’re going to give the rest of the group a fresh-start, too?”

I snorted and waved to Esi. “I did already,” I muttered to Svîk. “There was yesterday and this morning.” I took a deep breath and shifted my attention to him, giving him a cheeky grin. “Remember, I’m judgmental. Two chances are all you get.”

“Noted,” he said and chuckled again. His chest puffed out as he took a deep breath, and he strode toward Esi, saying, “Hey, Esi. I’m sorry I was such a toad earlier.”

I didn’t hear what she said in return, as I pivoted toward the wall of foliage. I surveyed the growth and frowned. *What had they done yesterday?*

“Hey,” Esi said, suddenly at my side. “I’m sorry.”

Nodding, I turned and said, “Me too.”

Esi’s shoulders relaxed, but she still asked, “Really? Because you were right, and it wasn’t fair, and I was guilty. Even if my reasons seemed unselfish.”

I shrugged off her worries. “You were right, too. Sometimes we have to make the best of the situation we’re given with the power that we have. I wasn’t here before, so I don’t know all the details.”

She swallowed and then pulled me into a hug. “Thanks.”

The muted murmurs of our unit floated to us, the rolling sounds of discontent.

“You better save the rest of your reconciliation for later,” Svîk said. “Since you’re not including the daft-magî in your love-fest, they’re likely to get upset if you’re not working.”

As if to reinforce the point, Rumi shouted, “Do we all get a break? Or is that just for animals who don’t know any better?”

I grit my teeth as we pulled apart, and Esi shook her head. Apparently, she and Svîk already agreed on something.

“I know,” I said, returning to my spot, which was significantly farther along than the space where Rumi and Lis were—not that I was looking. The two of them were like night parrots: cute, obnoxious, and stupid. “I’ll keep it to myself from now on.”

Esi sighed and wiped the mud from her face—smearing it really—leaving a dark streak down her cheek and another across her forehead. We trudged past other groups still working to beat back their sections of the jungle. I couldn't help feeling some vindication seeing everyone working.

“So,” Esi said, dragging my attention back to her. “You and Svîk, huh? You got his attention and seem to be holding it.”

I pulled up short by her words. “No-o,” I said, dragging out my protest. “Why would you even say that? I still don't really trust him; I'm certainly not going to get romantically involved with someone I don't trust. That would be stupider than—” I stopped just before insulting Lis and Rumi. “—a toad.”

Esi laughed, but it sounded forced.

Squinting, I tried to get a read on her because something was off. I'd only known her a couple of months, but we'd spent a lot of time together, enough that I could feel it, even if I didn't know what it was.

Eventually, Esi turned and put her hands on her hips. “What are you gawking at?” she asked. “Let's go wash off the mud. I know how you feel about being clean.”

Everyone else in our group was headed toward the Cem or back to their homes.

“Yes,” I said, running to catch up. I threw my arm around her shoulders and, after several steps in tandem, asked, “Do you not like him because he's a toad?”

She grunted. We left the perimeter road and stepped onto the path leading down to the pool just off the Cemik River. Esi held her tongue, keeping her

strange peace as we waded into the water. I dove under and scrubbed my scalp, letting my hair float out around me, giving her space. I surfaced and swam around the inlet of calm water before turning toward shore. Esi stood on the rocks, waist deep, and I joined her. We swished our filthy tunics back and forth, and I scrubbed at a stubborn spot of dirt with my fingernails, waiting for her to speak.

As we headed home, she kicked at the mud, flinging chunks of the muck into the air in front of us.

“I don’t trust him,” she said, keeping her gaze fixed ahead. “He’s too . . .”

“Too what? Too confident? Too attractive? Too strong? Too . . . what?”

“All of it. He’s just too much.”

I nodded. “Plus he used to be Serîk for the kûmdâr, which means you have to wonder about his judgment.”

Esi turned toward me with a jerk. “Yes.”

“I agree,” I said. “I don’t trust him either.”

This time, she rolled her eyes. “You don’t trust anyone. But for you, it’s not just Svîk. You don’t trust anyone—not Rull, Svîk, Nebe, not even me. But *that* problem isn’t everyone else, Taja; it’s you.”

Her words thumped the air from my lungs, but when I opened my mouth to protest, the argument stuck. I blinked as the assurance I wanted to offer—that I trusted her—dissolved in the simple truth she’d declared.

“Not that it’s your fault,” she rushed to say. “You don’t even know who you are. How could you hope to really grasp the depth of someone else’s character? I mean, at least not right now—or not yet.” She shook her head. “I’m not saying the right thing. In fact, I’m sure I’m saying all the wrong things.” Esi grimaced, squashing her lips together like a duck. After a long sigh, she added, “But I think your instinct is right with Svîk. Sometimes good people do bad things—or stupid—” She pointed to herself. “—like going along with the council because I did want to visit Terit and have goats.” She dropped her hand to her side. “But sometimes bad people do good things.”

I nodded, not because I agreed, but because I wasn’t sure what else to do. Because the same instinct that made it difficult to trust Svîk made it impossible to trust Rull—and almost everyone else here I’d met—just like she said. And after weeks of living with Esi, I wasn’t so sure about her, even now.

“Why did you take pity on me?” I asked. “When you saw me on the Little Rê, what made you say I could come to Pûleêr with you?”

She held my gaze for only a second before returning her attention to the muddy ground. Kicking another clump of muck into the air, she said, “Just a hunch.”

“You know I don’t believe you,” I said.

Esi pursed her lips, and her shoulders tightened. “It doesn’t really matter if you believe me or not. I don’t know you, and until that day, I’d never seen you before.”

“But?”

“People talk, but that doesn’t mean anything they say is true, Taja. My cousin said something when I was in Terit the last time, about a girl there. She was incoherent and had no short-term memory. And not that you look anything like the girl she described, and you were awake, talking, walking, totally capable—so nothing like that girl at all—but that girl’s story made me take compassion on you. That’s the truth.”

I stared at her, and she stared back, the fire in her eyes—even more than the vehemence of her words—convinced me she was telling the truth.

The bell rang, calling us to dinner. My stomach growled, the sound loud enough to make Esi’s serious expression crack.

“Did you eat anything today?” she asked.

“Yes. Dostane made those rice balls.” I’d eaten the second one after Dostane refused. “And we had mangoes, remember?”

“Right,” she replied. We got to the perimeter road, and Esi turned left toward her house.

“Wait,” I called to her. She glanced over her shoulder, and I pointed toward the communal area. “It’s supertime. Aren’t you hungry?”

Esi faced me and shook her head. “I’m not. I’ll see you at home. Make sure you check on Bizi before you come back.”

Even though she didn’t say it, I felt like she was dropping a conda-sized hint to leave her alone. She exhaled as though the weight of emotion was likewise conda-sized. I thought of all the goodness and kindness—which far outweighed the bad, or stupid, choices she’d made, and my heart softened. “Of course I’ll check on Bizi. And if we have meat, I’ll save you a piece.”

Esi halted mid-turn and smiled. “Thanks. I’ll wait up for you, but don’t feel like you have to hurry back. And I’m glad you came home with me.”

“Me too,” I said.

A dozen magî rounded the bend, followed by a dozen more.

“You better hurry or you won’t get any meat. Even if they do have

some.”

I nodded with a laugh, spun on my heel, and waved goodbye as I sprinted to dinner.

The smell of roasted mutton made my mouth water as I drew near the kitchen. Several dozen magî were already there, jostling for position. A male magî shouted my name, making me jerk out of my thoughts, and my gaze collided with Svîk’s.

“Over here,” he said with a wave.

He stood toward the front of the line, and several magî near him threw glares toward the former-Serîk. I shook my head and joined the last few stragglers, even letting two young boys scoot in front of me. With the amount of contention I’d already caused, I was not about to cut in line for food.

“I’ll come sit with you,” I called back. “Save me a seat.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

The line for food finally started moving, and within minutes, I was at the front of the long wooden counter.

“Plantain?” a magî asked, holding up a whole roasted vegetable, its skin marred with ash. Her eyes were glazed, staring blankly forward.

I’d never seen her in the kitchen before, but Dostane had said changes were coming.

“Sure,” I said. It would be pretty hard to ruin plantains. I smiled, trying to catch her attention as I said, “Thanks.”

She held the food out for me, not meeting my gaze. *Okaaay*. I put it on my plate and moved forward.

“Beans?” the next magî asked, holding up a ladleful. Like the first, she kept her attention fixated just above my head.

“Yes, please.” I held up my plate, and she dumped the soupy mix on top of the plantain. Not quite what I would’ve done, but I bit my tongue and glanced down the line to the next server. This time, I recognized the magî.

Nebe dropped a heaping spoonful of cheese on the plate of the person in front of me, giving the utensil a shake. Her expression was hard, her lips pursed in a thin line of irritation. She dug up another large portion of the creamy goodness, raised her head, and narrowed her eyes as she met my gaze. She released the spoon into the pail with a wet splat and clenched her jaw, her anger rolling out to me. She said nothing as she picked up the spoon, turned it sideways, and smacked the utensil on the edge. She then leaned over and deposited a few flakes of cheese next to my plantain.

“Next,” she snapped, dismissing me.

I shook my head. “You dropped almost all the cheese back in the pail.”

“You’ve got some on your plate. We have to ration so everyone gets some,” she explained, her voice filled with condescension. “We need to be *fair*.”

Debating the cost of arguing took less than a second. Did I like cheese? Yes, but not enough to create more waves. And holding up the line would cost far more than the scoop of cheese was worth. I gave her a brittle smile and said, “Someday, the role will be reversed, and you won’t get any cheese. When that happens, remember this moment.”

She curled her lip at me and said, “Next time, *you* won’t get any cheese. Move on. You’re holding up the line.”

I stepped to the next magî serving roasted maize and held my plate out. Indignation pulsed through me, making me want to throw my plate at Nebe, but my stomach rumbled again, reminding me of my priorities. I finished going through the line, my mind oblivious to what else was being served. Entering the dining area, I scanned the space. Svîk sat toward the back, talking with Rumi and Lis. Grinning like a fool, he shook his head, said something, and the two young women laughed. But as I approached, they both jerked upright. Rumi sneered at me from the other side of the table and grabbed Lis’s arm.

“Come on,” Rumi said, tugging on her friend’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Bye, Svîk,” Lis said, her voice breathless as she smiled down on him. She continued to stare at him, walking backward until Rumi let go. Lis flicked a glare at me, and then the two young women turned and wound through the crowd of magî flowing out of the kitchen.

I watched the two of them swimming upstream, and when they joined several other magî—cutting into the line—I tensed. All that talk from Rull about fair and equal, and they . . .

“Don’t do it,” Svîk said, echoing his previous warning.

I turned my anger on him. He swiveled in his seat, away from the two magî, to face me. He shook his head, picked up his spoon, and mashed the beans into his plantain.

I slammed my plate to the table, and beans, gravy, and roasted maize splattered onto the wood. “Are you joking?”

He shook his head, his previous jovial expression gone. He scraped up a bite of the mash and said, “I never joke about strategy.”

His statement was so unexpected that I stood rooted, studying him as he

put the food in his mouth, frowned, and quickly swallowed.

“Sit down, Taja,” he said, patting the table between our plates.

“Why?”

He drew back and studied me before he said, “Because you need me.”

I snorted. “I don’t need you.”

He chuckled as if I’d said something funny. “You’re right. But I think you’ll do much better with me than without.”

“You’re just insufferable sometimes.” I huffed and took a seat. “And I don’t know why you’re making friends with Rumi and Lis. They’re lazier than sloths and dumber than a night parrot caught by a conda.”

He nodded. “Astute observation.”

“Then why are you being so friendly with them? It makes me feel like you’re trying to play both sides—friends with them and me? I don’t want to be friends with magî who stab me in the back.” I indicated my dab of cheese and added, “Or cut me out.”

Pointing at the thumbprint-size serving, he asked, “Is that all you got?”

“Yes,” I replied. Scraping my finger over the plate, I wiped up the single bite and put it in my mouth. The creamy cheese coated my tongue for a few seconds before I swallowed it down. “Apparently, as you already know, I have a talent for upsetting the residents.”

With a snort, he dropped half his cheese on my plate, the remainder still almost the size of my fist.

“You do have a knack of calling out an individual’s foibles.” He chuckled then added, “Or an entire community’s.”

I froze, my spoon halfway through the cheese. “I’ve been silent—mostly—since you said something this afternoon. The only person I’ve talked to since we left assignment was Esi.”

“And me,” he added, tapping his chest where the silver charm rested.

And Nebe, but she hardly counted. I shrugged. “And you, but you’re also flirting with—” I waved my hand after Lis and Rumi. “—stupid and stupider.”

“Being nice doesn’t mean I’m friends with them.” He mashed the remaining cheese into the plantain-and-bean concoction. “I’m not much a fan of savory pîderîne, but the rest of the food tonight is terrible. What happened to the magî who made the fried cheese balls?”

“She told me this morning that they were making her rotate, so it was fair.”

Rull got up and made announcements—mostly just to hear himself speak—but his last announcement made my throat catch. Esi was off the council.

Svîk snorted again. “I think you’re right about the intelligence here. There is a definite lack of common sense.”

He ate in silence while I struggled with my food and emotions. Esi must’ve known what was coming, which explained her not wanting to come to dinner. I couldn’t even mash the plantain because it was so undercooked. Instead, I scraped the beans to the side and mixed them with the maize. As soon as I moved my spoon toward the cheese, Svîk reached forward and grabbed my wrist.

“Don’t mix the cheese with that, not without trying it first.”

I got a single bean and kernel of corn, both saturated with gravy, and tested the liquid first. Looking closer, I could see the flecks of black speckling the gravy weren’t pepper but the scorched scrapings from the bottom of the pan. I drained the liquid and put the corn and bean in my mouth. The maize was overcooked and the bean crunchy and raw. I spit them both out and then took a large bite of cheese to get rid of the taste.

“We should see what we can do to get your friend in charge of cooking again.”

Nodding, I mashed the cheese to the roof of my mouth and ran it over my tongue. After swallowing again, I said, “It’s terrible.”

Svîk told me of the different foods in Yândarî while I ate my cheese. By the time I was done, twenty minutes later, Rumi and Lis sauntered up with their trays—their hair and clothes disheveled. I stood and nodded to Svîk. “Thanks for sharing your cheese.”

He rose as well, nearly knocking Rumi over. “Sorry,” he said, grabbing her tilting tray, barely saving the food from falling into the dirt. When he glanced up, his apology disappeared, and his expression tightened. “Excuse me. I didn’t mean to knock you over. Did you want our seats?” Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “Taja and I were just leaving. You’re welcome to have them.”

Rumi and Lis froze, the former stammering incoherently. Weird because they were all flirty with him just thirty minutes ago.

Svîk ignored them and rounded the table, taking my mostly full tray. “Come on, Taja. You said you’d show me Lovers’ Leap.” He winked and jerked his head, indicating that I follow. “And I think you’re right: if you decide to move forward, I’ve got your back, and I always will.”

By the time he finished, I regarded him with a scowl. “What are you . . .”

With his back to the other two, his eyes widened, and the intent look communicated more than his words. The expression shifted to a soft smile, and he said, “If I had to choose one magî, it would be you.”

That was a little thick. Taking a deep breath, I pushed my lips into a fake smile that put his acting to shame. “I’m so glad you agreed to be friends. Friends certainly make the day less dull.” I glanced at Rumi and Lis and, determined to be gracious, said, “Enjoy your dinner.”

I caught up to Svîk and bumped into him, driving my elbow into his side. “You’re a bit of a tool.”

Laughing, he dropped the dishes off as I walked by his side.

“I admit, I’m a tool. And a frog—or was it toad? But I do agree with you. And you have keen eyes. I really do think we should be friends.”

“Fine, just don’t tell anyone else we’re going to Lovers’ Leap. Is that really a place?” I shook my head. “That’s creepy and weird.”

“So no creepy and weird?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “Even if it means that Rumi and Lis will not only leave you alone but me, too?”

I wanted to tell him no, but I could understand not wanting to be bothered by the other female magî.

“You made it clear we’re just friends,” he added. “Which was a great touch—even better than what I was trying to do—so thanks.”

“Sure,” I said, turning toward home. The sunlight was rapidly disappearing, and I needed to get back before the overcast darkness made it near impossible. “I’ll catch you in the morning.”

“You sure you don’t want to show me Lovers’ Leap?” He stood with his hands behind his back, a teasing smile on his lips. The mottled light filtered through the canopy in shades of violet and cerulean. “I’m sure it’s beautiful.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” I said, waving him away.

Svîk chuckled, a low, rumbling sound of mirth. “The posts always have one—some place where doomed lovers jumped to their deaths to avoid being torn apart.”

“How morbid,” I said, shaking my head in protest to both his invitation and the very concept of such a place. There’s nothing romantic about dying with one’s lover. “I guarantee I’ll never go there.”

“All right. I’ll walk you home.”

Svîk came all the way to the head of the trail. We talked for a few more minutes, but the emotional strain of the day was almost as draining as the

work. By the time I said goodbye, the moonlight had darted through the trees.

“Good night,” I said with a wave. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yep,” he replied. “Say hi to Esi, too. I hope she feels better tomorrow.”

I wound through the trail, and when I got to Esi’s, I was a little surprised when she didn’t say anything. Shrugging out of my tunic, I found my way across the room and climbed onto my pallet. After a deep breath, I sunk into my bed and whispered a quiet goodnight to my friend.



ESI WAS GONE when I woke up the next morning—maybe trying to talk the council into putting her back on. She wasn’t at the communal area when I got there for breakfast, and I wondered if she was okay. Svîk joined me at the table, sitting across from me, and we ate the sweet grain cereal we’d been served, our hunger whetting our appetites after the terrible dinner the night before. I kept glancing toward the kitchen, looking for Esi, but even after Rull finished the announcements and work assignments, I didn’t see her. As the groups broke off, I scanned the ones nearest our table, looking for her. Svîk and Esi were a part of the same work unit I was in, so I figured she was bound to show up.

“Where’s Esi?” Svîk asked as we left the common area.

I regarded him: his rumpled sulu, as though he’d slept in it while still wet. He was otherwise clean, but his forehead creased in a deep furrow, more wrinkled than his clothing.

“Or does she normally join you later?”

“I’m not sure.”

We followed the rest of our group toward the perimeter road, but my mind was occupied with Esi. Had I heard her at all? Not once, but that was nothing new. I was a heavy sleeper.

“I haven’t seen her since yesterday,” I said. “After work.”

“Does she normally take off?” Svîk asked with a frown.

“No.” The unease I’d felt earlier returned, and I immediately started a mental list of people who didn’t like her, turning my gaze to Svîk. I studied him suspiciously, but Esi’s words regarding my distrust slapped me as I stared at him. What little of my past I did remember was filled with all the reasons not to trust—which wasn’t completely fair to Svîk. I’d been with him

after Esi went home, so it wasn't like he even had the opportunity to isolate her—let alone hurt her. But that didn't mean something didn't happen to her. “If she doesn't show up today, will you help me look for her?”

“Of course,” he replied immediately. “But you don't really think anything happened to her, do you?”

I shrugged because I wasn't sure how to answer. I'd only been in Pûleêr for a couple weeks, so I was hardly immersed in their culture—especially since I'd pretty much been instrumental in blowing it up. But there had been no violent repercussions. “Do you think anyone would do something to her? I wasn't there that day when you stood up for me . . .”

Was that only two days ago?

“There were a couple magî who were pretty upset but just shouting and the like. No threats.” He pulled up short and scowled. “Wait . . . I don't know their names, but those female magî in the kitchen, would they be mad enough to do something? Or any of the young males, like the lemur-turds in our group yesterday?”

Dread sunk deep into the bottom of my stomach. “Dostane?” I asked, choking on her name. “I don't—I can't imagine she would. But I don't know about anyone else.”

There were so few people I knew; how could I know who to trust without Esi?

Svîk shook his head. “Actually, we shouldn't start assuming things. Esi could be here any minute. Let's not go borrowing trouble, right?”

I swallowed back the panic clawing its way up through my chest and nodded. “Right. She'll show up.”

But my words were flat and full of doubt.

I spent the day in a daze, my frenzied pace interrupted only when Svîk reminded me to have something to drink. I choked down mouthfuls of coconut water before returning to my work. We had to hit the line of bromeliads before we could be done for the day, and this area was one of the thickest I'd ever seen. Every time I heard the squelch of feet approaching, I looked, hoping to see Esi on the path. But the day wore on without her presence.

The afternoon sunlight began to fade when the last bit of fauna was pushed back to the line of bright-yellow plants. Several of the magî cheered, and a couple even thanked me for helping with their sections, but there was no victory in it.

My stomach was in knots, and I turned to Svîk. "Let's go talk to Rull."

For the first time since my arrival in Pûleêr, I wondered if what I'd done was best. Because if Esi had paid for me trying to set things right—to be fair—I'd never forgive myself. Or anyone who took it out on her.

Instead of going to either the Cem or Cemik to bathe, Svîk and I returned to the common area. Several women and a couple men were in the kitchen, and the smell of burned rice permeated the air. I made a mental note to avoid the rice tonight as we walked through.

The tables were mostly empty. Only a few male magî loitered toward the back, nearest to the kitchen. They stepped out of our way, and no one said anything as we passed. I was grateful for Svîk's presence behind me, doubtful it would've been so easy without him.

Rull and the entire council were in the dining area—all except for Esi.

They sat around a table at the front of the space where Rull normally did his announcements, all with either tight or sober expressions, and Dostane's eyes were red-rimmed with emotion. Their hushed tones made it impossible for me to hear their words, but as I marched closer, the fear made my heart race, and the whooshing of blood blocked their voices.

"Esi didn't show up," I blurted. A couple magî turned to look at me, but I kept my gaze fixed on Rull. "Have you seen her?"

Rull's placid composure faltered, and his features twisted and pinched. "No."

He glanced at each of the other magî, and I followed his gaze. But one after another, their furrows, frowns, and wide eyes revealed only surprise or confusion.

"When was the last time you saw her?" Dostane asked.

"Yesterday. She went home after cleaning up, and I came for dinner. By the time I got back, it was dark. I thought she was already asleep," I explained. "She was gone this morning, but I assumed you had a council meeting—" I pointed at them. "—like now."

"We didn't have a council meeting," Dostane said, shaking her head. "Not this morning. We're having one now." She darted a glance at Rull before she continued, "Because we lost five more magî today. And that was before the news of Esi."

"The bûyî?" Svîk asked.

Dostane flinched before nodding. "We think so. Three of them were taken on the northern tip of the road this afternoon: Valn, Ney, and Lis. Their group saw them get sucked down."

"Rumi and Malk haven't been seen since last night," another magî of the council said, his gaze darting from me to Svîk. "And now Esi, makes six."

The fact that Rumi, Lis, and Esi were all gone around the same time didn't sit well, like a ball of unease slithering in my gut, but I had no one to accuse.

"Do you think Rumi and Malk were taken by the bûyî?" Svîk asked. He glanced at me and added, "Was Esi friends with Malk?"

"I don't even know who she is," I said with a shrug. "So I don't think so."

"He," Rull said, shaking his head. He raised his eyebrows, and his attention shifted from me to Svîk then back to me. "Malk is a he."

Yikes. Of course. "Sorry," I muttered. "I didn't know. But . . . I don't see her going off with Rumi after what happened the other day."

Rull took a deep breath, pinched the bridge of his nose, and closed his eyes. “That’s just it, Taja. You don’t know. You’ve been friends with Esi for a few months? Not even a full season . . . So you don’t really know anyone’s history here.” He opened his eyes and glared at me. “And we don’t really know you, either.” His attention shifted to Svîk. “Either of you.”

“Stop it,” Dostane snapped, slamming her hand on the table. “Fighting like that won’t do anyone any favors. What would you like the council to do, Taja?”

I forced my gaze away from Rull who made me feel like everything was my fault, and though Dostane’s smile was sad and tired, relief poured through with her obvious compassion. The vice-like tension waned, the tightness around my chest dissipated minutely, and I said, “Can we organize a search party?”

Two magî snorted, but Dostane nodded. “You can try. I’m not sure you’ll find any willing to go into the jungle, especially because if Esi or the other magî are still in Pûleêr, they’ll show up.”

The truthfulness of her words settled over me and, with it, hopelessness. I could look, but would I find nothing?

“Come on,” Svîk said, sliding his arm around my shoulders. “I’ll help you.”

He tugged me away from the council, and I followed him blindly as my eyes filled with tears. But Dostane was right. No one had seen or heard anything, and even though Svîk was braver than most, our short treks into the growth of the undercanopy were fruitless.

Three days passed with no clues, no hints, or indications. Nothing.

“Taja,” Esi whispered.

I awoke with a yelp and sat upright in my bed. I was still in Esi’s home, in my own bed, and the room still smelled of goat, sour milk, and a mixture of Esi’s and my sweat. The room was pitch with night, so I reached for her.

“Esi?” I said, groping at the empty air. “Where are you?”

“Gone,” she said.

Confusion and the refusal to accept what I knew slammed into me, stealing my breath. “Gone?” I gasped. “You mean . . . dead?”

“No one really dies. You know that.”

My heart pounded, seizing and thrashing against Esi’s declaration of her own death. I gasped, choking on the single word question. *H-how?*

If I spoke aloud, she ignored my question as she continued. “But it

doesn't matter anymore. What matters now is you."

Doesn't matter? I sat in the darkness, blinking into the abyss as the rest of her words registered. She couldn't mean . . . "Me?"

"Yes, you," Esi said, her disembodied voice sounding as if she were sitting next to me on the cot.

I ran my hand over the rumpled bedclothes, finding nothing more than empty cloth, the residual warmth mine. Despite swallowing, the lump of shock at the back of my throat remained. I opened my mouth to ask her more—something—but the words flitted in and out too fast for me to string together.

"So no matter what," Esi said, her tone grave and serious, "don't trust him. You hear me?" she continued, but her voice grew softer, farther away.

I nodded, speechless. Leaning forward, I strained to hear more, anything else she might tell me. But the sounds of the jungle declared morning's arrival, and dawn light filtered into the darkness through the cracks in the wood. Her voice was gone—I knew it—and then suddenly . . .

"Don't trust—"

"Taja?" Svîk called from outside, his deep voice drowning out Esi's whisper.

Nausea rolled through me as my heart fluttered, panicked. "Wh-who?" I stammered, turning right and then left. "Who? Esi?"

Svîk rapped on the metal door and added, "Are you awake yet? The bell rang almost an hour ago—"

"Esi?" I whispered. "Are you here?"

"Taja?" Svîk called again. "Are you . . . Are you talking to someone in there?"

"What? No," I said, raising my voice. "Just give me a second."

I waited, focused on the silence until Svîk knocked again. Aching despair wrapped its arms around me, and my shoulders fell.

"I'm coming," I snapped and then shook my head. I wanted so much for Esi's visit to be real, but doubt nagged at me. Was I going insane, or was this truly my magîk? I scanned the space, the familiar shapes still obscured by darkness. But no Esi-shapes. No movement either. *Esi wasn't here in our room.* I grabbed a tunic on my way to the door and pulled the garment over my head.

Tugging the metal barrier open, I the gray predawn light filtered in, illuminating the space and confirming the delusion of my wishful thinking.

Dreams weren't reality, no matter what I wanted. There was no one here, not even Esi's ghost or spirit or soul. I was dreaming or hallucinating or something. But Esi wasn't here.

"You all right?" Svîk asked. "It sounded like you were talking to someone."

I shook my head. "No, just myself, I guess. I thought . . . I thought I heard Esi, but that's impossible, right?"

His gaze jumped from over my shoulder to me, and he frowned. "You heard Esi? Talking to you?" He scanned the room, and his furrow deepened. "Is she hiding?" He faced me and added, "Is she here?"

He looked down at me, his gaze intense, and my heart flipped as I realized just how close he was to me—like kissing close. My mouth dried, and I had a brief yearning to close the distance and let him comfort me.

Shaking my head to clear the thoughts, I stepped away and said, "No. I . . . I must've been dreaming." I thought of Ruin, of the time I thought he was a man, and rolled my eyes at myself. "Never mind," I said, stepping into the clearing. "Sorry I overslept. Will you get the door?"

His expression melted into a pitying smile, and he turned and slid the door closed before joining me on the path. "It's okay that you slept in; I'm sure you needed it. And even though you missed breakfast, you didn't miss anything. They took all that burned rice and added milk and sugar to it, so it was burned rice pudding."

"Gross," I said, frowning. My attention snagged on a rough scratch on his neck. "What happened to you? Did you cut yourself? And where's your necklace?"

"What?" He pressed his hand to his chest, where the necklace usually rested, and grimaced. "It must be by my bed," he said. "Or maybe it's an omen to move on and let go of the past."

"You always wear it," I said, seeing through his feigned flippancy and the anxiety beneath. "Should we go look for it? Do you remember when you last saw it?" Now that we were talking about it, I couldn't remember if he'd had it on last night or not.

"I'm sure it's in my hut."

"Well, that scratch is pretty bad," I said and then had a flash of insight. "You didn't have a fight on account of me, did you?"

He snorted. "I'd like to pretend the scratch was from you, but we both know that isn't the case." He rolled his eyes, and then his frown turned into a

grin. “On second thought, maybe we should go back to my place.”

Heat flushed through me, and I shook my head. “Never mind. You can find your own necklace.” I marched toward the perimeter road. “I need to find some breakfast.”

“Hold up,” Svîk said. “Dostane took pity on you.” He held out a piece of banana leaf. “She made a bit of sweet bread last night and saved you a slice.”

I opened the package and found a small loaf of dark-brown bread studded with bits of fruit and nuts. “I’m pretty sure she’s not supposed to do that.”

“Let this one go, Taja,” he said with a chuckle. “Otherwise, you’re going to disappear.”

I nibbled on the meager meal as I followed Svîk, but my mind wandered back to my dream of Esi and her warning. If Esi were to come to me, who would she say not to trust?

My gaze slid to Svîk. Maybe him . . . but most definitely Rull.

Head of the council—also known as Master Manipulator and Head Liar of Pûleêr. I hated him so much; he made me sick.

So much . . . I almost didn’t want to eat Dostane’s bread.



“ARE you going to stay at Esi’s?” Svîk asked as we walked to where we’d been assigned.

I’d not only missed breakfast but the assignments as well. The units were arriving on the perimeter road. Some of the magî jumped into clearing the growth without preamble, and others laughed and joked before getting to work. We passed one unit, then another, and another. A few grumbled as we passed, but most ignored us. Those who did acknowledge us directed their greeting to Svîk, and their wary expressions were easy to read.

“I was planning on it,” I said. “If she comes back, it would suck to let the jungle take her house. Why?”

He didn’t reply for several seconds, and the rest of the jungle sounds swelled, the chirping birds, howling of monkeys, and squelching of our feet in the mud, but none of them dispelled the tension.

“Just spit it out,” I said. “I’d much rather you tell me, especially if you know something.”

“I don’t know anything,” he rushed to say. “But it seems that everyone

has assumed she's gone, not coming back. Her and the others."

A spark of rage flared in my chest, but the emotion bubbling up in the back of my throat and burning my eyes felt nothing like anger. I shook my head, but the weight of truth rang in his words. "But they don't know," I protested. "Not really, right?"

With my vision blurred, his expression was lost to me. I stopped walking and swallowed the rising lump of emotion. Sucking in a breath, I scrubbed away the moisture so I could see.

And immediately wished I hadn't as I stared at the truth.

Lies—the spoken kind—could be passed as fact if the speaker had enough conviction or motivation. But pity etched in the expression of a friend was louder and more compelling than any words.

Fresh tears welled in my eyes, and my chest constricted. Shaking my head, I mentally searched for some plausible way to deny what he was telling me, but I knew. Grief tugged my chin to my chest, and emotion spilled down my cheeks, dripping into the mud below.

"I'm sorry," Svîk said. And then I felt his presence a fraction of a second before he wrapped his arms around me. "Shh," he murmured, patting his hand awkwardly on my back.

His compassion only made me cry harder, and the previously silent tears turned to weeping.

"You don't know," I said, choking on the denial. "You couldn't know that."

He pulled me closer, and the warmth of his body seeped through my clothes, forcing the chains of despair to loosen their hold although they refused to release me.

"You're right," he said, talking into my hair. "I don't know, but—"

But? There was no but.

I cried for a few minutes before gritting my teeth and shoving the grief into a corner of my mind to deal with later. Later . . . if Esi really was dead. I shuddered and then straightened. "I'm fine," I lied. "I'll be fine."

But I'd lost Ruin, and now Esi. Esi, who was going to take me to Terit . . . when I convinced her. Esi, the only hope I had for answers.

"Did you know her that well?" Svîk asked.

"It wasn't that." How well could we really know each other? "It was that she knew me the longest. And when you don't know who you are, and with no one else . . . She was the closest thing to family."

But the words rang false in my own ears because while she did know me longest, I'd already said she didn't know me best. And she looked at me a little like Svîk was looking at me now: like I was crazy.

"If you want to stay in her house, I'll help you clear the plants after we finish our work today. That's a lot of growth to clear by yourself, and you're already behind."

I pulled away so I could see his face. The kindness of his offer was thoughtful, but the sincerity in his expression, his soft smile and bright eyes, warmed my heart.

"Thank you," I said, sniffing back the rest of my tears. "I'd appreciate that."

He winked at me and tilted his head toward the perimeter road where the units were working. "Then let's go plow through our assignment with the lazy asses we're stuck with today. I bet I can clear more than half the space before most of the magî in our group even put their hands in the mud."

"Probably not half." I laughed because even though his assertion was an exaggeration, there was an element of truth behind it.

Nodding, his expression grew serious, like he was acknowledging defeat. "You're always so literal. Fine then, fifty-one percent, maybe even fifty-two."

I laughed again, and he grinned.

"Who are we working with today?" I asked as we started up the road.

We rounded the corner, the small gap between sections disappearing with the bend.

Svîk pointed and bounced his finger forward three times. "Up there with my second least favorite magî in all of Pûleêr."

He'd been here less than a week . . .

"You already have favorites?"

He snorted. "It doesn't take long to pick the best and worst of a lot, Taja."

I glanced at him to find his eyebrows raised, his gaze pinning me. My mouth went dry with the intensity of his attention. Afraid to hear him say something I wasn't ready to hear, I limited my next question. "Who's the worst?"

Svîk smirked. "Fine," he said. "We'll play by your rules for now. My second least favorite is Velt. He's so stuffed with self-importance I want to drown him in the Cem."

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Your solution to not liking someone is to drown

them?”

He shrugged. “It solves the problem.” The joke wasn’t really funny, and he must’ve realized it as soon as it was out of his mouth because he waved his hand in surrender and said, “I’m sorry. That was tasteless.”

I shrugged off the comment. “I don’t even know him.”

We continued walking in silence, but after a few more paces, I blurted, “Who’s your least favorite?”

Svîk stopped walking. His glance slid to the unit working beside us, and he shook his head. “I’ll tell you later. When it’s just us.”

We arrived at the space we'd been assigned, and I frowned when I saw that only a few of the magî were working—as in five. The other dozen stood with wide-eyed expressions of puzzlement, staring at the growth they were supposed to be clearing or talking amongst themselves. The most surprising thing was it wasn't the female magî doing nothing—more than half of them were working. I turned my head to verify my assessment. Indeed, the five magî working were all young women. The anger I'd felt a few days ago sparked anew, but before I could say anything, Svîk spoke.

“You fetid asses waiting for a personal invitation to get to work?” He growled as he pushed into the group of young men, and Svîk squared off with one, glaring down at the male magî. “If you don't get moving now, I'll make you. And I promise you will hate every single second of it.”

Whoa.

The group broke and flowed to the edge of the undercanopy where they began to remove the new growth encroaching on the perimeter road. Svîk said nothing more as he dove in, too.

I stepped away from the men and leaned over a fern, doing my best not to disturb the spores which would spread more of the annoying plants in odd areas. Ferns were the worst. I worked side-by-side with the women, but not one of them spoke to me. I tried not to care. I didn't care what they thought, and I didn't need them. I didn't need anyone, but need and want weren't the same, and after what felt like hours of silence, I glanced at Svîk.

Apparently, he was taking my statement that he couldn't clear more than half the area as a challenge because his back glistened with sweat as he

worked at a frenzied pace. He crouched, wrapping his hands around the trunk of a small papaya tree—only a dozen feet in height—and pulled. The ground squelched in protest as it released the tree, and Svîk heaved it back into the lush jungle.

“Fetid rot,” the young female said next to me. She had the same intonation as Esi, the exclamation sounding like one word. “He could probably tear a magî in half.”

There was no probably about it.

Svîk straightened, glanced my way, and grinned. “Fifty-one.”

I laughed.

By the end of the assignment, I had to acknowledge his accomplishment. The young male magî, spurred by Svîk’s taunting and grueling pace, pitched in and worked harder than I’d ever seen almost anyone in Pûleêr work. Even the female magî increased their pace. Mud and muck flew, and sweat soaked my tunic by the time someone called stop.

“We’re done,” one of the young men said, grinning. He was splattered with the dark, sticky earth, and he pointed at the orange bromeliads.

Several magî laughed, and the chortle of the male and female voices filled the air around us with a sense of joy.

“So now what?” one young magî asked, rubbing his hands together to clear off the dirt. His nose was wrinkled with distaste, and he held out his arms, far away from his impossibly clean sulu. He had only a small spattering of dried dirt on the right side of his chest, the side near another magî who was covered with mud. “Are we done for the day?”

Scanning the unit, I noticed that all of us were similarly filthy, all except the one magî speaking—the one Svîk had threatened.

“We’re done,” the magî next to me said.

She grinned like she’d won a prize, and I couldn’t help but smile too. Deciding it was better to keep my mouth shut was a conscious decision. As much as I wanted to say something to the young male magî, I didn’t believe it would do anything.

Svîk and I didn’t join our unit as they went to the Cem, even though a dip in the river sounded nice.

“Better that we get your area cleared, or you might get swallowed up by the jungle,” Svîk said.

We walked back to Esi’s home, scooping out the flesh of a young coconut and eating it. After working so hard, I felt a little weak-kneed. Svîk stopped

at a mango tree and shook a couple of fruit loose.

“Here,” he said, holding one out.

I looked at the orange fruit and shook my head. “I don’t like them when they’re that sweet. They turn rotten too fast once they get ripe, and I get a horrible taste in my mouth just thinking about it.”

He bit into the mango and pulled the skin back with his teeth. The glistening orange fruit was unblemished, and he took a large bite. The juice ran down his chin and dripped onto his chest. His very muscular and defined chest.

I jerked my attention back to his face, confused by my sudden interest in him. I didn’t want him—not that way. I bit my lower lip, but instead of orienting me to reality, memories of the dream I’d had of Ruin as a male magî surfaced, and something I really didn’t want to acknowledge flipped inside my abdomen. But there was no way Svîk could be Ruin, regardless of the fact that the latter’s departure coincided with the former’s arrival.

“Are you sure you don’t want one?” my friend asked, the side of his mouth pulling upward in a half-smile. He held out another mango. “They’re really good.”

I shook my head, refusing the fruit as well as the odd thoughts. “If you see one that’s still green—just barely soft—pick that one for me.”

“Really? All right.” He took a huge bite, almost half of the mango, and his cheeks puffed out from his gluttony.

I needed to stop staring. Glancing around, I spotted an acai palm with a panicle loaded with dark-purple fruit. I picked at the berries, tossing several in my mouth at once. I bit into the fruits, and they were so tart my lips puckered. As soon as I crushed the seed between my teeth, a rank bitterness overpowered the taste of the fruit, and I shuddered before spitting everything out, most of the pulp still mixed in with the seeds.

Svîk guffawed which made him choke on the mango still in his mouth. He doubled over, coughing, laughing—hopefully dying.

But as soon as the thought of Svîk being dead crossed my mind, a deep sense of loss wrenched through my chest and hollowed it out. I crossed the distance between us and pounded on his back.

He twisted to the side, continuing to hack and cough as tears of mirth leaked from the corners of his eyes. Grabbing my shoulder, he gasped for breath and shook his head.

“I’m okay. It’s just . . . your face,” he said between breaths. He

straightened and cleared his throat, his lips twitching as he schooled his features. “Do you like acai berries?”

The residual taste on my tongue was still tart, and a totally different flavor than a green mango, but just as delicious. “It wasn’t the fruit,” I said with a huff. “I didn’t . . . remember the seeds being so big.”

“Really?” He drew back with a frown.

And just like that, the humor evaporated. He studied me with an intensity that made me want to hide—or run away. I had no idea what he’d heard, and the two of us had never discussed what had happened to me or how I’d come to Pûleêr. I assumed he knew everything, that *everyone* knew and judged me for it.

“I’ll answer your questions if you answer mine.” He waved his hand between us, continuing his explanation like I was daft. “Back and forth.”

I shrugged, reticent. While part of me wanted to believe I could trust him, I wasn’t sure. Not at all.

“Want me to go first?” he asked. “Or take turns?”

“Take turns.” I repeated his words with sudden clarity; I could ask him about Yândarî, the kümdâr, and the kirinî. I could ask him about the Serîk and if magî could have the power to shift.

I blinked, my attention drawn to Svîk’s face—his intent, *intense* expression, not because I didn’t understand but because I did. I was standing on the edge of a precipice, and I needed to either leap or back away. Far away. But with Esi gone, I had nowhere to go, or rather no one else I could go with. But could I trust Svîk?

“And you can always just say pass if it’s something you don’t want to talk about,” he added. He looked up at the canopy above and sighed. “I’d like for us to be friends.” Dropping his gaze to meet mine, he added, “Please?”

Friends? Or did he want more? Was I reading him wrong? “I can pass on anything?”

He nodded, and I leapt.

“Why did you leave?” I asked. “I thought the kûmdâr treated his Serîk well.”

Svîk crinkled his nose and started walking again. “I don’t know why you would think that. Have you ever met him?”

“No.”

He cocked his head but didn’t push any further than that. “Well, consider that a mercy. Zerôn is *obsessively* driven, and not too particular about how he achieves his goals.”

“Is that why you left?” I pressed.

Pursing his lips, he was silent for several seconds before answering. “To be fair, an opportunity presented itself, and it was too good to pass up. At least that’s what I thought at the time.”

“You don’t feel the same way now?”

I frowned at the path leading back to Esi's home. The fauna now encroached on either side. The area around the hovel would be just as bad, and my shoulders slumped.

"I'm not sure. Yet. I think it's too early to say." He surveyed the path and laughed. "Come on, we'll get it done in an hour or two—at most."

We both dove in, but our pace was slower as we continued our conversation.

"So what happened? What was your opportunity?"

"There was an attack on Zerôn—"

"A coup?" I asked, straightening to look at him.

Svîk grunted as he pulled out a four-foot palm tree. "I wouldn't call it a coup. At least, it didn't seem like that was the goal." He straightened and met my gaze with a shrug. "But I wasn't in the midst of the action."

"Oh," I said with a pang of disappointment. "Do you know why the kûmdâr's having multiple kirinîs?"

Svîk chuckled and shook his head. "That's a whole new set of questions, and it's my turn."

My cheeks heated, and I rushed to say, "Sorry. Go ahead."

"Where did Esi find you? She did find you, right?"

The pang of disappointment blossomed, spreading through my chest and carving out a deep ache of loss. "Yes. She found me on the Little Rê—between Terit and Pûleêr. I was living in a hovel there."

"In a hovel? Alone? Or with your family?"

I shrugged, debating on how to tell him. But I couldn't think of any other way to say the truth besides blurting it out. "I can't remember."

"Really?" he asked, his eyes wide. "You can't remember who was living with you?"

"I can't remember anything before a certain day. Absolutely nothing, except stuff about Qralî, and all of that is old news—like from years ago."

"Fetid rot," he said with a heavy exhale. "That's terrible. I mean, I heard things." He waved his hand back toward Pûleêr. "Just like I'm sure you have about me. But I didn't believe them."

Guilt nagged at me because I hadn't been so fair. I pushed the emotion away and went back to my questions. "Esi said the kûmdâr is doing something to kill the magî. Is that true?"

He blanched. "I don't know where she got her information—"

"Terit. She has a cousin in Terit. She was heading back to Pûleêr from

there when she found me.”

Shaking his head, he said, “She was one gutsy girl if she would walk all the way from here to Terit. The Serîk who patrol the Little Rê are brutal.”

She’d said as much. “Is it true? Is he killing his own people?”

Svîk swallowed, and his skin turned ashy as he nodded. “It’s true. He’s been experimenting.”

“How? And what is he trying to do?”

“He’s trying to change the nature of our kind,” he replied, and his eyes reflected significant terror—enough to emphasize his next words. “But the process is brutal.”

But how would that even be possible? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “Sounds awful.”

He rolled his shoulders as though shrugging off the weight of what he’d seen. “I hope you never have to see it. Please, can we talk about something else—anything else?”

I chewed on my lower lip. I couldn’t see any other way to get answers, but maybe Svîk would know. “Is there a magî who can unblock my memory?” I asked. “Is there someone in Yândarî, or maybe one of the other posts, who can help me get my memory back?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered and turned back to the foliage.

He was silent then, but above us in the canopy, a family of tamarin chattered and hollered at one another. With a grunt, Svîk picked up the pace on his labor. The afternoon light waned, and rain fell, squeezing through the canopy above and chasing away the tamarin. We finished the path and plowed into the growth around Esi’s one-room structure, pushing the jungle back foot by foot, racing against the—

The bell clanged, calling us to supper. Way more than two hours.

“Come on,” Svîk said, straightening. He was splattered with mud, and it had smeared on his face where he’d wiped away the sweat.

But I shook my head. The hopelessness of my situation had stolen my appetite, and I just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep. “You go ahead. I’m too tired to eat.”

He stared at me, his expression hardening.

Rot. He was going to try and convince me, so I added, “And I have a little of that bread left over.” I pulled it out to show him. “See, I’m all good. I’ll take a bath, eat another coconut, and go to sleep.”

“All right,” he said with a nod. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Yep,” I said, giving him a thumbs up. “Thanks for all your help.”

He walked several paces then turned toward me and said, “The only magî I know who can help with memories is Zîvrünê, the kûmdâr’s brother. But he disappeared months ago, and I’m not sure if he’s ever been found.”

“Well, that’s something.” Useful? Maybe—possibly.

“I’m not disclosing anything secret or special. Everyone in Yândarî knows what Zîvrünê’s power is—or was, rather. And there might be other magî with similar power, but his would be the most powerful—as a zeta.”

I nodded my acknowledgement and then waited for Svîk to leave. I’d spent the day distracted, intentionally avoiding any thoughts of the morning and my hallucination of Esi. But with exhaustion taking over, I needed time to decompress, to think and process. After Svîk left, I trudged to the Cemik, wanting to wash away the entire day, or three, before bed. For having lost my memory and hating that I couldn’t remember, I sure wanted the pain of Esi’s disappearance—death—to be gone.

As I splashed in the water, it was easy to lie to myself that the moisture on my face was just from the river. But the ache in my chest didn’t go away.

I released a breath, a slow languished exhale, and kicked my feet, propelling myself through the water. My tunic billowed around me, brushing against my thighs with the movement. I opened my eyes and stared up at the canopy, the vines connecting the trees in ladders of looped ropes that the monkeys used for travel. The water muted the sounds of the jungle, the chirps, trills, and calls, and I enjoyed the moment of peace as I floated.

I thought of Esi, wishing there was some way to bring her back. I swam until my fingers and toes wrinkled from exposure to the water, and then I climbed out on the rocky shore and waited until my tunic was nearly dry. Shaking my head, I stood and marched to the top of the trail as if I could will her to appear. The idea of returning to the hovel, her home, brought a fresh swell of emotion. I ached with the loss of my friend and, with a huff, returned to the water. Wading in to my ankles, my thoughts drifted from Esi to Ruin, the only other living thing I’d really cared about—or that cared about me. Had the dream of him as a magî just been a desperate hallucination? Probably. But the pang of longing for him ran deeper than even the loss of my friend.

I was all kinds of backward.

“Stupid cat,” I muttered, stomping out of the clear pool. Glancing up, I saw the afternoon had faded into twilight as I started up the hill toward the

perimeter road—and home.

I approached three women walking together, their heads inclined as they whispered to each other. One looked up, her gaze colliding with mine, and she pulled the others to a stop with her gasp.

“Oh my soul,” one of the women exclaimed, blanching.

“Where have you been?” another one asked, a portly female who I think was named Eria.

Shrugging, I said, “Down at the Cemik pool.”

“Wh-what?” Eria sputtered, looking at the female magî on her right who shook her head.

The four of us stood on the wide path, but the division was clear. I remained on my side while the three of them stared me down. I’d often wondered why no one else ever came here to bathe, but I was afraid to ask and then find I’d suddenly have to compete for resources. It was like my quiet slice of joy.

“No one goes to the Cemik anymore. Not since Petra—Esi’s mother—drowned there.”

“Drowned?” one of the other magî said, shaking her head. “She didn’t drown there.”

I narrowed my gaze. “What are you talking about?”

Eria’s eyes were as wide as a pomelo. “No one knows for sure.”

“Don’t be daft, Eria. Right now might be safe because of the time of the year, but if that female conda gets hungry after she drops her young.” She *tsked* at Eria and then turned her frown on me. “You won’t even know until it’s too late. She’s at least thirty feet long.”

My stomach turned, and suddenly I knew why there were no caiman or other large predators there. If the female conda was thirty feet long, it could eat an adult male—or female. “How long ago?”

“Three months ago,” a dark-haired female said. She shot a glare at Eria and added, “Just before Esi went to Terit. Worse than the bûyî—unless Petra drowned before the conda ate her.”

The weight of what they were saying hit me like a caiman’s tail. Bile burned the back of my throat. “Why would Esi take me there? Why would *she* even go there?” I shook my head, knowing the answer before anyone said it. “That’s not bravery.”

Eria blanched and stuttered, but the dark-haired magî spoke. “Everyone has to face their demons somehow. Didn’t she ever tell you?”

“No,” I gasped, shaking my head. That was an extreme way of facing death—more like playing chicken with it—and cruel to include me without telling me the risk. I took a deep breath, decided I was done at the Cemik, and then said, “I can’t believe she never told me.”

The magî had to be in their early twenties. Older than me and Esi, but not by a lot. One of them twitched and wouldn’t meet my gaze, and Eria coughed and coughed. Only the dark-haired female continued to stare at me.

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “You should be careful who you trust.”

“I will,” I replied, dread slithering down my spine. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Of course. I—we—didn’t know, or one of us would have told you sooner.” She looked at her companions who both nodded in agreement. She stepped toward me, lowering her voice as she continued. “I’m sorry. I know you thought she was your friend, but that’s . . . wrong.”

I stared at her, the female with dark hair and a dirty green tunic, wishing there was some way I’d misunderstood her words because . . . There was no way. She was wrong. Esi . . . I swallowed a gulp of air and panicked denial. In a hoarse voice filled with shock, I choked out, “Thanks.”

The next morning at breakfast, I asked Dostane if the story of Esi’s mother was true. I didn’t want to call anyone a liar, but I could hardly reconcile that Esi, my friend, would put me in the path of danger.

“We do odd things, most especially when it comes to protecting our loved ones or dealing with their loss,” Dostane replied. “I would go to any lengths to protect Doli, and I’m hardly unique.” She pursed her lips and pointed across the common area.

I pivoted to follow the trajectory and saw Svîk talking to Eria and the dark-haired female magî, his features twisted with anger.

“He has a strong attachment to you. I might even call it love or possibly infatuation,” she said. “Odd, considering how little time he’s been here.”

I blushed and turned away from Svîk, facing Dostane, but couldn’t bring my gaze up to meet hers. “He’s certainly been persistent,” I agreed. But it wasn’t fair to tear him down . . . “And he’s the only one to even try to be my friend since Esi left.”

As soon as the words were out, I wanted to take them back. Instead, I fumbled and added, “And you.”

Dostane laughed, but it sounded forced. “I understand. He’s closer to your age than I am, and that does matter right now. Just be careful you don’t jump into anything unless your head and your heart are in agreement.”

I smiled, filled with appreciation for her wisdom as well as caring enough to share. “Thank you.”

“Fetid rot,” Svîk said, stepping to my side. “I just heard what happened last night—”

Waving at Dostane, I pulled Svîk through the line with me. “It doesn’t matter now. I’m fine, and there’s nothing to do at this point. I’m not going there anymore.”

He sucked in a deep breath, the air hissing between his teeth. After exhaling, he pushed his lips into a smile, but his eyes flashed with suppressed rage. “I would say not. I know you think she was your friend, Taja, but friends don’t *do* that kind of thing.”

There was no way for me to reconcile it in my head, and Esi wasn’t here to ask. All I could do was agree. “I know. Why were you yelling at Eria? She and her friends were the ones to tell me.”

“And I can’t believe they did. Right as you were coming out of the water? I think they were trying to make it sound like they were doing you a favor, but I can’t even imagine how you slept last night.”

Not well at all. “I slept fine.”

“Rot. I don’t believe you for a minute,” he said. He took my tray and set it on the table before pulling me into a hug. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

His intensity and compassion nearly overwhelmed me, and I pulled away so I could maintain my composure. “Me too.”

As we walked toward the tables, we passed dozens of magî, and I couldn’t help but notice a significant percentage of the females greeted Svîk warmly and then glared at me. *Great.*

I slid into my seat and shoved a bite of fried plantain into my mouth, patting the bench next to me with my other hand. Svîk sat, but he continued to flex and stretch his hands as though trying to contain the emotion within.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Why are you upset?”

He stilled, and several moments passed before he spoke. “I’ve been running, hiding, for the last two months, trying to find my way to Pûleêr, hoping to start anew. Then I get here . . .” He pursed his lips and then asked, “What if—”

The clang of metal interrupted our conversation, demanding our attention. Rull climbed up on the table and called out our work units. When he announced mine, I grimaced. The only name I recognized in my group was Nebe, and the girl was insufferable. Not that it would matter much. I’d just position myself on the other side of the group, but still.

“Why are you frowning?” Svîk asked as we stepped away. “Were you hoping for a day off?”

Rull had explained that the council had changed the rotations so everyone

would get an equal balance of work and personal time, which for me would mean separate time to keep my home free from the jungle.

“No,” I said. A day off would be far worse than listening to Nebe. With nothing to do, I’d likely get lost in my own thoughts—none of them good. “But it would’ve been nice to have you around to talk to.”

I saw two young women eyeing him as they walked past, and I curled my lip, irritated by their obvious ogling. They turned their attention to me and glared. It probably didn’t matter which group I was in; I’d have to listen to a bunch of female magî talk *about* him. My gaze slid to the two young women, both still staring at Svîk, only now from a bit more distance. “But I reckon if you were with me, I’d have to listen to them fawning over you all day, which would suck, too.”

His eyes widened, and then he held up a finger. “Don’t you dare leave without me.”

“Where are you going?” I called as he wove through the straggling crowd. I watched him make his way back to Rull.

The two men started talking, and I sighed. Rull wouldn’t go back on the edicts—especially not now. The council had made strides in being transparent about their decisions as well as being fair, and to change it now could undo a lot of that—most definitely for an outsider. I grabbed several plates from the nearest table and then returned them to the kitchen where a dozen magî were washing.

“All good,” Svîk said, suddenly at my side. “We’re going to—Rot. Wherever you were assigned. Was it North?”

“West,” I said, stunned. “Over by my hovel.”

He nodded. “Okay. We’re going there. Rull is putting me with you.”

Well, that was unexpected. I smiled while internally shoving away the nagging guilt for getting special treatment. It wasn’t for me anyway; it was for Svîk.

“Have you lost very many people since you’ve been here, or just Esi?” he asked, breaking through the hum of jungle life.

“Esi was the only one I was close to,” I admitted, my shock at her behavior still making me question our friendship. “What about you? Have you ever lost someone to the bûyî?”

“No.” He sighed and then said, “The bûyî hasn’t reached Yândarî, so the magî residing in the capital and the surrounding innerposts haven’t really been affected by it.”

I turned my head to look at him, frowning at the injustice in his words. Digging my fingers into my palms, I opened my mouth to tell him so, but he beat me to it.

“It’s not fair, I know,” he said somberly, meeting my gaze. His expression was drawn, and he pursed his lips before adding, “But that doesn’t mean I haven’t experienced loss. It’s practically inevitable in the world we live in today.”

We continued walking the path to the perimeter road, and my thoughts were consumed with anger for the magî in the capital—mostly the kûmdâr. “Do they not know how bad it is?” I asked. “Or do they not care?”

“It probably depends on who you’re asking.” He huffed before volleying another question my way. “If you could have anything in Qralî, what would you want?”

“I don’t even know where to start right now,” I hedged although there was plenty of truth in the statement. “I might have a list. What about you?”

We arrived and divvied up the plot of land. Svîk and I dove in, working to steal back our space from the jungle. Conversations sprouted up around us, but I knew he hadn’t forgotten my question.

When he finally glanced my way, I was stunned to see tears glistening in his eyes.

He spoke, his whisper breaking, “I wanted a mate, maybe ch-children someday. Is it wrong to want a family?”

My heart ached for him, and I shook my head. “Not wrong at all.”

He drew himself up, straightening his shoulders and setting his jaw defiantly. “Maybe I won’t get it in this life, but I’m not going to be miserable. Life wasn’t meant for just”—he waved his hands at the wall of jungle—“tearing out plants.”

The fierceness in his expression made my heart skip a beat and my mouth dry.

“What about you? Tell me the truth. Who are you, and what do you want, Taja?”

This was it. If I told him, there was no going back. And if I didn’t tell him now, I was fairly certain I never would. But he knew the inner workings of Yândaî. If I was ever going to go there, ever head that way to find out who I once was, it would be nice to have help. “I was attacked by a Serîk,” I blurted. “Almost two months ago.”

His eyes widened, and he paled.

“And what’s worse is I don’t know what he looks like—”

Svîk waved his hand and said, “Wait. How is that possible? How could you know it was a Serîk, but not know what he looks like?”

“I saw red leather pants—”

He frowned. “And then he covered your head?”

I barked a mirthless laugh. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t remember. I lost my memory—as in all of it. The first thing I remember is waking up in the middle of a fight with a male magî in leather pants. Esi said that meant he was a Serîk. But before that—” I held up my empty hands. “—I’ve got nothing.”

He studied me, his eyes narrowing as if there was something more to see. For all I knew, he could see truth, but with nothing to hide, I merely waited for his expression to relax, hoping that indicated he was done with his assessment.

“Esi found me on the Little Rê and brought me here, to Pûleêr,” I said, bending over to work on another plant. “I’m an outsider, too—just like you.”

Svîk snorted. “Fetid rot.”

“Someday, I want to remember what happened to me, who I am and how I ended up on the side of the road.”

I peeked at Svîk, and he raised his eyebrows.

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes. Why do you sound so surprised?” I threw the stalk into the jungle before straightening again. “Why wouldn’t I want to know?”

“I don’t know,” he said and shrugged. “What if it’s terrible?”

Esi had said something similar, but . . . “What if it’s not? Besides, not knowing makes me feel like the essence of me is missing.”

We continued to work at pushing back the wall of the undercanopy, its two feet of new growth. I eyed three young women staring at Svîk, but he must have had a seventh sense because he kept his attention firmly on me.

He bent, pulled a fistful of plants up, tossed them into the foliage, and then said, “But the way you have it now . . . it’s like a fresh start. You can make of it whatever you want.”

“Isn’t that what you have?” I replied. Taking a deep breath, I started working on the section of growth in front of me. “No one here knows you—”

He shook his head. “But all of them have a preconceived notion of me, knowing I was once Serîk. You don’t have any of that.”

True. But it didn’t seem to be hurting him any.

I sucked in a deep breath, the rich smell of dirt, mulch, and plants filling me. I thought of the pain of losing Esi and the anger of her betrayal. I thought of the hurt of Ruin leaving, but the peace he'd given me was worth the pain now. Even if I had to learn from my memories, I wanted the knowledge of the experiences I'd had. "Even if it was bad, I would want to know."

Svîk chuckled and straightened, wiping his hand over his face and leaving a streak of mud. "You say that now, and you even believe it, but I would give almost anything to forget things I've seen at the hand of the kümdâr. Maybe your life was good before now, maybe not, but take this as a gift and move on. There are two things I know . . ."

I waited, and he cleared his throat and waved at the space we'd cleared.

"First, we're done here." He grinned. "And second, you can never go backward. It's impossible. Life only moves in one direction."

"Har-har," I replied, smacking his arm. "I wasn't talking about moving back. I just want to know the past so I can make the best decisions."

"The only way to do that," he said as we walked toward the river to wash off the mud and sweat of the day, "is if you could see it all—everything, from the very beginning when your soul left Kânkarâ. And that will never happen."

Maybe he was right . . . but maybe not.

I mulled over my situation all night, but no matter how I examined the information, I continued to come back to the same question.

Why am I staying here, in Pûleêr?

And if my only hope for answers was to find Zîvrünê, or someone with that kind of magîk, then I should go to Yândarî and find him. I faced the proposition, stared it down for hours in the darkness, trying to come up with something other than the impossible task of finding a missing prince.

Eventually, the morning light filtered in through the crack I'd left when I tugged the door closed, but the only illumination it brought was what I'd already concluded. I huffed and climbed out of bed determined. Maybe finding Zîvrünê would be a challenge. But Svîk made the *unattainable* a little more likely.

I marched onto the perimeter road, toward the path to the common area, and stopped when I heard a male's voice floating out from between the trees. Curiosity pushed me closer to the jungle, down a fresh path until I reached a small clearing in the mangrove trees near a stream. The magî's voice was familiar, and when I peeked from behind several lush plants, I recognized

Svîk.

My first thought was I'd caught him—but what was he doing?

“She’s different,” he murmured, and then he released a sigh. “She’s smart and beautiful . . . and she really does care.”

I peeked through the leaves and studied him. His face was alight with the morning sunlight, and he stared up, his expression fierce with determination.

He shook his head, and then he said, “I’m not going to let go. I don’t know what happened, but I’m moving on.”

Svîk closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked so much like when he’d arrived and yet also a lot like someone from Pûleêr. He muttered something under his breath, and I rested my hand on the ground and leaned forward to try and catch what he was saying. The branch under my hand snapped, and he whipped his head toward where I was hiding.

Rot.

In a fluid movement, Svîk turned, rotating slowly as he studied the surrounding jungle. I inched back, crawling on my hands and knees to avoid detection.

Suddenly, just like a cat, Svîk leapt out from between the trees and landed in front of me in a crouch. Our gazes connected, and his eyes brightened as a slow smile spread over his features, but his handsome face was marred by spots of blood. He straightened, his movements graceful, and the power radiating from him charged the air.

“Are you spying on me?” he asked with a laugh. “It’s dangerous to eavesdrop; you never know what you might hear.”

He extended his hand to help me up, and I frowned, pointing at his palm. Bright crimson slicked from his wrist to his fingertips, which explained the gruesome spots where he’d pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What happened to you?” I asked, scrambling to my feet.

“What? Ugh,” he said. Grimacing, he wiped the blood on his sulu, and then we both peered at a deep gash at his wrist.

“Gross,” I muttered. “Don’t wipe it on your clothes.” I grabbed a bit of the spongy moss from the ground—wet from the recent rain—rolled it in my palms and then reached for him.

“It’s fine,” he protested, leaning away.

Shaking my head, I snatched his hand. “You’re bleeding, which means you’re not fine.” I blotted the wound, but the gash was shallow and had already stopped bleeding.

“See,” he said, grinning. “I am fine.”

He winked at me, making my stomach flutter, and I threw the spongy mass at him.

It hit him in the face—right on the lips—completely missing the blood on his nose. I barked a short laugh, and at the same time, he muttered something that sounded like *ner-f*.

“What?” I asked.

Leaning over, he pulled up a huge hunk of the moss. Tearing off a piece, he smirked. “I said, ‘no fair.’ But I’m so okay with this game.”

I squealed and dodged bits of the spongy moss as I ran back to the perimeter road.

Both of us were laughing, and I reached up on my tiptoes and wiped the blood off of his face.

He stilled with my touch, his eyes growing brighter, and then he slowly rested his hand on my hip.

Realizing our proximity, my heart flipped, and embarrassment spread from my scalp to my toes. The air around us charged, and I swallowed and stepped back. In a breathy whisper, I said, “I was just going to breakfast, but I heard talking. I promise I wasn’t spying.”

He laughed again and ducked to meet my gaze. Raising his eyebrows, he nodded. “I know.” He draped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into a side hug. “Let’s go have breakfast.”

The heat from his skin seeped into me and for some reason made me nervous. Part of me wanted to hug him back, maybe even more, but part of me . . . My stomach flipped again, and I elbowed him in the ribs before ducking out of his embrace. “Who were you talking to?”

He shrugged. “No one. Just thinking. Remember how we talked about your plans? Well, I had plans when I left Yândarî, but I’ve decided I’m making new ones.”

We arrived at the common center, the smell of burned plantains permeating the air.

“Someone should get kicked out of the kitchen,” he grumbled.

“Definitely,” I agreed, grateful for the break from his intensity.

Several magî entered the path, interrupting our talk. Svîk pulled me closer as a group of young women approached. Several gave me the stink-eye as they passed, and more than one glanced at where Svîk held my arm. Only after they’d gone did he let go.

When it was just the two of us, I put some distance between us, took a deep breath, and then blurted, “Would you ever go back? To Yândarî?”

He narrowed his eyes, and they flashed brighter again as he studied me. “My instinct is to tell you no, but I’m learning to not jump to conclusions.”

Another young female magî appeared and stepped between us, her back to me. In a throaty voice, she said, “Hi, Svîk.”

He raised his eyebrows as he drew away from her. Shaking his head, his attention flicked to me, and he stammered, “Uh, hi?”

I laughed, and she brushed past, muttering under her breath.

He closed the distance between us and said, “What’s wrong with these magî? I’m not sure I’d survive here without you. How about I say maybe, and we discuss it later? We could both use a few days to get our feet underneath us before we jump into anything.”

We grabbed plates and made our way through the line, making sure to avoid the plantains.

He was right, and I put my thoughts of departure on hold. I needed him, or at least I wanted him to come with me. And the emotional toll of Esi’s death and potential betrayal had me reeling.

Here, with Svîk in Pûleêr, I was safe.

And the rainy season wasn’t over—not yet.

The bell echoed through Pûleêr, the clang of metal calling each of us to the morning labor. I turned on my bedroll, grabbed the nearest pile of fabric, and pulled it over my head to muffle the grating sound. After my first inhale, full of stale sweat, I pushed the dirty garments off and sat up, chasing away the last threads of my dream of a waterfall-fed pool, so different from the Cemik but just as real in my mind. Thoughts of Ruin surfaced, and a pang of loneliness tugged at my heartstrings. I dismissed the feeling, shoved it away really. After so many months, the melanistic panthera *almost* seemed like a dream; to admit I missed him, with all the other issues, was ridiculous.

Darkness still clung to the interior of Esi’s hut—now my hut—and I blinked, just able to make out the shapes of the wooden crates I now used for furniture and storage. The thick, sticky air would make today’s labor even more challenging, and the sun was probably just starting to roll over the horizon, chasing away the gray of predawn’s filtered light. In a couple more hours, the heat would be sweltering.

“Hurry up, Taja,” Svîk called from outside my hovel, the sucking noise of his footsteps drawing nearer.

He sounded impatient this morning, and I wondered what—or more likely who—had caused his mood. After months in Pûleêr, with so much loss, I was glad Svîk was here with me. He’d been my rock for the last couple of weeks, and I’d been thinking—a lot. Maybe he was right. Maybe finding out who I was mattered less than what I chose to do moving forward, but part of me still wanted to know. It would take at least a month on foot to get to Yândarî, but if, after the rainy season ended, we went together . . . we’d be safer.

“Hurry up, or I’ll come in and get you,” he said.

“Har-har,” I said, even as I scrambled to pull a tunic over my head, not so sure he wouldn’t. The humidity made wearing even a tunic while sleeping inside impossible. Instead, I kept on only my thin unmentionables, and I wasn’t ready to have Svîk see me undressed.

While Svîk knew of my amnesia, the scars on my abdomen and chest felt so much more personal. The thick, ropey lashes on my belly had faded from angry red marks to silvery blemishes, and the irregularly shaped scar over my breastbone was the size of my fist—impossible to hide without a tunic.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me the only chance for goat cheese was if I hurried. In the last week, we’d lost all but two of our goats. Thankfully, Bizi was among the survivors, like me. Not that anyone in Pûleêr was starving, at least not for food. I slipped out the door, took care of my morning ablutions, and returned to the front of my home where Svîk stood waiting.

The dense foliage had crept closer overnight, leaving only a small space to stand inside the path, and I knew the inevitable was coming. I grunted and pulled up the small shoots, pushing back the undercanopy in hopes of another day—just until my scheduled day off.

“You know at some point, you’ll have to move closer to the center, so why not just move now?” Svîk asked with a smirk.

My intention of leaving clashed with the concept of staying. I needed more than Pûleêr could offer. My tongue and thoughts tangled, and all I managed to say was, “Not now.”

I straightened, brushed the sweaty strands of hair from my face, and grinned up at Svîk, my smile faltering when he winked in return. *Whoa*. Svîk was attractive, a blind bat could tell by sonar, but I was nervous about changing our relationship and all that would mean. Not that I didn’t *know*, but . . . just the thought of intimacy made me feel skittish.

Svîk’s smile widened, and he rolled his broad shoulders and then flexed his chest for good measure. “You know I’m gorgeous.”

I shook my head and mumbled, “Maybe.”

He grunted, and his smile flipped upside-down. Svîk wore a plain sulu wrapped around his narrow waist, and the once-orange fabric was faded and stained like all of our clothing in Pûleêr. He shuttered his eyes and reined in his emotions. Just like Svîk—only not usually with me.

“Rot. You’re being broody. Let’s try again. Good morning,” I said, forcing some cheeriness as I pulled my dark hair back into a messy knot.

“Lovely day today.”

But he knew me too well and wasn't playing along with my feigned mood. Wiping his hand on his already filthy sulu, he asked, “What's wrong? What happened this morning? Something's not right.”

Everything. “Nothing.” I shot back, giving him a cheeky grin I didn't feel. “I'm anticipating an entire day of highs, including pîderîne for breakfast, with green mango and pine nuts.”

I wanted to ask if he would come with me to Yandarî, and the question gnawed at me. I needed to talk with him, to talk him into going. My stomach tightened and churned with the thought.

Svîk laughed, a low rumble of humor tinged with darkness. “You'll have to get up a lot earlier if you want cheese now, Taja. With only two goats and almost eight hundred magî, the cheese is the first thing to go every morning.”

He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know, but I chafed at his pessimism and the feeling of self-reproach. “Just declaring my wishes,” I said. “What is it you want today?” I pointed at his dirty sulu. “A bath?”

“I'd like to get through the day . . . alive,” he said. “I want to outlast the bûyî. And a bath sounds nice—especially if it's with you.”

I blushed, but Svîk didn't seem to notice. He jerked his head toward the trail. The muddy path leading out from my hut had shrunk overnight, and I narrowed my eyes at him. Svîk usually pulled up plants on his way in. I stepped past him, and the sticky muck clung to my feet so bad that the next step made a wet sucking sound when I pulled free of the ground's hold.

“Is the growth this bad all the way in to the common area?” I asked, trying to find another subject—one that was safe. And the pace of growth *was* increasing, making it a *real* problem.

“No. It's better on the perimeter road, but it's getting worse,” Svîk said with a sigh, letting me off. He rolled his neck and then extended his hand, slowly uncurling his fingers. In a tone tinged with determination, he said, “Look what I found on my way over this morning.”

My gaze slid to his hand, and my mouth filled with saliva. I clenched my hands to my sides so I wouldn't snatch the fruit away. “Oh my soul, is that a *green* mango?”

The fruit was almost as big as his palm and barely ripe. Perfectly, deliciously sour. There was no way it was too sweet and definitely not rotten. My stomach echoed my excitement about his prize, for green mangoes were rare. “Sorry, it's yours,” I said, smiling sheepishly. “I have no control if my

gut wants to talk about your food.”

He chuckled again. This time, it held none of the weight he occasionally tried to conceal. I had no idea what burdens he carried from before, from when he'd served the kümdâr. He'd only spoken about it once, but the hints he'd dropped were enough for me to know he carried plenty. Even now, after being in Pûleêr for almost a month, he still didn't chum around with other magî, just me.

Which made it even more odd that everyone in Pûleêr not only knew Svîk, they'd also grown to respect him, at least enough to let him do whatever he wanted without complaint. The permissiveness usually spilled over to me, at least if it had to do with him—though we didn't take advantage of it . . . usually.

“You can have it, Taja,” Svîk said. “I actually had two, so don't feel bad.”

Two green mangoes? I narrowed my eyes, debating if I should take it or take a stand against his recklessness. *Pretty sure he went through the trouble for me . . .* If I had any concept of navigating through romantic relationships from before my amnesia, I'd lost *all* those skills, and I was left with a hefty amount of awkward. My hesitation made him frown, and I rushed to fill the silence.

“You know I want you—it. I want it.” I blushed redder than acai juice—as in practically purple—and blundered on. “You found two green mangoes at the same time? You're not going into the jungle are you?” I knew he was just as I knew he wouldn't admit it. “You better not let the bûyî get you.”

“No,” he said, his shoulders relaxing. “I promise I'm not.” When I stopped walking and just stared at him, Svîk sighed and added, “Don't tell anyone, but it's from a tree I planted. I got rid of it this morning—all the way down to the roots—so don't worry.”

“That's a lot of work for a couple of mangoes.” Brilliant, really, but totally prohibited, although probably safer than getting lost. An uneasy twinge tugged at my heart, but I pushed the feeling of trepidation away. “Be careful. If you get caught . . .”

I didn't bother finishing the sentence. We both knew what could happen if someone caught him intentionally planting new growth, though I doubt it would have applied to him. Me, on the other hand, I was certain Rull and the council would throw me and anyone else in Pûleêr out, just like they'd said at every community meal this week.

I shook away all my thoughts and bit into the mango. The tangy juice

filled my mouth, making me pucker. I threw the skin into the growth on either side of us as I devoured the fruit. “This is definitely going to be my high today.”

Svîk’s grunt floated back to me as I munched away. His moods the last couple of days were becoming as unpredictable as the shifting weather, but I didn’t know what to say without making our dynamic even more awkward. However, to continue saying nothing was just as bad. Finally, I took a deep breath and jumped.

“I want to leave Pûleêr, and I want you to come,” I said, rushing through the words.

He stopped walking, his back tense, and he slowly turned to face me. His golden skin paled, and his neck muscles were tight with tension. “Why?”

“I decided I want answers.”

He shook his head. “You *think* you want answers—”

“No, Svîk. I know I want answers,” I stated. “I don’t think it will change anything, but I need to know. Otherwise . . . I’ll always wonder, and the what-ifs will pile up. I want to be free to move forward.”

He strode to me, stopping when we were toe-to-toe. “To which questions?” he demanded. “Which questions matter the most to you? And once you think you know, ask yourself *why*?”

I frowned with confusion because I’d never thought through why I wanted to know who I was before now—just that I would always wonder.

“Stop thinking about all the questions you have, all the what-ifs you say will threaten your future happiness—and mine. Stop thinking and answer me this one question: What is it you want *most*?” he whispered.

I’d spent hours thinking of this, so it was easy to answer. “I want safety and love, probably like everyone else.”

As soon as I finished speaking, an image sprung into my mind—a delusion. Ruin as a magî in the darkness of a cave . . . behind a waterfall. Our bodies were tangled in an embrace, and the steamy air was perfumed with sandalwood and ylang ylang. My heart skipped a beat, and while I couldn’t see Ruin’s face, I *knew* that male-magî dream-version of him would always be my ideal bondmate.

Svîk stepped toward me, breaking through my delusion. Svîk was real. Ruin was a cat, an apex predator, not a magî. Taking a slow, deep breath, Svîk brushed several strands of hair away from my face. His thumb lingered just long enough for me to notice his trembling.

“Do you ever think about us?” he asked.

I stepped back and shook my head, trying to clear the last remnants of my dream. “I’ve been too afraid, too preoccupied, too busy with other thoughts.”

“Afraid?” he whispered, his eyes darkening. “What are you afraid of?”

I swallowed and risked a bit of the truth. “I see how the female magi look at you. And we’ve only known each other for a few weeks. Are you really interested in *me*?”

He frowned and then asked, “What do you want me to do to prove it?” When I said nothing, he added, “What do you want? Like what characteristics are you looking for in a bondmate?”

Again, my thoughts went to Ruin, and even as I cursed him and my twisted heart, I said, “I want a hero. I want constancy, commitment, courtship —”

“That’s a lot of c-words,” he replied, his expression twisting with conflict.

“Har-har.” I stepped past him and onto the path. “You were the one who asked. Now, come on so we don’t miss all the breakfast. One green mango isn’t going to be enough for me today.”

The leaves brushed against our sides as we walked single file through the prolific growth pushing in on the path we'd cleared only two days ago. Svîk moved by me and used both hands to pull aleph-ear stalks up, and then he threw them back into the jungle. I ate the rest of my mango, hopping through the mud, trying to stay out of the oozing puddles of Svîk's footprints. The bûyî was getting worse, and there was talk of the council increasing our work days again, maybe even going to every day.

"Do you think we'll get our break tomorrow?" I asked. My plan, as it was every free day, was to clear the area around my hut and the twenty foot path to the perimeter road before bathing in the Cem with everyone else.

"No idea. Where are we working today? Did Rull announce the assignments last night, or does his new rule start tonight?" Svîk asked as he stomped onto the main road, shaking free the mud on his feet.

I joined him, frowning at the thick coat of muck on my feet. The frequency of precipitation hadn't changed, but the duration of each bout of rain was less, making the perimeter road much more passable. The breeze picked up, and a dozen leaves filtered to the ground, their vibrant foliage a stark contrast to the rich loam.

"Yes," I responded, jumping to dislodge the biggest clumps of mud. "You're probably the reason he's making the announcements both at dinner and breakfast—at least today. Unlike you, I was listening. We're on the south—closer to the Cemik."

His expression darkened, and his pace slowed. He balled his hands, and I knew he was thinking about the snake in the Cemik even though several

weeks had passed since the incident with those females—had I seen them since?

“I hope you’re wrong,” he grumbled and kicked at the mud.

But I wasn’t. Determined to head-off a bad day, I rushed to distract him, blurting, “Rull said it’s approaching a week since the growth was cleared to the yellow line—so we have a race today: us against the jungle.” The yellow row of bromeliads would have had to be abandoned if we didn’t get there this afternoon. “I heard Velt say you’d never get that far.”

“Velt?” He narrowed his eyes, displaying his dislike for the other magi. “Okaaay,” he said, taking my bait. He rubbed his hands together and grinned with the challenge. “We’ll get there. I promise.”

This part of his personality was consistent, and it was his work ethic, and most everyone else’s, that had kept us safe. For almost a month, no one had spotted the bûyî—the longest stretch since I’d come to Yandarî.

Already, a dozen people toiled on the road. They must’ve raced through their breakfast to ensure they’d have free time this afternoon. Their backs were bent as they chopped at the growth on the right side of the perimeter. Both Svîk and I walked on the left side of the main thoroughfare, pulling up plants as we went.

I tossed the pit of the mango with the next clump of growth, adding to the rustling of plants all around. The smell of mud and lush vegetation surrounded us, and I glanced up at the twisted vines hanging from the trees above. The sun must’ve peeked over the horizon because the light filtering through was getting brighter, and the top layer of the rainforest was visible through the gaps in the shorter layer of jungle. I sighed and turned my attention to the ground, reaching for the base of another plant.

We arrived in the center of Pûleêr and got in line for breakfast. Rull was still eating, so technically, we weren’t late, which was a relief. Along with the stricter rules over the last week, we’d also been dished more individual *responsibility*—meaning if Rull felt like anyone wasn’t pulling their weight, the council would decide their fate. At least now, everyone worked—even Rull. Completely *fair*.

I looked at the food and grimaced with disgust.

“I told you,” Svîk muttered from behind me. “If you want cheese, you’ve got to be one of the first ten.”

Completely *not* fair. Forcing a cheeky grin, I replied, “But I had a green mango.”

“Not quite as good as pîderîne,” he said with a chuckle, drawing the attention of several women.

Pîderîne was the last of my favorites still served. Dostane’s fried rice and cheese was merely a memory, and the only time I got cheese now was when I was assigned to meal duty.

Svîk and I picked through the leftovers and then filled our waterskins with coconut water. We’d missed the eggs and cheese, but there was still a small dollop of yogurt, and Svîk nudged me to take it as well as the fried rice patties. I stuck out my tongue, pretending to throw up, as he slopped taro paste onto his plate; boiled taro, reserved for babies with no taste buds, seemed an ominous omen. If I was going to eat tubers, I liked them fried or mashed or roasted. Paste meant we were scraping the bottom of the proverbial barrel—usually because someone hadn’t done their job.

Svîk and I ate while Rull announced the groups for the day, repeating that we’d be given our assignments at night from now on, and then those of us not assigned to work in the kitchen made our way to the borders of the perimeter road.

Our unit crossed the square and wove through the homes until we reached the perimeter on the southern edge of Pûleêr. For the next several hours, I heaved, raked, chopped, and dug, clearing my section of growth with Svîk working next to me.

“So what do the magî do in Yândâri?” I asked, fishing for information. Over the last week, this had become our daily game: me trying to pry information from him about the capital. I already knew they didn’t have to clear the jungle, but I figured I’d start easy and work my way up. Yesterday, I’d asked about the market, and Svîk had hissed at me to shut up.

Today, Svîk grunted but didn’t even bother to look at me.

Not to be put off by his non-answer, I waved my muddied hand shovel at him and pressed. “I’m just wondering because when I do go to visit, I want to blend in.”

He said nothing, just continued to work.

“Don’t act like that,” I continued. “You’re the most informed citizen in Pûleêr. Even Rull doesn’t know as much as you do about Yândârî. So just tell me something about the place. Do they eat fried pîderîne? What do the magî do for work? If I walked all the way to Yândârî, would anyone recognize me?”

Svîk snorted. “No one’s going to recognize you.”

His harsh tone felt like a slap, and I glared at Svîk. “Are you saying I’m not worthy of being remembered or that no one knows me?”

Because those were two very different meanings, and if it was the former, the insult felt more than a little cruel.

His lips curled, and a slow smile spread across Svîk’s face, turning fierce. “You know what? If you really want to go to Yândarî, I’ll take you.”

On the other side of me, Dostane laughed. “Don’t be quarreling, you two.”

I turned toward her and snapped my mouth shut, cutting off my retort when she started to talk.

“In Yândârî, there are dozens of different ways to work, everything from cooking to cleaning to just doing magîk. But no one there is beating back the plants. Not like us. And I’m sure the Serîk don’t even bother with fried pîderîne; it’s probably garbage to them. Yândarî is to Pûleêr like pîderîne is to taro paste.”

Ugh. Wait a minute . . . “How do you know? Have you been to Yândarî?” Taking Dostane with me might be nicer than Svîk’s mood swings—but she wouldn’t leave her daughter, Doli. For as nice as Dostane was, Doli was rude to me every time I interacted with her. Besides, Svîk was a Serîk, so I knew he could keep me safe. But what of the kümdâr? Focusing on the here-and-now, I pressed for more information. “Can you tell me about traveling there now? Do the Serîk patrol the roads all the way to the capital? Could I go to Yândarî by myself?”

Svîk shook his head and mumbled, just barely loud enough for me to decipher, “You better not.”

I was pretty sure which of the questions he was answering, but Dostane continued talking, and I kept my attention on her.

“I’ve never been, but I knew several male magî who would go regularly, back when I lived in Heza, almost a year ago. Then the Serîk came, and we found our way here.” Dostane continued working while she told me the story about how the kümdâr’s guards raided her outpost, her smile as big as if we’d been discussing the best berries for jam. I listened, my stomach churning with the horror. *How could she be so blasé about that?*

“The sovereign handpicks each one of his guards we were told, not only for their power but also ability, and he keeps them close.” She looked past me at Svîk and said, “I’d never heard of a Serîk leaving the kümdâr before you. It’s very brave of you.”

I grinned at her and nodded. “Svîk is brave.”

“No one is brave anymore,” someone grumbled. “That’s the problem.”

Dostane ignored the comment, but I wanted to lash out at whomever said it. Turning, I caught the glare on Svîk’s face and pivoted back toward Dostane.

“Do you miss doing magîk?” I asked. “If you were in Yândarî, you’d be able to do your magîk, right?”

“Theoretically,” Dostane said, pursing her lips. “But my magîk wouldn’t be of much use here anyway. Besides, not doing magîk is what keeps the Serîk and the kûmdâr away from us. Given the options, even now, I’d rather not do magîk.”

I wanted to believe Dostane, but how was it possible to be satisfied with denying such a big part of who they were? I snorted at the parallel in my own life and shifted my attention to the fern in front of me instead of asking more questions. Even I knew when to stop . . . sometimes. I cataloged what I’d heard then tried to do as Svîk said: sort through what mattered most and why. I dug around the plant, glaring at the fronds. Ferns were worse than burned plantains.

“But if someone did have fire magîk, they could burn away all the new growth every morning, right?” a male magî named Qelp asked with a chuckle. “That’d be a nice break from this load of rot.”

Several people laughed, and I wholeheartedly agreed with him. Ferns were akin to rubbish as far as I was concerned. I understood the necessity of our work, and I wasn’t about to quit, but an end to the bûyî would be nice.

“When the Serîk come, there will be no more Pûleêr,” Svîk mumbled. “Not that this place is really worth mourning. It’s disgusting.”

Something about his words felt familiar. I darted a look at him, but he wasn’t looking at me. Had he meant for me to hear his declaration? I bit my lip. Had I even heard him right? I’d have to ask later—when it was just us. Because if he knew the Serîk were coming, shouldn’t we warn the magî here?

As the day wore on, we pushed deeper into the undercanopy, looking for the bright-yellow bromeliads. The air plants normally made great markers, but the growth seemed more dense than usual. My feet, legs, hands, arms, and tunic were all saturated with mud, and the thin fabric of the tunic clung to my sweaty back. The smell of the wet earth mingled with the sharp, clean scent of verdant growth as we hacked at the branches and fronds. A heavy thud was followed by two more, and someone hooted about fresh coconut. I

turned to ask for a drink, and Dostane screamed.

I jerked, blinking when she wasn't standing . . . Fetid rot. I scrambled and then thrashed as someone yanked me back away from the oily sheen on the ground. The rancid stench of rotten meat rolled through the air, and my stomach turned.

"Help me!" Dostane screamed, writhing in the muck.

The world tipped, and I froze, going slack as I stared at the undulating mud around her.

Dostane was chest deep in the bûyî. The thick sludge sucked and gulped. She flailed her arms, scrambling to find something to grab, but the only growth nearby were the shallow plants we'd been clearing, and even those were now out of reach.

"Please," she sobbed, her panic tearing through me.

Svîk leapt past me, pausing only to shove me back toward more stable ground. He reached out to help Dostane. Her arms were now above her head, her hands flapping frantically. The bûyî quivered as he yanked, and the force of the bog almost made it seem like he was pushing her in. She opened her mouth to scream, but the bûyî oozed and contracted, rising to cover her mouth and nose. The filthy muck rippled. In one second, Dostane was gone and Svîk was waist deep in the rot of death.

Panic tore me from my stupor. My heart pounded, demanding action. I *needed* to save him. I stepped forward, and he waved me away.

"Get back, Taja!" he shouted. "Keep her safe and find a vine to pull me out."

Commotion swelled around me, people yelling orders, and I heard the grating of metal biting through wood. From the corner of my eye, I saw several magî fleeing the area, but I took another step toward my friend. Suddenly, a thick vine flew by me. Someone pushed me again, and I stumbled to the side before catching my footing and moving forward, still intent on helping Svîk. Before I could get to the edge of the bûyî, strong arms encircled my waist, and one of the male magî dragged me back.

"No," I screamed, scratching and clawing as I tried to pry myself free from my captor, but my gaze never left Svîk's blue eyes. Emotion clogged my throat as the bûyî sucked him in deeper, all the way up to his chest. My eyes welled with tears, and they spilled down my cheeks as I screamed for the magî to pull him out. "Let me help him!"

The bûyî swallowed again, and Svîk was all the way up to his neck in the

dark muck. He caught the thick vine just as the black mud covered his closed mouth. He wrapped the plant around his extended arm, over and over, and then he pulled his arm down—into the bog. The bûyî seeped past his nose, and some small part of me marveled at his calm even as I continued to panic.

“Get him out,” I shrieked, still thrashing against whoever held me.

The men fought the bûyî, but the bog greedily slurped Svîk into its maw until only the crown of his head remained.

Something deep inside burst, and determination filled me. My frustration boiled into white-hot fury. I would not let the bûyî take one more person from me. The decision exploded in my mind, and I screamed, “Give him back to me!”

The men heaved, grunting and cursing as they pulled, and viscous residue of the dark mire clung to Svîk as they pulled him out of the bûyî. He’d brought his arm all the way down to his side, securing the vine to him, but he flopped, inert, facedown as they pulled him across the muddy ground.

When he was several feet away from the bûyî, my captor released me, and I ran to my friend, falling to my knees beside Svîk. I wiped the sticky mud off his face, my tears falling on his body. His still, lifeless body.

I closed my eyes, my heart tearing in two with an ache for something I didn’t even understand.

“Come now, lass, at least the bûyî didn’t get to keep him,” a male whispered. As if there was comfort in the words.

I glanced up to tell him to leave me alone and gasped.

There, right in front of me, next to his own body, was Svîk. He smiled and raised his brows and then quickly held his finger to his lips while he pointed at my open mouth with his other hand.

I blinked and snapped my mouth shut. Whatever I’d planned to say evaporated from my mind, and my thoughts skittered and reeled. Even the stupidest of stupid knew seeing spirits of the dead wasn’t normal.

He pointed at his chest, his spirit chest, and then at his body. “You need to help me get back in.”

“Wh-what?” I stammered.

“You all right, Taja?” a female asked, shaking my shoulder.

“Just . . . a second,” I said, waving her away without even bothering to see who was asking.

“I need you to put me in,” he said again. “You can do it.”

Could I? Was it even possible? I’d never heard of that type of magîk,

although my memory was obviously limited. So I took a deep breath and stopped thinking.

I looked up at Svîk, his transparent soul, and jerked my head toward his body. I turned my attention to his frame, wiped the muck away from his eyes, and then dug chunks of the bûyî out from between his teeth. I grabbed my waterskin and poured the remnants of the coconut water over his face, cleaning out his mouth and nose.

“He can’t feel it anymore, hun.”

“He’s not dead,” I said. I put my hand to his chest and lied, “I can still feel his heartbeat. I just need to clear his mouth so he can breathe.”

The murmur of hushed arguing emitted from the crowd behind me, but before I finished exhaling, someone placed another bladder of water by my side. I tilted Svîk’s head and scooted my knees under him. My pace quickened, instinct telling me there was a time limit to what I wanted to do, so I rinsed him again and then looked at his soul. He’d been kneeling across from me the entire time.

“He should be coughing,” a male muttered.

“Come on,” I said and widened my eyes at Svîk, telling him now was a good time to get back in. I smacked my hands against his chest. “Don’t you dare leave me.”

He smirked and put one hand on the chest of his body and held out his other hand to me. “Do it like this.”

I copied him, reaching out with one hand and willing him to return to his body. The moment my skin touched his soul, it disappeared. I felt his presence slide through me, and then it was gone.

Under my hand, Svîk shuddered and coughed. I yelped and scooted away from him so he could lie flat.

Instead, Svîk rolled to the side and threw up. After wiping his mouth, he flopped to his back and offered me a weak smile.

“Am I a hero now?” he rasped.

I blinked, and my eyes spilled with relief, tracking through the mud and sweat on my cheeks. I sniffed, trying to fight through my thundering emotions, and then nodded. “Yes.”

The initial triumph over Svîk’s death twisted from elation to trepidation. Some parts were nice: he brought me green mango in the mornings after going to the kitchen in time for goat cheese and getting me breakfast. And while he didn’t bring up *us*, he scooted closer when we stood in line for meals, his body near enough to *feel* possessive. After two days of waiting for him to explain, I’d stayed up most of last night with the frogs and crickets for company, thinking. Because . . . how did Svîk know I could put his soul back in? And if he knew that . . . what else did he know? A couple hours ago, in the hour between night and day, things connected with a sudden epiphany. And now, I wanted answers.

“Taja,” Svîk called, his squishing steps announcing his arrival at my hut long before he said my name. “It’s our day off from group work. Come on. Let’s get started on your path. I brought you *pîderîne* . . .”

He must’ve only now noticed that the path was clear.

“What time did you get up?” he asked, his low voice sounding troubled. He knocked on my door. “Are you in there?”

My stomach churned with a mixture of frustration and dread. My only excuse for being blinded for so long was that Svîk was all I had left, his attention comforting and familiar . . . *familiar . . . of course he was*. “Yeah. Give me a minute, and I’ll be out.”

I pulled my hair up and splashed warm water on my face, the liquid in the dish turning brown as I transferred the location of the dirt. I shoved open the door and stepped outside, forcing my lips into a smile. “Good morning, Svîk.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Who died?” He laughed at his own joke. “Not

me.” More laughter. He sobered when I didn’t join in, and his smile flipped. “Hey,” he said, stepping toward me. “What’s wrong?”

I pursed my lips, and my gaze went to the ground. Why did *I* feel so guilty? I wasn’t hiding anything. “We need to talk.”

“Okaaaay,” he said, drawing the word out in a very Svîk way. “What happened?”

The tension between us stretched, and I kicked the ground as I searched for the words to ask him. Birds chirped, and a monkey hollered in the distance, mocking my coiling anxiety. If I had done this before, it wasn’t second nature like walking or talking.

Svîk put his hand on my cheek and said softly, “Hey—”

As soon as his touch registered, I forced my gaze up to meet his. Fear was etched around his narrowed blue eyes and in the creases of his frown.

I blurted, “I need you to stop hiding things from me.” I blushed and lamely added, “I like you, but I can’t trust you if you’re lying.”

Svîk stared at me like what I’d said was a foreign language and he had to translate it in his head. I could tell the exact minute the meaning registered because his eyes hardened. He curled his lip, and the sneer on his face felt harsh and cruel, a terrifying likeness of the young magî I thought I knew.

“Of course you think I’m *lying*,” he snapped, his hands clenching at his sides.

I shook my head. “I don’t want *that* to be it. But I don’t know what else to think. I like you—the parts I know—but there’s too much I don’t know about you *and* me, and . . . us.” I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “And you know a lot about me, even before—”

“Before I almost died?” he snapped, narrowing his eyes.

Didn’t he remember? “That’s not what”—*happened*—“I was going to say.”

“No? So what do you want to know? You want to know more about before—what? Before you came here? Why?” His voice rose as he continued. “Do you actually believe if you know more that you’d be happy in this disgusting, doomed hole of rot and ruin?”

I stepped back from his vehemence. “I already told you I don’t want to stay here—”

“Oh, that’s right,” he said, throwing the bowl of pîderîne into the surrounding foliage. “You want *answers*. All I’ve done has been to spare you, but you’d rather have answers. You can’t remember, and it makes *no* sense.

You want me to tell you something so you *feel* better. You want to know about your past, about my past, about magîk.” He grit his teeth, and his chest heaved with emotion. “All you think about is what *you* want. But *none* of it will help.”

I stared at him, shocked dumb. I’d never seen Svîk so . . . out-of-control, and then his actual words registered, and my jaw dropped. A deep feeling of betrayal swelled, and I shook my head. “Wait . . . You *do* know about before I came here?”

His gaze became a glower, and Svîk raised his hands in frustration. “This is so impossibly awful, and you—” He pointed at me. “—veiled with blissful ignorance, have no idea how disgusting it is, or how good you have it.”

I watched him rave, slack-jawed as he hollowed out my chest with each of his explosive declarations.

“Fine, *Taja*. You want to know more? I’ll tell you more. I gave up everything—everything—because I thought I was saving you. But really? I don’t know what the *fetid rot* is going on. And now . . . I’m not sure I *want* to know.”

His words punched me, forcing the air from my lungs. I blinked, reeling, and whispered, “Why don’t you want to know?”

All the fury disappeared as he exhaled, and his shoulders sagged. When he met my gaze, his features were ravaged with emotion. “I only wanted to be happy, and I thought we would be happy. I thought you were her.”

“Her? Her who?” I asked, begging for any scrap he would give. *He knew!* “Please—”

He leaned over me, studying my face and asked, “Are you making the plants grow?”

I drew back, frowning with confusion. “What?”

“Is that your magîk?” he whispered. “To make plants grow?”

How could he not remember? Didn’t he know I’d put his soul back? He’d even told me how. Something deep inside held my tongue. “Why would you ask that?”

“Never mind. I’m done hoping you’ll remember. I don’t even know . . .” He held up his hand and shook his head. “I’m . . . done.” With that, he marched away, throwing the two mangoes in his hand out into the jungle with a curse.

I spent the rest of the day near my hut, stunned by Svîk’s temper tantrum. And while I wanted to rip his soul back out of his body, I wanted answers. He

had the ones I wanted most, and I wasn't about to give up. But I could give him time to cool off. One day wouldn't matter.

Tomorrow, we'd talk.



I AWOKE to the low purr of an animal outside. I rolled off my pallet to my knees and then crawled to the door. The stench of goat and sour milk was mostly gone, but the odor of sweat clung to the air in the hovel. I peeked through the crack at the shadowy world beyond and raised my gaze to scan the clearing.

The filtered glow of moonlight broke through the gaps in the curtain above and painted the undercanopy in silvery shadows, kisses of the moonlight. The leaves rustled with the breeze and the normal nocturnal activity of the rainforest. In the distance, frogs still croaked and the crickets chirped, but the silence just outside my door confirmed the presence of an apex.

My heart flipped, and I squinted to find him, staring out into the shadows—nothing to the right. I glanced to the other side of the clearing, and my gaze snagged on the sleek, melanistic panthera crouching in the middle of the only pathway out from my home, his tail twitching. He stalked forward, his inky-black fur the same color as the pitch of night. His pupils were wide open to absorb the limited light, and I couldn't tell if there was a sliver of green or if I just wanted it. The great cat stalked toward me, a low rumble emitting from his chest.

My mouth dried, and my hands dampened. I wanted so much for this to be Ruin, but his eyes—I couldn't see any green. Everyone understood the odds against an apex predator, which meant anything that could possibly attract one of the deadly creatures was disposed of meticulously, as in, under at least two feet of dirt. There was easier prey than magî, and everything around my hut was cleared. So then why was he here?

My heart thumped against my ribs, and the massive cat froze, his eyes narrowing. He turned his head and hissed, exposing his deadly fangs at the jungle.

Oh fetid rot, he can bite right through my neck. I whimpered, a totally involuntary response, but the animal continued to stare out into the jungle

while my heart thumped against my ribs. Several seconds—an eternity—later, he turned back to my hut. He disappeared, but before I could sigh with relief, the acrid stench of urine wafted in through the gaps.

My fear tinged with outrage, and my anger grew as the creature reappeared and then pulled my freshly washed clothes from the line, through the mud, to make a kitty bed. A really big kitty bed. He rolled in my knee-length, sleeveless tunics and underclothes, purring the entire time. And then he chewed through my only strap of leather, which I used as a belt, before falling asleep right outside my hut, keeping me trapped.

If I had anything inside besides my pallet and bins—anything I could use as a weapon—I would've thrown it at the animal, but after the previous awfulness with Svîk, the apex feline was hardly the low of my day. My eyes burned with exhaustion and emotion, and I crawled back to bed. If the creature decided to kill me, at least I wouldn't have to deal with Svîk or clearing the fauna tomorrow. "Just wake me if the bûyî creeps in," I murmured to the panthera although far too quiet for him to hear. "And if Svîk comes back—" I wanted to say it was okay to kill him, but I was rational enough to admit I wanted answers not emotional vindication. "—trap him."

As I drifted to sleep, I let the spark of hope spread in my chest and admitted the truth: Even with the mess outside, I still hoped the panthera was Ruin.

The clang of the bell startled me from slumber, and I rubbed the remnants of sleep from my eyes with a groan. I arose and shook off the residual fatigue still clinging to my body. Grumbling, I snagged my mostly clean tunic from the pallet, the same one I'd worn last night after doing laundry and my bath. I wrinkled my nose with disgust because most of my clothes were outside in the mud. I'd have to wash all of them again tonight.

I took a deep breath and muttered at the now-absent, frisky apex who'd called on me. The whole thing would be funny if it didn't mean more work, or if I had someone I could laugh with, or if it was Ruin. But my whole world felt upside down. High? No one died. Low? A great cat peed on my house and then disappeared. Biggest low? Obviously, the panthera wasn't Ruin because he would have better manners than that.

The darkness melted into shades of morning gray, and the daylight and relative silence outside confirmed the empty clearing. I tugged open the door and collected my filthy clothes, dumping them into a bin with the ruined leather strap. Finishing as quickly as possible, I trudged to breakfast. The

normal chatter at the tables seemed to decrease with my arrival, but I wasn't sure if the change in volume was real or just in my head, so I pretended not to notice. I walked through the line, grabbing a few things at random, and then took a seat by Dawi.

"Good morning," she said.

I glanced up at her, and she smiled. I returned her greeting and then took a large bite of fried plantain so I wouldn't have to say anything else. I darted furtive looks around the communal area, my stomach churning when Svîk cast me a weighty glance followed by a tentative half-smile. I glared at him, furious because he'd hurt my feelings *and* lied to me. Svîk owed me an apology. When work groups were announced, I grit my teeth with determination because he was, as always, in mine.

Good. I'd get my answers today. Then tomorrow, I'd leave—with or without him. The ground was dry enough; certainly the flooding of the rainy season would be over.

When it came time to disperse, my courage fled, and I skirted to the side of our unit, sidling up to Dawi who was also in the group. The petite young female was at least a year younger than me, but her belly was swollen with child, their first. She'd been partnered a year ago to Rojek, who was also working in our party today, but he walked ahead, talking with several of the men.

We shuffled up the path toward the assigned area, my thoughts agitated and heavy. I wanted to believe Svîk had been honest, that he'd been trying to protect me, but the outburst was so out of character—and I could hardly believe someone who cared would hide so much. I didn't understand, not at all, so shaking away the moroseness, I asked Dawi, "How did you and Rojek partner? I mean did you choose him, and was he always so . . . calm?" *Pretty sure he didn't throw mangoes at you or because of you.* I frowned and added, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I . . . I was just curious."

Dawi looked up at me with wide eyes, like a small jungle animal. A smile played on her lips, and then she snickered. "Is that why you two are fighting?"

I blushed and ducked my head. "No. Is that what everyone thinks?"

Oh rot. Is that why he smiled?

She snickered again. "No. However, the two of you have been dancing around each other for weeks, so it won't surprise anyone—even if a few are disappointed." She grinned and patted her abdomen. "Don't worry, I'm more

than happy with Rojek, but I know several female magî who've been hoping Svîk would lose interest in you."

What? I stared at her, blinking, while fragments of shock flitted in and out of my head.

"When are you going to make it official? Will you have Rull do an incantation at your bonding ceremony? I'm sure it'll be a relief to have the two of you—"

I shook my head, stunned.

"What's the matter? Do you not want to partner with him?"

"I . . . I don't know."

Dawi froze, and after a few steps, I realized she wasn't stopping to be funny. I returned to her and pointed at the still-moving group. "Come on—"

"You're really not going to partner with him?" she asked, her jaw dropping and eyes widening. When she spoke next, her voice was hoarse. "Then what are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "I want to find answers: Where did I come from? What happened to me? Why was I on that road where Esi found me? I'll go to Yândarî alone if I need to—"

Dawi shook her head, her expression filled with the doubt she wasn't saying. "Are you *dreaming*? You can't go to Yândarî—not if you want to live."

"What?" I snapped. I wasn't some helpless—

"You . . . misunderstand," she said, grabbing my arm and pulling me closer. "I merely meant you could search all over Qralî and never get the answers you want—and then what? Yândarî isn't safe—not with Zerôn as the kûmdâr. So . . ."

The idea that I might fail had never crossed my mind. Even now, I refused to believe it. But it was clear Dawi did. Was her perspective different because she grew up here? Was it different because of who she was, or what her magîk was? "What do you think I should do?"

We arrived at our assigned spot, and the unit spread out. I stayed by Dawi, and she gave me a sympathetic smile before leaning over to pull up a plant. "All I'm saying is live your life—whatever that is." She tossed the plant back into the wall of the jungle. "You can go seek answers, but you may end up alone because you turned your back on the love in front of you."

I opened my mouth to protest, but my gaze landed on Svîk, and I gaped like a fish in the Cem. Did I love him?

“Would you be happy if you never saw him again? Would you be happy if he was with someone else? If he loved someone else?” She straightened again and rested her hand on her belly. “And what if she was having his child?”

Svîk mouthed the word *sorry*, and I closed my mouth. What if he was with . . . my gaze shifted and fell on Nebe. Hot anger bubbled up with the thought, and I shook my head to clear the emotion.

“Don’t lose your measure of happiness, Taja, whatever it is, by chasing dreams, or answers, or anything else.”

“How do you know?” I asked, giving Dawi my attention once again.

“Hey,” Rojek said, pointing at Dawi with a grin. “You better be working over there. Having a baby is no excuse for not getting your section done.”

The group hooted and hollered, and I tugged up several handfuls of plants before even looking at Dawi again. But when I did, she rubbed her belly and smiled at me.

“You know what?” she asked. “You don’t always know what will make you happy. Sometimes, it’s just instinct. But long term, you make your own happiness, Taja. If I were to die tomorrow or next week or in a year, the joy I’ve had with Rojek would be worth it. You choose happiness, and then you make it.” Dawi patted my arm and added, “No one is perfect, so don’t wait for perfection. Instead, ask yourself if you could be happy with him.”

Happy with Svîk? The idea of being with him—not just physically but sexually—made my head spin, but the thought of being without him made me sad. What else did I have? And here in Pûleêr, there was nothing of happiness, love, or friendship, at least not for me—with the exception of Svîk.

I nodded, smiling at Dawi, grateful for her wisdom. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” she replied.

The people around me were in the midst of their daily labor, fighting for what they wanted, freedom and safety and love. The rhythmic sounds of clearing the growth filled my ears, and I pursed my lips as Svîk made his way over to me.

I took a deep breath and waited.

“I’m sorry,” Svîk said. “I lost my temper. I just don’t understand . . .”

“What?” I asked, inching closer and dropping my voice.

He studied me, searching for something I couldn’t even help him find. The rest of the magî seemed to disappear as the intensity between me and

Svîk swelled and cocooned us both.

“Why don’t you remember?” he whispered, his gaze so intense I could feel it on my skin.

I shrugged, at least as perplexed as him. “How would I know?” I sucked in a breath, my mind racked with confusion. “What happened? Tell me what you know.”

“When Zādîsa put your soul in last time, you still remembered . . . everything.”

Wait . . . What? Zādîsa put my soul back in? My eyes widened, but before I could say anything, a collective gasp ripped through the cocoon, and Svîk paled. His expression morphed from shock to fear, and then a male magî bellowed, “Stop!”

I spun around and stared at the magî waving at our group from the perimeter road. He walked toward us, almost gliding over the mud his movements were so fluid. Several paces behind him was another male magî, and I frowned, trying to process *why* the air was suddenly filled with panic. I glanced at the other magî—those all around me—from Pûleêr, and their expressions confirmed my assessment of *what*, but not the *why*.

And then two more magî rounded the bend of the path through the houses. Svîk swore. I felt movement—there and then gone—and I gaped with the realization that Svîk had pulled away. Only I couldn't bring myself to even glimpse his way as the scene unfolded.

Something is wrong.

Time slowed as my attention stayed riveted to the new magî. The male in front wore a sulu, much like the men in Pûleêr. The simple fabric wrap was undyed like many of the garments here, but his wrap was pristine as were his feet. His chest was bare except for a small silver pendant in the shape of a crescent on a thin strip of leather tied around his neck. Unlike most of the men in Pûleêr, he was fair with golden hair and pale-blue eyes—almost like Svîk.

I stared, squinting to focus my gaze, and then shook my head. My sleepless night must have affected my vision because the male blurred, becoming transparent. Had I just imagined it? Or was he dead?

The magî continued toward our group, his lips tipped up in a friendly smile, and he waved again. “Ho there!”

Behind him, three other male magî strode toward us, all dressed exactly

the same: dark fitted breeches with black boots hitting mid-calf and tight, sleeveless jerkins. Strapped to their backs, unlike anyone else in Pûleêr, the three each had a sword in a scabbard as well as daggers secured to their thighs. The trio also wore matching expressions of intensity, narrowed eyes, and corded neck muscles, but their lips were in various curls of disgust. Two magî wore their hair tied back at the nape—one with golden hair, and the other had hair the color of rich honey, but the blond in front, who was so clean, wore his loose, and the male nearest him with umber hair, had his shorn close to his scalp. Their jerkins had a deep V, and each of the magî wore the same crescent-shaped necklace.

Slinking out of the dense vegetation, the final member of their party stalked forward—on four legs. His ears were back, his mouth open just enough to see his tongue through his deadly canines. The panthera crossed in front of the men. His fur, as dark as liquid night, stood on end at his hackles, and his tail twitched back and forth. His muscles coiled and bunched as he prowled toward us.

I took a deep breath as hope unfurled through me.

A low growl rumbled in his chest, and I couldn't look away. His eyes . . . Was this . . . was he . . .

I gasped, hyperventilating, and my jaw remained unhinged. My heart sputtered through several beats and then stopped as the panthera shifted mid-stride. I blinked repeatedly, my thoughts spinning as he stood, straightening to a fully upright, bare-chested male.

Murmurs of disbelief bounced through the air. Impossible—we all knew it—and yet . . . My attention was fixed on the impossibility walking toward us.

He was real.

The magî was lithe, his muscles defined and corded in a way that made my mouth dry and my body tingle. His skin held only a hint of the warm sun-kissed hue, pale enough to speak of time inside during the day, a luxury none of us in Pûleêr knew. His hair was so black the filtered light picked up bluish undertones, similar to the rich color of his bright eyes—*blue* eyes. He wore dark fitted breeches like the other men, with a knife strapped to each thigh. Around his neck he wore a black leather string, but his charm was a silver pentagram with a crescent inside.

I blinked, and my stomach dropped, pulling all the organs in my chest down with it. How . . . But—Ruin . . .

His eyes met mine briefly with a flash of confusion before skipping past toward the rest of the work group. Just like a predator, he stalked forward with singular focus. But my mind was stuck, replaying the dream I'd had the last time I'd seen *my panthera*. As he passed me, I murmured, "Ruin?"

He paused, just a fraction of a second, and his brow furrowed. He glanced my way, his eyes flashing green, before stepping by me. His three men in black closed ranks behind him, but I followed—only a few steps. A deep *need* from within demanded I be near him, by the melanistic panthera-magî. I was sure he was Ruin, which meant he would keep me safe. How else could he be so much like the male in my dream? How was that even possible? The only difference was his eyes.

The cluster of magî in black leather stopped. I twisted to see between their bodies, and someone whimpered. Tension crawled over me, ratcheting up with the silence from the other magî.

With sudden clarity, I realized Svîk was in the group of magî. I inched to the side and pushed closer, wedging between one of the leather-clad Serîk and a magî from Pûleêr. Panthera-magî stepped up to Svîk, and he paled.

"You d-don't understand," Svîk sputtered, his eyes widening. "I had no time. I had to choose . . ."

I inched forward, desperate to hear what was said between the two as tentative dots connected in my mind. If Svîk knew Panthera-magî, and Panthera-magî was Ruin . . .

"He would've killed her again," Svîk snarled, his eyes wild. His left eyebrow twitched, a sure sign of nervousness.

Panthera-magî glared at Svîk.

Sucking in a deep breath, I reached forward and touched the fierce magî's back. "Ruin? Is that you?"

The panthera-magî shuddered again, and in a voice so low it mixed with his animalistic growl, he said, "You faithless liar."

The shifter dropped his hand in a blur of movement and then buried a blade into Svîk's abdomen, all the way up to the hilt.

The world stopped. Svîk . . . I'd just saved him. I needed answers from him. I was going to bond . . . maybe. How could . . . I blinked, the scene in front of me feeling more like a nightmare than reality, and I shook my head to clear my vision.

With a snarl, Panthera-magî jerked the knife upward, and Svîk screamed, a panicked, desperate plea.

My heart rent. I blinked and shrieked, “Ruin!”

The panthera-magî’s skin rippled. One of his guards bellowed, but I barely heard the sound—and none of the words registered.

“Ruin,” I gasped, falling to my knees. I was too stunned to fight, too stunned to even move. All I could do was stare.

Time slowed as Svîk’s hands went to his abdomen and blood ran, slicking his skin, covering his arms as he tried to hold himself together . . . and failed. Loops of his entrails spilled over his arm, falling toward the muddy ground. Panthera-magî held the bloody knife and muttered something indistinguishable as my mind reeled.

My heart flipped, and the vicious brutality registered, battering my consciousness. I screeched and clambered to my feet, desperate to get to Svîk so I could help him. I blinked, and Panthera-magî now held another blade. My jaw dropped as I sucked in enough air to scream—

And my mind blanked.

He crossed his arms and then stretched them apart so quickly the purpose behind his movement didn’t immediately register. The coppery tang of blood wafted on the breeze, followed by the rancid stench of death, and Svîk’s head fell, wide-eyed and open mouthed, into the mud with a wet slosh. His body slumped to his knees then flopped to the ground, blood pumping out from his severed neck in gushes of crimson.

“No!” I screamed, throwing myself at the brutal magî. I pounded my fists against his back, scratching and clawing.

He turned and shuddered—again—and then wrapped me in a tight hold as a string of explicatives ran from his mouth.

How dare he? Why was he acting irate? Was he upset with me? Fine. I’d give him something to be angry about because I would *not* go easily. My hair whipped as I fought against him.

“Bîcav,” he growled.

I fought harder, flailing and kicking, and the magî tightened his cruel hug. “Bîcav!”

I was shoved away from the panthera-magî and then caught. Whoever held me now held me taut, his grip so tight my fingers tingled. The heat radiating from the magî was filled with wrath. But even facing certain death, I couldn’t let Svîk go. I needed his soul and his body together. I needed answers. I needed safety. I wanted love. “I need the truth! He was going to tell me the truth.”

“Stop it,” the male holding me hissed. “Whatever he told you was lies.”

Whimpering, I mumbled incoherently—protests, disbelief, denial. My stomach heaved, and I leaned over and retched, falling into the mud when my captor released me. My pitiful breakfast slopped into the muck, and my eyes burned with tears. Someone grabbed me by my arms and yanked me upright, and I stared into the vibrant-blue eyes of the panthera-magî.

“Why did you do that?” I cried. “Why . . . Do you know . . . What . . . ?” I sputtered and choked on the questions. “Are you Ruin? Please . . . Do you know me?” The questions dribbled out of my mouth with hopeful desperation to make sense of something—anything. Tears spilled down my cheeks, my throat clogging with emotion. “Please.”

His eyes narrowed, and then he grimaced. “I’ve never seen you before. Are you Zîyanâ?”

My heart clenched and then dropped—a dead weight in my chest—and shock gutted me. He wasn’t Ruin? I shook my head, not willing to accept anything he said as truth. Glaring at the magî who’d just killed Svîk, I snapped, “No.”

I wanted to say something more, do something more—to hurt him—somehow. But words flitted through my head and out, refusing to stay long enough for me to string together coherent thought. Hate. I blinked and then snarled, “I hate you.”

Ignoring my spewed abhorrence, he growled, “Then who are you?”

Rage bubbled up from deep within, and I swung fast and hard, my palm slapping him so hard that his head jerked to the side. “I’m the magî who will gut you in your sleep.”

The magî behind me grabbed me again, holding me just enough to remind me it could be worse.

“Is this the one, Bîcav?” Panthera-magî snapped the question as if dreading the answer.

The male behind me cleared his throat and then, in a voice choked with emotion, said, “I have no idea.”

I glanced over my shoulder to find the magî with hair the color of fresh honey, looking up at the canopy. He swallowed and then focused on the panthera-magî, and I was startled to see the Serîk’s eyes glistening with moisture.

“I didn’t get that from his thoughts,” Bîcav said. “Didn’t you sift the answer out before you *beheaded* him?”

The guard suddenly released me and turned his back, and Panthera-magî closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened his eyes, he reached forward like he was going to grab my chin but stopped short. The heat from his skin touched me, filling me with confusion. I hated him, but a small part of me wanted to lean forward and close the distance. Not too hard to shove that crazy part away.

He dropped his hand to his side and asked, “Are you Zādîsa?”

Why would he think that? Maybe *he* was crazy. “I heard the kûmdâr has her in Yândarî.”

His features hardened. “Are you Zîyanâ?”

Is he mad? I glared at him, hating him more for the stupidity of repeating himself. The sovereign bondmate’s magîk was far more powerful than anything I could do. I looked nothing like her, and . . . I couldn’t remember the other reason I couldn’t be her, but I knew there was at least one more. *What a fetid jackass.*

He glanced over my head and, again, called, “Bîcav.”

After a heartbeat, the magî-guard said, “If she is, she doesn’t know it.”

I jerked to look at him, and the leader grabbed my wrist.

“How do you know that?” I demanded of the Serîk.

He said nothing, and Panthera-magî turned to another of his men. “Is she strong?”

“Yes,” one of the other guards said.

“Who else?” the panthera-magî asked. He released me and then stepped over Svîk’s body to walk through the group.

One of the other magî muttered a response, his words lost as I grappled with the reality of the pieces of my friend now lying in the mud and gore of his own body. I glanced at the bare-chested leader, watching as he trailed his fingers over the other magî, no longer brutal. He pulled one male and one female aside and then pushed the two magî toward his guards. “We’ll also take them just in case.”

I heard him, but movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. My lips parted, and I sucked in a breath as fresh tears pricked my eyes. Because there was Svîk, standing by his mutilated body—his beautiful, *whole* soul. He hovered in between the pieces of his body and head, and I forgot all about our stupid fight yesterday. Ever since Esi died, he’d been my best friend, and a crushing grief wrenched through me as his death registered. *I wish . . .* Emotion blurred my vision, and I stepped forward, wanting to

bring him back. *If there was a way to put his body together . . .*

I heard a growl, and Panthera-magî appeared between me and Svîk, the smell of sandalwood and ylang ylang swirling around me. I saw his bare chest, and then he murmured, “Do you see his soul? Is it there? Can you put it back in?”

I lurched and met the gaze of the shifter. My anguish became fury, hot and fiery, and I wanted to lash out at the monster, not scream or yell uselessly. I narrowed my eyes and said, “If I could, I would just so he’d kill you.”

“If you believe that, you’re a fool,” he replied, the muscles of his neck tightening. “He was not what you think.”

He grabbed my arm, pulling me away from the other Serîk, and I tugged back, testing his grip. He held firm, and I rotated so my back was to him, and my gaze landed on Svîk’s soul again.

“I’m sorry,” Svîk said, his lips twisting into a sad smile. “I should’ve told you everything right from the beginning. I didn’t understand . . . I’m so sorry.”

I opened my mouth to respond, to ask him something, but over one . . . two . . . three heartbeats, Svîk’s spirit melted away, fading until it disappeared into the humid air. Gone, and now it was too late. A fresh wave of emotion crashed over me, and blinking through my tears, I tried to see well enough to run, but it was useless.

Instead of getting away, Panthera-magî yanked me to him, wrapping me in a tight embrace and pinning my arms to my sides. His scent hugged me, a smell strangely familiar and beloved—which only made my animosity greater.

“Stop this foolishness,” he growled. “If you can’t do anything, stop.”

He was right. I couldn’t do anything, and the futility of fighting now was enough to clear my head. I stiffened and muttered, “Let me go.”

Surprisingly, he did, stepping back half an arm’s length, and then he grabbed my upper arm again and frowned as he glanced down at my tunic. His gaze shifted to his men, and he said, “Take those other two. We’ll start now. I don’t want to stay in this wretched post.”

I hated him. I hated that he’d killed my friend, peed on my house, ruined my belt, and this close to him, I hated that he’d taken the two scents which smelled like love and made them his. He was a murderer, a thief, and an animal.

How could ten minutes last so long? And now . . . my entire *world* was wrong.

He pulled on my arm again, but as he tugged me down the perimeter road toward the Little Rê, full realization hit. “Wait,” I snapped, resisting his motion. “Where are we going? You’re taking me? Us? With you?”

I looked, really looked, at the other two magî captives, now estranged from the rest of our group by a few feet. Most of the remaining magî from Pûleêr stood as still as baked mud-bricks, watching with slack-jaws and wide eyes. Both Nebe and Rojek were pale, but while Nebe’s lower lip trembled, Rojek’s hands were fisted out in front of him as if ready and waiting to fight.

The Serîk captors drew swords and advanced to claim their prisoners, but Rojek only glared and waited, refusing to move, his gaze darting to his bondmate, Dawi.

Oh my soul.

My heart thundered back to life. Less than a dozen feet from where I stood was Dawi, the quiet girl I’d been talking with all morning, her entire body trembling. She whimpered and then covered her mouth as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. I wanted to reach out and comfort her, save her, do something for her—for her kindness to me.

I shook my head and turned my full attention to the obvious leader. “Please, stop,” I said, my voice hoarse with shock. “Don’t take him.” I gestured at Rojek with my free arm. “If you don’t let him go, he’ll do whatever he needs to escape.” I stared up at my captor, clasping my hands together to beg. “Please . . . His bondmate is expecting.”

One of the guards laughed and then muttered, “She sure has a bleeding heart like your zeta.”

The magî holding my arm quirked his eyebrow at me.

“You should show mercy,” I said, my gaze going to the other three magî before returning to the shifter. “If you take him and leave her, you’ll make them miserable.” I didn’t want to say what I really thought would happen. Rojek wasn’t going to leave his wife. He’d fight, and she’d have to watch him die. “Please,” I begged, choking on the words. My chest heaved with emotion, and I sputtered, “S-show mercy.”

“Show mercy?” The panthera-magî asked, his eyes widening as if he found the concept foreign. He studied me, his lips pursing, and then glanced at one of the Serîk.

I followed his gaze to the magî with honey-colored hair a shade darker

than Svîk's in time to see the magî jump as though pulled from a stupor.

Bîcav glared at the leader and then muttered, "He'll fight until you kill him."

Panthera-magî's lip curled, and his gaze returned to me. "Here in Pûleêr, do they show mercy?"

I blinked, initially surprised by the question but then more so by my inability to answer. The word mercy meant little to me here except possibly in reference to leniency regarding punishment. In the last four months, I couldn't remember anyone in Pûleêr ever being punished—except by exclusion or the land, both of which, incidentally, *didn't* show any mercy. "Please?"

His eyes hardened, the vibrancy of blue shifting to sharp crystalline. He focused his attention on the other two captives before glancing over the rest of my work group. "You want me to show mercy?" he asked. "How much?"

Hope sparked in my chest, and I looked from Rojek to Dawi before looking up at the leader. "As much as you can. These people work hard, every day, to keep back the jungle. Your . . . interruption has cost our group precious time." I pointed behind us to where I knew Svîk's body lay in pieces and, with my lip curled, asked, "Would you kill needlessly?"

Glowing, the magî stepped closer to me, the muscles in his neck going taut as he clenched his jaw. "Needlessly?" He paused and sucked in a breath. "I don't do anything needlessly."

I nodded, agreeing with his ridiculous statement. He'd killed Svîk, and I was certain his death was not necessary, but I would agree to almost anything right now. I needed to stop any more deaths from happening. I looked to the rest of the people from Pûleêr for support, but no one else in the entire work group said or did anything as if they already believed the effort would be futile.

But these men had come for a reason, and Panthera-magî knew Svîk . . . and they said we had strong magîk. My mind spun as I tried to make the pieces fit together in a way that made sense, but all I could think was Rojek would die if they tried to force him to come.

"Please," I whispered. "Let him stay with his bondmate. I promise . . ." If Svîk had betrayed the shifter and ended up here . . . My mind spun, but nothing made sense. "I'll do whatever you want. I'll come with you, no fighting . . . do whatever you say. Please."

He studied me, the intensity making me feel as though I was naked all the

way to my soul, and then he asked, “You want mercy—for them?”

I nodded, still desperate to make it right for Dawi.

“How many of you knew the Serîk you called Svîk killed several of your magî?” he asked, eyeing the rest of the group. He waited, but no one raised their hand.

An emotion crawled through my chest, something I didn’t even want to examine, and I scrutinized the magî, my neighbors, my fellow village-mates, but not one looked up from the ground. My captor cleared his throat, drawing my attention back to him.

He gazed down at me and asked, “Don’t for a moment believe no one knew.” He shifted his attention to one of his men. “Bîcav? How many knew?”

I spun toward the Serîk and the one with honey-colored hair, the one who had confirmed that Rojek would fight, and watched as he scanned the cluster of magî. He met my gaze and, with a rough voice, said, “More than half of them.”

“You’re lying,” I rasped.

The blond, Bîcav, grunted. “I don’t lie. They knew what he was—and what he was doing.”

“Do you really believe it would be a mercy to spare these fools?” Panthera-magî asked. “If we allow them to breed, it will perpetuate their idiocy and fear on generations to come. They won’t be heroes.”

His harsh offense hit me, but far worse was the doubt about their integrity. And if Bîcav was right . . . what about Svîk? Panthera-magî raised his eyebrows, and I was stuck in the trap of his questions. Would my answer even matter? It would for one family—and Dawi had been kind. “I’ll do anything you ask.”

He stared at me for a long moment then, still looking at me, he said, “Fine. Let him go.”

“Done,” his man said.

Nebe let out a wail, but I could hear Rojek’s squishing footsteps as he ran, hopefully to his wife.

Panthera-magî grimaced and, in a low growl, said, “Fetid rot, shut that magî up.” He offered me a grim smile and tugged on my arm, indicating I should follow. “That’s all the mercy I have in me. Now, let’s go, Taja.”

I jerked my head to stare at him and asked, “How do you know my name?”

I marched beside the leather-clad leader, my mind churning and spinning. The world around me blurred, the overwhelming confusion spreading to all my senses as I reeled. Panthera-magî had to be lying about Svîk, trying to get me to hate my friend. Svîk had been my rock, and I would spend every minute of every day devising a way to execute justice on the magî at my side.

“She blames you,” one of the three men behind us said. “You’d better fix that, or you’ll need to look over your shoulder every single minute.”

I glanced back to see who was speaking, but Panthera-magî yanked me forward with another growl. *Nice. He really is an animal.* For some reason, the thought made me think of mated pairs, and I couldn’t help but *grudgingly* admit he was attractive—at least physically.

Someone snorted, but this time I didn’t even bother trying to see who.

The three magî with swords followed us, and I blinked, shocked with the sudden awareness that we were already at the Little Rê. My thoughts stuttered as the memory of Svîk’s gruesome death flashed in my mind, and I shuddered violently. I had no way to reconcile the panthera-magî’s accusations of Svîk, the fight with him, and the constant friend he’d been to me.

“Here,” the leader snapped, propelling me forward, his touch far gentler than his tone. “Bîcav, keep an eye on her for a moment. This is where the girl was hidden.”

The dark-haired magî shifted into the melanistic apex and disappeared into the jungle. I stared after him and then turned my attention to the horses on the opposite side of the trail into Pûleêr.

I frowned, counting the horses a second time—still only four, and then said, “Wait. What happened to the other guy?” I asked. “The one in the sulu. Where did he go?”

One of the men laughed, and another one asked, “This one?”

The bare-chested male in a sulu appeared in front of me on the road, waved, and then evaporated.

“He’s an illusion?” I asked, my chest heaving as I hyperventilated. Looking away, my gaze landed on Nebe, who was quiet and calm. *Holy Kânkârâ*. I stared at the magî holding her and choked out, “Are you controlling her mind?”

The magî with shorn hair shook his head. “Just what she sees and hears.”

Which is pretty much like controlling her mind.

“No,” Bîcav said. “There are limitations for each of us.”

The panthera stepped out of the undercanopy’s thick foliage and stopped in front of me. He opened his mouth and dropped two things into the mud.

Captivated, my attention remained on the ground even as I felt the magî shift beside me.

“Keep your focus,” Panthera-magî grumbled. “Not on entertaining the prisoners.”

“Got it, Rûnê,” one of the magî answered. “Whatever you say.”

His name was Rûnê—so close to Ruin, and yet nothing like my panthera. *Unless he really was protecting me from Svîk*. My heart thundered with the thought, the concept frightening in a way I wasn’t ready to acknowledge.

I swallowed and bent down, picking up the scrap of fabric. Running my thumb over the faded-blue garment, I felt my heart stopped when I recognized it. With my stomach turning, I hoarsely choked out, “How?”

“Two female magî kidnapped her and tied her to a tree for Svîk. The two of them fought—Svîk and your friend—before he killed her. Her body is mostly gone, but the bones are still there if you want more proof,” Rûnê said. “Or you might recognize this? She had it in her hand.”

He scooped up the thin leather cord—more worn than I remembered—and set it on top of the piece of Esi’s tunic, the silver charm still bright and untarnished. Bile burned the back of my throat, and I shook my head. Tears blurred my vision as the memory surfaced. Esi’s soul talking to me, telling me not to trust him, and then Svîk appeared—without his necklace. My thoughts tumbled incoherent with the fresh grief.

Rûnê continued, “There were two more victims. Women who lied to you

—told you there was a conda who killed your friend’s mother. He killed them in a mangrove forest. You saw the blood on his hands.”

“How would you even know that?” I whispered.

“It’s his magîk,” Bîcav said, his face pinched with emotion.

I nodded, but it made no sense. Panthera-magî’s magîk was obviously his ability to shift—or something about picking out the magî with power—or . . . Someone was lying, and I had no way of knowing. Overwhelmed, I tried to put the pieces together in some other way that could make sense, but I couldn’t process *anything* more. Tears dripped down my cheeks, unheeded, but I wasn’t even sure who I was mourning—or why. I only knew the wrongness of *everything* today was too much.

“We’re done here,” the panthera-magî, Rûnê , said. “Mount up.”

“Wait . . . wait,” I begged. “Just tell me something else. Give me some answers, please . . . How did you know Svîk? How did he betray you?” I asked in a rush. “How did you know my name? How—” *is any of this possible?*

This time when Rûnê looked at me, the ferocity in him singed the air between us. He lowered his head and looked me in the eyes. “You thought his name was Svîk?”

I nodded, a little less sure of my conclusions. How could they know each other and not know names?

“Basvîk swore an oath, and he broke it.”

“What was the oath?” I demanded. If I pushed hard enough, I’d find the flaw in his logic or his magîk. I was determined to discover the truth through the lies.

He mumbled something else under his breath and then looked at his guard.

Bîcav grimaced. “You’d better tell her everything. She probably won’t believe you, but you should tell her.” His shoulders dropped and then he added, “I didn’t know that happened in the clearing.” He coughed, closed his eyes and shuddered. “I’m sorry. I-I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” I asked.

Bîcav looked at me. His eyes reminded me of my friend, only right now, the Serîk’s eyes were filled with pity—for me. I studied him, noting he had wavy hair like Svîk, too. Bîcav’s complexion was darker though, and right now, the black-clad warrior’s face was tight with restrained emotion. There was something deeper, darker, beneath the pity and anger.

“Are you sure you want to know?” Rûnê asked me, drawing my attention back to him. When I nodded, he continued, but the ferocity was gone. “Basvîk promised to keep my . . . friend safe. But apparently he didn’t. I don’t know much more right now, no idea when or how the two of you ended up together, but . . .” He took a deep breath, and when he spoke next, his voice was quiet, subdued, and just for me. “Do you remember the Serîk in the clearing—the one you were fighting with—your first memories?”

My eyes widened, but I refused to give him anything.

“The Serîk who attacked you, your most vivid memory, from just over six months ago.” He crouched and looked me in the eyes. “That Serîk wearing crimson pants was your friend, *Svîk*.”

“No,” I said, my breaths coming in short gasps. There was no way that was possible. “You’re lying.”

But I remembered the trepidation I’d felt the first time I’d seen *Svîk*. I remembered the familiarity of the timbre of his voice and the reservation I’d felt yesterday and even this morning, I’d put so much effort into talking myself into . . . what? I swallowed hard, the answer sticking in my throat: trying to have a relationship with him. I blinked and studied Rûnê.

His eyes flashed from blue to green to yellow, and then he shuddered. Green—just like . . . Which would explain *why* I’d felt so at peace when he’d first walked by. Oh rot. How could he . . . be Ruin?

Shaking his head, he frowned.

“Tell her,” Bîcav snapped.

My gaze bounced to the guard and then back to his leader, hyperventilating as disbelief strangled me.

Rûnê bowed his head and whispered, “I was there—sort of. That panthera was . . . *is* . . . me . . . now.”

I jerked, and my stomach dropped. If that was him, that would mean . . . I swallowed as heat spread low in my abdomen and a fierce sense of possessiveness stormed through me. No. I refused to believe that. “If that was you, then you lied earlier when you said you’d never seen me. Were you lying then or now? How can I trust anything you’re saying when at least part of it is a lie?”

“Stop,” he growled. His eyes flashed green again, and he trembled. “I don’t care if you trust me or not, but I’m not lying. And I didn’t lie before either. I don’t need to explain myself to you.” He pushed me toward one of the other magî in black leather. “Bîcav, it’s your turn. I need time. I can’t,” he

said. He strode to his horse and mounted, snapping instructions to his men about the prisoners. “Let’s go. If we ride hard, we might make it out of here before the Serîk come.”

“Aren’t you the Serîk?” I asked, glancing at the group of magî in leather.

Fetid rot.

Black leather. I swallowed as the realization sunk in. These weren’t Serîk from the kûmdâr. These were magî-guard from the Zîv.

“Where are we going?” I asked, suddenly filled with new trepidation.

The magî mounted their horses, and I followed Rûnê with my gaze. When he said nothing, I turned to Bîcav. “Where are we going?”

“Yândarî,” he muttered. “You don’t know who you are, and apparently neither do we. We need to find out.”

“Taja,” Rûnê said, swinging his leather clad leg over his horse as he mounted the beast. “You’ll ride with Bîcav.”

My gaze darted to the other Serîk in time to not only hear his strangled protest but to see the emotions narrow his eyes and harden his jaw.

Bîcav was taller than the other magî, and less tanned than the other two Serîk, but still not as pale as Rûnê. The guard was built, big muscles and broad-shouldered, and his entire frame stiffened with the order. He opened his mouth and then slowly closed it. Giving a sidelong glance to Rûnê, Bîcav grabbed my arm and said, “I hope you’re right, but I still don’t like it.”

“I’m not crazy about the idea either, just so you know,” I ground out. I looked down at the scrap of fabric in my hand, the piece of Esi’s tunic, and Svîk’s necklace—the evidence of my naiveté. How was it possible the magî I thought was my best friend actually killed my best friend and I didn’t know? My throat clogged with emotion—loss, hurt, betrayal, and guilt—but after everything else that had happened today, I refused to bawl in front of these monsters. I scrubbed the tears from my eyes and cleared my throat, but my feelings continued to swell, making me nauseated. How did he fool me? How could the magî of Pûleêr let him control them? How was it even possible for him to manipulate so thoroughly?

“He was not what you think,” Bîcav said as he crouched down to glare at me. “And you better not throw up on me.”

We mounted the horses and started to ride, but the guard behind me grew more rigid every second until he finally bellowed, “I know. I heard it—every single time.” He exhaled and pulled his horse closer to Rûnê and muttered, “You’re practically shouting it at me. Stop apologizing and tell me what

happened instead.”

There was silence for several minutes, and I turned in the saddle to see Bîcav wide-eyed, looking from me to Rûnê. “She told him—you—that?”

“What?” I sat up, balling my hands. “What are you saying?”

Bîcav looked down on me, his eyes glistening, but his face was filled with pity—for me. “In the clearing, you told Ruin, the panthera, to gut the Serîk who’d attacked you.”

I exhaled, and all of the fight left with my breath. That memory was seared in my mind, and the only one who would know it was Ruin. While almost nothing else made sense, they’d told the truth.

“Will you help me get the rest of my answers? Help me find out who I am?” I swallowed back the hope and fear, both battling through me, and added, “Please?”

Bîcav’s gaze went to his leader, and I shifted to stare at the dark-haired magî.

The air around him seemed to sizzle, and I had to stuff down the yearning to reach out to him. He leaned forward, and Bîcav coughed—or chuckled—making the panthera-magî straighten.

“Fine,” he growled. “We want the same answers anyway.”

I took a deep breath and decided to play nice. Because right now, in this moment, finding answers was enough.



Turn the page for a sneak peek at book 2, Illusions!



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ILLUSIONS—SNEEK PEEK

I glanced back toward Pûleêr, and my stomach lurched. Would I ever go back? Sadness gripped my chest and twisted because everything there was a lie.

“Probably not,” Bîcav answered my question from behind me. “But would you really want to?”

I didn’t bother answering him or asking how he knew my thoughts. He must have telepathy magîk or something like it. Instead, I probed for more information—the only thing I could think of to distract me. “Are we really going to Yândarî?”

Bîcav didn’t answer, but I wasn’t sure if it was because he didn’t know or if he didn’t want me to know. I opened my mouth to ask him another question, but he cut me off.

“Don’t. Not now. I need to listen so we don’t get caught.”

Not getting caught sounded important. And while I wasn’t sure I agreed with their plan—Rot, I didn’t even know what their plan was—I was equally unsure about my disagreement. I felt worse than I had when I came to my senses in the clearing with Ruin because I had no one to trust—including my own judgement.

We rode all day, staying on the Western Rê, stopping once when Nebe asked to use the bathroom. We ate fruit from the Nerazî and then continued our journey. I stared at the muddy earth and the foliage of the Nerazî for hours, and the longer I looked, the more perplexed I became. The Western Rê was completely clear; the ground muddy, but not overtly so; the horses didn’t struggle with their steps, and the muck didn’t cling tenaciously to their

hooves. There were leaves mixed in with the dirt, but most shocking of all, there were no workers beating back the growth from the Nerazî. The dense jungle just stopped at the edge of the road. Why was it different here? Did Svîk come to Puleer for me, or had he been hiding, like he said? Were these magi telling the truth or manipulating me with their lies? Because if Svîk had known who I was, why did he say he didn't? He'd been so angry—

“That way, Rûnê,” Bîcav said, suddenly yelling over my head. “There’s another small outpost down the next path on your right.”

“Bawêrî? Is it good?” Rûnê asked, slowing his mount. Of course the horse was all black like the fur of his beastly form, probably like his soul.

“I’m picking up mostly minor magî,” the other Serîk answered. “But there’s a few with some strength. It’s as good of a place as any.”

Rûnê glanced up at the canopy. The deepening hues of light filtering through the leaves declared the day almost done. “Do we know the name of this post?”

“Not yet,” Bîcav said. “We’ll be close enough in a few minutes for me to hear their thoughts. Then I’ll let you know.” He took a deep breath, his chest pushing me forward, and then, just loud enough for me to hear, said, “That was Svîk’s amulet.”

“How would you know?” I asked, turning in the saddle to examine him. I was desperate to know if I could trust them, and something about Bîcav’s reaction to Svîk’s death—especially toward Rûnê—gave me a wisp of hope.

The emotion ravaging my captor’s face made me gape. I blinked and turned around without saying anything more—mostly because whatever other questions I’d had were gone in the face of his pain.

Bîcav cleared his throat and then whispered, “He was my brother.”

I closed my eyes, trying to shut out his anguish while processing this new bit of knowledge. My thoughts flitted from piece to piece of information, loosely grasping for meaning as well as attempting to put them in an order that made sense.

“Bîcav?” Rûnê snapped. “The name!”

The Serik swore under his breath, and pity welled up from inside me. Keeping my eyes closed, I muttered, “This is Terit.”



THE OUTPOST TERIT was almost exactly like Pûleêr. A branch off the Western Re led into the post with a bell tower at the junction of the Little Re and what I assumed was their perimeter road. Inside the entrance was a communal area with a large building I assumed was a kitchen. To the left of the kitchen were privy houses—much nicer than we’d had in Puleer—and to the right of the communal kitchen, a small chicken coop and a pen of goats. Several dozen tables filled the clearing, far more than in Puleer, and the magi of Terit sat enjoying a hearty meal of taro and plantains when we arrived.

Bêrde’s friendly magi-illusion called a greeting, and the group froze, the clatter of dropped dishes a forboding welcome.

Before I could mutter a snide comment, female magi burst into tears, followed by the screams of young ones. The distress in the clearing became palpable, and I glanced at Rûnê. He clicked and urged his mount into the clearing and then descended, the rest of our party following.

“Nice welcome,” I muttered, feeling my own alarm simmering anew. What was I doing here with these men? I’d promised Rûnê to go with him so he’d spare Rojek, but did that matter now?

“It matters,” Bîcav said, lifting me off the horse. “If you promise Rûnê, or anyone who means something to him, it matters.”

Right. Disembowelment. I liked my guts right where they were. Bîcav stepped away from me, and my morbid thoughts jumped back to Svîk’s death, and then my stomach turned. Why did he go to such lengths to manipulate me—to isolate me? Poor Esi—Fetid rot. Esi had a cousin in Terit. Could I find her? And then what . . . I looked past the clearing to the darkening Nerazî. Could I escape in the jungle?

Bîcav snorted.

“Please,” the smiling man said, waving his hands at the villagers. “Please, calm yourselves. We—”

“Don’t promise them false,” Rûnê growled, almost like he’d overheard my conversation with Bîcav. “We’ll have to find at least one or two here to take with us.”

Bêrde frowned, and the image faltered before solidifying again. “We will sup with you tonight,” the illusion said. “And please accept our gratitude for your hospitality.”

Hospitality. The occupants at the table nearest to where Rûnê stood lashing his horse to the rail by the kitchen cleared out, most of them leaving their plates. That was some serious permissiveness—or fear.

“Don’t say anything to them,” Bîcav said. He stared at me and added, “Any of them. You don’t know her cousin’s name, and it wouldn’t do you or her any favors if you did find her.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I snapped. I was pretty much done with being told what to do and not do. I was pretty much done with today.

He merely shrugged as he stepped around me. “Suit yourself. You’ll only make it worse.”

I grimaced, not even sure what *it* he was referring to. And worse for who?

The air smelled of sweat, mud, and overripe fruit. I filed through the kitchen, saying nothing as the server slopped taro on my plate. Nebe stood in front of Bawêrî who stood in front of Bêrde who stood in front of Bîcav. I turned around, looking for the last member of our party, and met the dark gaze of Rûnê.

He said nothing, just watched me with those predatory eyes, his pupils so wide they swallowed all of the blue. He smiled, a tight expression that reminded me I was his captive.

How had I believed I was safe with him? How could he be Ruin? Why the rot did I promise him anything? My skin crawled, and I narrowed my eyes, my witty retorts abandoning me. I faced forward, and Bîcav’s dark eyes pinned me, the depths brown instead of black or blue but just as hardened. “What?” I snapped, finding my voice. “What’s your problem?”

Bîcav pursed his lips, his features pinching into a troubled expression. “Nothing,” he said, raising his gaze over my head. “Nothing.”

I grabbed my plate and stepped out of line. Whatever fare I was missing didn’t matter. My appetite was gone, just like my freedom. “I hate you both.”

I marched out into the clearing and to our table, skirting past Nebe, Bawêrî, and Bêrde to the opposite end. I pushed back a plate to make space for my own and dropped the dish to the table. I shoved a bite of plantain into my mouth, hardly tasting the dry, starchy sustenance as I forced myself to chew and swallow.

Someone set a mug of liquid in front of me, and I caught a flash of his black jerkin. He came around the table and sat on the bench across from me, but I kept my gaze down, not wanting to know which of the men was showing concern.

“It’s not about concern,” Bîcav said. “It’s survival. If you get dehydrated, you’ll slow us down. Every member affects the entire party; the collective strength is only that of the weakest member.”

“I’m the weakest?” I asked, jerking my head up to glare at him. “Then why bother?”

A second mug slammed to the table, milky coconut water sloshing over the rim and puddling on the wood. A moment later, Rünê’s scent wafted across to me, and he said, “Don’t answer that.”

Maybe I should be scared. Nebe seemed plenty scared, sitting quietly by Bawêrî while she picked at her food. I glared at the two magî across from me, the livid simmer making it impossible to think rationally. Why couldn’t I remember who I was? I had to know something, but all I got for my frustration was a dull headache. I needed a break.

“Drink your water,” Bîcav said. “Before you take a minute to yourself, finish that entire mug.”

I swung my leg over the bench, ready to leave when Rünê cleared his throat. “If he tells you something, it’s the same as if it came from me.”

My gaze darted from him to Bîcav who pointed at the mug. Was he kidding me? I had to obey them when they told me to eat and drink, too?

The rest of the villagers remained sitting at their tables, and I wondered if there was an understanding I was unaware of. Probably. Undoubtedly.

I rotated back toward them and leaned over until Bîcav met my gaze. I spoke slowly, enunciating every word. “Stay. Out. Of. My. Head.”

Rünê growled, and I swung my head to glare at him, but he merely pointed to the mug.

I picked it up and sipped at the tepid fluid. I hated coconut water. I hated coconut everything. I wanted cheese, creamy, tangy goat cheese. Maybe with some nuts and fruit. I dreamed about my favorite foods while I sat, playing with my taro and sipping on the disgusting liquid.

“No,” Bîcav said suddenly, drawing my attention. “There’s too much suspicion, and they know too much. That won’t work here.”

He frowned at Rünê and paused, the silence between them stretching, his expression darkening as if listening to bad news.

“My limitation is not a failure,” Bîcav said, clenching his hands. He leaned over the table and continued in a low voice, “At least we have an answer so we don’t do anything foolish.”

I tilted my head back as I finally understood. While Rünê was silent, Bîcav was pulling the questions out of the panthera-magi’s mind. But Rünê lacked telepathic power, so Bîcav had to answer out loud. I was hearing one side of the conversation, leaving me to wonder what Rünê’s questions were.

“You could take one or two here and then go to the next outpost and see. It all depends.” Another pause, and then Bîcav shrugged. “I can’t know until we’re there.”

Rünê clenched his teeth, and his nostrils flared. “We’re running out of time.”

The last of the sun’s light melted away into the encroaching darkness as I finished my water. The people of Terit remained in the clearing, but torches suddenly sparked, lit either by magîk or flint, and I saw people moving in the shadows as they worked. The orange glow bathed the common area in contrasts, and I glanced at the members of this outpost, wondering why they didn’t band together to fight against the small group of Serîk.

I drained the last of my mug. The warm liquid might be good for me, but it didn’t taste good. I set the clay mug on the worn wooden table and asked, “Now, may I be excused? Or would you rather I relieve myself in your presence?”

Rünê looked at Bîcav who nodded. Yeah, he so wasn’t staying out of my head.

“You have five minutes to be back,” Rünê said without looking at me. “Or Bîcav will come in and get you.”

“What if I’m blocked up?” I asked, wiping a lock of my dark hair away from my face. The retort escaped before I had time to think it through, but as soon as it was out, I realized I didn’t care. I doubled down and glared at him.

Rünê dragged his plantain through the sticky taro paste. “Then he’ll have to smell your excrement. I reckon he’ll find his own way to make that even with you.”

Bîcav grimaced and shook his head.

“You’ve got four minutes—” Rünê dropped the plantain and looked up. “—and forty-five seconds, Taja. Better go.”

Hate wasn’t a strong enough word.

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#LOAfortheWIN

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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.

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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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