



## I

I stand, perfectly straight, in front of the mirror.

‘Don’t slouch, Blaze!’ Grandmother barks, prodding me in the back with her stick. She circles me for a full minute, lips pursed. ‘No. No, I think not. Next.’

The seamstress bows her head deferentially to hide the scowl on her face. Needles still clamped between her teeth, she helps me out of the cerulean dress and hands it to one of the attendants. Another gown is quickly produced, this one a pale seafoam. I raise my arms obediently and she eases it over my head, careful not to tousele my hair, which has been twisted into two braids and threaded with small pearls. The dress is huge. It bulges out around me in swathes of ruffled lace. I wrinkle my nose but say nothing. At this point, after a dozen vetoed dresses, I would wear a sack if it pleased Grandmother. She raises a thin dark eyebrow, looks me up and down, then motions with her finger for me to spin. I spin.

My twin pops his head round the door of the dressing room, a hand over his eyes.

‘Are you decent?’

‘Depends on who you ask,’ I mutter.

Flint splays his fingers, lowers his hand and snorts loudly. 'You look like a meringue.'

I grab a hairbrush off the dresser and throw it at him, but he shuts the door before it can meet its mark. I hear him laughing to himself all the way down the corridor.

'Next,' Grandmother says with a sigh, settling herself comfortably on a red-silk chaise.

Her own gown is a rich scarlet. Rubies gleam at her throat, the same as those set into the golden hilt of her stick, which is shaped like the head of a cobra – the emblem of our House. Her hair, once darker than my own, is now greying slightly at the temples, and has been bound in crimson spiderweb netting at the back of her neck.

Families like mine always tend to wear their court colour. I have never seen Grandmother in a dress other than red, or adorned with jewels other than her rubies. She is the colour red, to me.

The room is uncomfortably warm, heady with the scent of incense and spiced candles.

'Could you open a window?' I ask an attendant, who flinches as if I've shouted at her. She does as I say, though not before first glancing at Grandmother for confirmation.

It's marginally better, but not much. Valburn, home province of House Harglade, is situated in the heart of the Firelands. Hot, dry and densely populated, it sprawls just to the right of the Rift, the great yawning chasm that splits Ostacre in half, straight down the middle.

The next dress is a light, iridescent turquoise.

'Well, my lady?' The seamstress does not direct this

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question to me, and she is answered with a small, irritated shake of the head.

‘*Grandmother*,’ I implore. ‘It’s fine, they’re all fine. Any will do. I don’t mind, really.’

The seamstress bristles.

‘Well, *I* mind, Blaze, and you should too,’ Grandmother snaps. ‘Do you have *any* appreciation for the planning that has gone into this evening? Have you forgotten exactly *who* will be in attendance? You must look perfect. You must *be* perfect.’

She glares at me with beady eyes, Harglade eyes, deep brown and flecked with gold. I swallow a sigh and nod, defeated.

Today marks seventeen years since the storm, which means that today is my seventeenth Name Day. Flint’s and mine. Tonight Grandmother is throwing a ball, and soon the guests will begin to arrive in their thousands – Ignitia, Ventalla, Terrathian and Aquatori alike, Etheri from each of the four Crown Courts. I’m scared to look at them. To look into the faces of those who think me abhorrent, who perhaps lost loved ones at my hands. Some will have travelled for days – weeks, even – just to catch a glimpse of the girl they call the Storm Weaver. I am made of stories to them, not flesh. They come to put a face to the myth, to peer at me inside my prison as though I were a songbird in a cage. Because in a way, I am. Caged, I mean. I have spent seventeen years hidden away behind steel gates and stone walls. I’m told it’s for my own protection, but really it’s to protect others from me.

Only what they don’t know is that I could not weave another storm, even if I tried. That ever since I was a child,

my abilities have been entirely unremarkable. That whatever power I might have possessed, it's gone. And I am empty.

It's laughable, really. The last Rain Singer, incapable of summoning more than a weak flurry of drizzle.

There seems to be no explanation for it beyond some cruel twist of fate. My gift may have taken others' lives, but it defined mine. Losing it meant losing part of my identity. Without it I'm . . . Well, that's the thing. I'm not quite sure what I am.

Perhaps if I were still able to wield my powers, my confinement might be a little easier to bear. Might help pass the time, too. But I can't. I'm stuck here, in Harglade Hall, hollowed out and useless. I've often wondered whether it's my punishment, retribution for a crime I have no memory of committing. A price placed upon my very existence.

Grandmother tells me not to worry, that one day my rain will return, but I've long suspected that this is a lie designed to comfort me. Best I cling on to hope than drown in the knowledge of my own emptiness. Best nobody discovers that the most hated girl in all the realm is utterly defenceless.

The turquoise gown is removed, a little less carefully this time, and I am once again left standing in my underclothes. I fold my arms over my chest as an attendant approaches nervously, laden with yet more dresses.

Grandmother jabs her stick at a bright cobalt silk embroidered with silver peacock feathers. 'That one,' she announces triumphantly.

The peacock is the emblem of House Bartell. Though it's common in several of our neighbouring kingdoms to take one's father's family name, in Ostacre Etheri take the name

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of the more powerful House, meaning that I am a Harglade, not a Bartell. Perhaps Grandmother feels my father should be represented today despite his absence. I don't have much of an affinity with the peacock, much less my father, who hasn't laid eyes on me since my mother died almost seven years ago. I wonder what she'd make of this, my first public appearance. I wonder what she'd make of me. Sometimes she comes to me in dreams, and I wake with my hand outstretched.

Grief changes people, but it changed my father beyond recognition. The man who once carried me around on his shoulders and brought me back exotic gifts from his every military posting, that calm, kind, steadying presence I had known and loved and leaned on, was suddenly gone, replaced by someone cold and distant, barely there at all. In many ways, it was as if he died, too. But unlike my mother, he couldn't pass on. He couldn't be anything for anyone, much less a father. And he couldn't bear to look at me any more, because I reminded him too much of *her*. So along came Grandmother, who whisked me and my brothers away to Harglade Hall, where we have remained ever since.

The seamstress fastens the last button with a flourish and steps back. Both of us wait for approval with bated breath. The dress is elegant, supple, the bodice closely fitted, the skirts cascading from my hips and pooling on the floor.

The girl in the mirror looks back at me, and I feel as though I hardly know her.

Grandmother nods slowly, satisfied. 'Yes,' she says. 'Good. Beautiful.'

Pearls are hung from my earlobes and looped round my neck, matching the ones woven through my hair. I slip my feet into blue-satin flats and sit patiently as one attendant stains my lips blush pink and another brushes some silvery powder along my cheekbones. Nerves begin to set in then, a series of red-hot pokers jabbing me in the chest. I take a few deep breaths, wiping my palms on my dress and then scowling when I'm scolded for it.

*One more year, I tell myself. Just one more year, and then I'll be free.*

Finally permitted to leave, I set off along the winding stone corridor in search of my brothers. Finding both their rooms empty, I head down the back staircase.

Steam and shouting fill the kitchens. Attendants dart about frantically, for once too busy to notice me. Almost every surface is covered in food. Gold platters groan under the weight of delicate canapés, cheeses, cold meats dusted with pepper and pomegranate seeds, mousses and pies, sugared nuts and iced cakes as tall as my younger brother and twice as wide. I help myself to a strawberry tart before slipping out again, deciding to try the library.

This is where I spend most of my time. I must have read every book in here twice over. I used to keep a log of sorts, scoring a line on the loose panel above the fireplace, but gave up after I ran out of space. Grandmother went mad when she found it, arranging for it to be concealed by a tapestry – a rather ugly thing depicting a Harglade cobra emerging from flames. There's a book in here somewhere about tapestries, another about the emblems of the Noble Houses of Ostacre. I'm not fussy. I'll read anything: storybooks,

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history books, picture books, thick anthologies filled with poetry and ballads, large leather-bound ledgers detailing anything from Valburn's trading district to the repairs on the roof of Harglade Hall.

But my favourite books of all are the ones about the Otherlands, the wild, mythical isles far across the Second Sea that were once ruled by the Magi. I have studied their ancient languages, pored over maps, dog-eared and yellowing with age. I've always been fascinated by them, ever since I was a child.

Books have been my way of exploring the world I've spent my life locked away from. It's only the idea of seeing the Otherlands for myself one day that keeps me from wallowing too much in self-pity.

Sure enough, Flint is waiting for me as I push open the door to the library.

'*Finally,*' he says in an accusatory way, as if I had gladly volunteered to spend all afternoon being dressed and undressed like one of Renly's dolls. '*There you are.*'

'Here I am.'

The moment I reach my brother he swipes the remainder of the tart from my hand.

As far as fraternal twins go, Flint and I are more or less identical. We have the same unruly dark curls, olive skin and pointed chins. The only real difference between us – if you exclude basic anatomy and the brandmarks on the backs of our hands – is our eyes. While my own are grey and currently wide with indignation, Flint blinks innocently back at me with the signature Harglade brown-gold. He's wearing a thick, heavily embroidered maroon doublet.

‘You look like a carpet,’ I tell him.

Suddenly there’s a scuffle, and our younger brother swings into view, leaping off the sliding ladder attached to one of the towering bookshelves.

‘Blaaaaaaze!’ Renly skids to a halt beside us before sweeping into a bow so low he almost topples over. ‘I’ve been practising,’ he announces proudly.

‘Very impressive,’ I say.

‘Flawless,’ Flint confirms. ‘You’ll put me to shame.’

Ren beams, his smile the spitting image of our mother’s. He has no memory of her, since she died giving birth to him. Sometimes, though it hurts to admit it, I envy him. He doesn’t miss her stories, or the musical cadence of her voice. He doesn’t miss the smell of her perfume, the sweet scent of fig and orange blossom that would arrive in the room before she did and linger long after she’d left. He isn’t haunted by her absence because he never felt her presence. He cannot miss what he never knew.

Willing away the drizzle that threatens to fall above my head, I busy myself fastening the top button of his crimson doublet, which is ever so slightly too big for him. Since House Harglade is one of the most renowned flame-wielding families in the realm, Ren is dressed in Ignitia red. Some Etheri are born with their gifts, like Flint and me, but it’s more common for powers to emerge during infancy. Yet what is unusual, and troubling, is that at six years old, Ren remains giftless. Grandmother says he’s a late bloomer, that we must be patient. But still, I worry. I often find myself watching the candles when he’s nearby, waiting desperately for a sign. That he’s inherited the gift of fire, not water. That

he's like them, and not an anomaly like me. Or worse, that he's as empty as I've become.

'It's almost time,' says Flint. 'Shall we watch the arrivals?'

I hesitate, my insides twisting. Never, not once in seventeen years, have I had any contact with the outside world. And now, today, the outside world is coming to me.

It feels a bit like being thrown to the wolves. Only the wolves in question are under the false impression that I am the predator.

I glance at Ren, who nods eagerly.

'All right.' I wiggle my fingers so that he takes my hand. 'Come on, then.'

By the time we clamber out the trapdoor of the attic and on to the roof, the clouds are tinged pink and the sun is beginning its slow descent. Harglade Hall is a large stone fortress which sits upon a mound that was once a volcano. Up here, we can see for miles. Valburn stretches out beneath us, a city of slate and iron. The streets are cobbled and the buildings are tall, built high rather than wide. Twisting through the middle of it all is the Creek, the inland waterway which runs like a vein through every province. It glistens, as still as glass.

Flint stabs his finger into the air. 'There!'

Snaking along the western road is a long, trailing procession. I try to make out the colour on the banners. Grey, I think. Grey for the Ventalla. It seems the Court of Wind will be the first to arrive, led by King Balen, King of the Air, the emperor's younger brother. They say he rides a Threskan stallion, the fastest horse in the world. They say he can hear a whisper from a mile off. They say the wind listens for him, like a spy without eyes.

Far below us, the sentries are opening the gates. I dig my nails into my palms as guests begin to spill into the courtyard.

Beside me, Renly positively quivers with excitement. ‘Look!’

I follow his gaze to where a sea of green is making its way down a rocky mountain pass. The Court of Leaves are rarely seen out of the Wildlands, preferring to remain in the Grove – the towering forest they call home. I’ve heard that Queen Aspen of the Terrathian refuses to travel on horseback, but rather walks barefoot upon the earth she protects.

Flint jerks his head. ‘Right on cue.’

Crimson banners stream through the city. The Court of Flames travel in a cavalcade of solid-gold carriages pulled by red-maned, red-reined horses. Queen Yvaine of the Ignitia likes to make an entrance. Or rather, I should say, *Aunt* Yvaine. My mother’s eldest sister elevated our family beyond measure when she was Chosen for the emperor’s Crowned Council almost twenty-five years ago.

If I am a story, the Crowned Council are legend. For in Ostacre, kings and queens are not born to rule. Here, crowns are not inherited – they are *won*.

Around every quarter of a century there takes place a Choosing Rite, a deadly competition in which the most gifted young Etheri battle for each of the four thrones. This recurring transfer of power is designed to preserve one thing – youth. Unlike the frail, decrepit monarchs of some of our neighbouring kingdoms, Ostacre’s rulers are forever sound of mind and able of body, for they are replaced by the next generation before they have the chance to grow old. And

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what with most of the current Crowned Council beginning to reach middle age, there are already murmurs about how soon the next eclipse will occur, signalling the Gods' call for new leadership. When the time comes, I know that it is my family's wish that Flint be branded an Heir to the Ignitia throne. Aunt Yvaine has been training him since he was younger than Renly. That's the one silver lining in all this. My lack of power, alongside the fact that my birth almost wiped out the empire, means that I will never be an Heir.

'We'd better get going,' Flint says, shielding his eyes from the setting sun.

I nod, but something stops me from rising to my feet.

I sense them before I see them, before Renly tugs at my dress and points. A fleet of boats with swirling blue banners is weaving its way along the Creek. With neither wind, nor sails, nor oarsmen, the vessels sail swiftly towards us on the shimmering water.

The Court of Waves.

And leading them is the largest boat of all, a gigantic beast carved from pale driftwood and curved at one end like a horn. Even from here I can make out the emblem engraved on its prow – a silver swordfish. My breath catches.

Queen Hydra of the Aquatori.

I wasn't sure she'd come. It must have taken weeks to travel to Valburn from the Lagoon, her court at the southernmost tip of the realm. But here she is. Here they are. All of them come to see me.

Unease pools in my throat. For while I will forever be the odd one out among my flame-wielding family as a Rain Singer, I don't belong entirely to the Aquatori either.

The Rain Singers were a group of Aquatori who possessed the power not only to manipulate water but also to summon the rain. Though they lived side by side with their Aquatori brothers and sisters for many years, their abilities could be unpredictable and often dangerous, and eventually led to a divide, with many of the Rain Singers breaking away, forming a colony of their own in the depths of the Waterlands. It's said they grew savage, cut off from civilization, driven mad by the rain's song.

The last known sighting of a Rain Singer was over half a century ago. They were believed to have died out, a species deemed extinct.

That is, until I was born.

The last Rain Singer – an aberration, a mystery, an ill-timed punchline to a joke that isn't funny.

Flint claps his hands impatiently, startling me. 'Time to go.'

'Yes,' I agree, gathering myself. 'Grandmother will be looking for us.'

And so she is. She's tapping her stick impatiently at the top of the grand staircase, barking at passing attendants.

'At last!' she exclaims. 'And *what*, exactly, have you been doing?'

'Oh, just making myself look pretty, Grandmother,' Flint tells her.

She fixes him with an icy glare, which rapidly melts into a fond smile. Renly tries to dart past her but she catches him by the shoulders. '*Best behaviour*,' she warns.

Guests are already swarming the entrance hall below. A cacophony of voices reverberates around the stone walls, and a tight knot coils itself inside my stomach like a fist.

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‘Stand up straight, Blaze,’ Grandmother hisses as she motions for Flint to walk on her right side, me on her left.

I bite the inside of my cheek, hiding my trembling hands in the folds of my dress. The noise in the entrance hall is deafening now, and many Etheri have started glancing up at the staircase.

Grandmother grips her stick, inhaling sharply through her nose. ‘Ready?’

I think it’s supposed to be a question, but she says it like a command.

*No, I think. No, I’m not ready, Grandmother. Not now, maybe not ever.*

But I just swallow hard, forcing my feet to move as we begin the descent. The stairs swim in and out of focus. Faces blur. The world tilts.

Grandmother steadies me with a bony hand on my arm. ‘Remember what I taught you,’ she whispers. ‘Grateful and graceful, my darling one. Grateful and graceful.’

I smile and smile and smile, as if I belong.