

# ERIN M. EVANS

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# FIRE IN THE BLOOD

A BRIMSTONE ANGELS NOVEL AND COMPANION TO *THE ADVERSARY*

FIRE  
IN THE  
BLOOD

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LESSER EVILS  
THE ADVERSARY



**ERIN M. EVANS**

FIRE  
IN THE  
BLOOD





## **FIRE IN THE BLOOD**

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*For those who love the Realms above all else—especially Brian Cortijo  
and Ed Greenwood, without whom I could never have finished  
this book on time.*

*And for Kevin and Idris, always.*



Tanalasta

Filfaeril Selzair

Born 1311, Died 1390



  
Azoun Obarskyr  
the Fourth of that name

Born 1307, Died 1371



Foril Obarskyr

Born 1332, Died 1334



Nalara Marliir

Born 1373, Died 1468



Solatha Boldtree

Born 1417



Embar Obarskyr

Born 1405, Died 1437



Erzoured  
Obarskyr

Born 1438



Darmra  
Coermaeril

Born 1440, Died 1482



Nalance  
Crownsilver

Born 1434, Died 1468

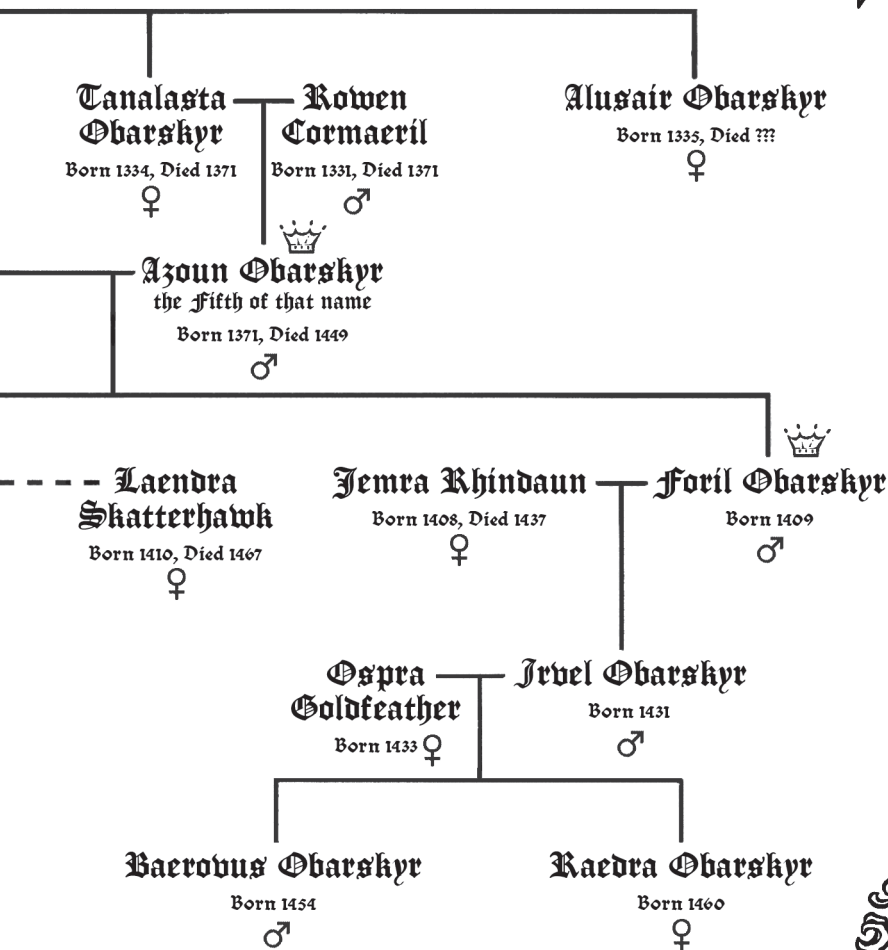


Aubrin  
Crownsilver

Born 1460



# The Royal Line of Cormyr





# PROLOGUE

*8 Mirtul, the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls (1486 DR)*  
*Two days' march from Saerloon, Sembia*

THE DAMNABLE RAIN DIDN'T HAVE THE DECENCY TO STOP WHEN SPRING came. If it would just stop raining, Irvel thought wearily, everything else would be simpler to deal with. The war, his children, the godsbedamned succession . . .

And Lancelord Beliard Greatgaunt, stomping toward Crown Prince Irvel Obarskyr's tent through the muddy field, wearing a scowl that Irvel dearly wanted to order right off the good lord's face.

"He's coming from an audience with Prince Baerovus."

Irvel jumped at the sudden voice. He scowled back at the Lord Warder, a man as broad and burly as a bear, but wearing fine silk robes of dark purple. Unlike everything else in the camp, the war wizard wasn't even damp.

"For the last time, Vainrence," Irvel said, "don't creep up on me."

Vainrence raised his brows. "My apologies, Your Highness, but no one crept," he said, unapologetic as the Lord Warder always was. "I walked in through the other entrance, and announced myself, as asked."

"Damnable rain," Irvel said. He rubbed his forehead. "You have my apologies, Lord Warder. I find I'm a bit on edge."

"Perfectly understandable," Vainrence allowed. "I shall speak more loudly next time." He looked past Irvel at the lancelord, now standing at attention in the tent's main entry, his features schooled.

"Your Royal Highness," he said with a little bow—and that did not bode well either. "We have . . . That is, His Highness, Prince Baerovus, has made further requests of the cavalry."

Irvel considered the lancelord, giving himself a moment to curse inwardly. He should have found a way to stock the officers of his army with fellows whose company he enjoyed. Fellows who knew how to deal with his son's strange ways. He'd had the time at the start of the campaign.

"Oh?" he said. "What is it he wants?"

"His Highness feels that the horses would be better at ease if their pickets were spread farther apart," Beliard said in clipped tones that told Irvel all he needed to know about Baerovus's rambling lecture on the well-being of horses. "And that we should move them to the south side of the encampment. Because the cookfires

upset them. Never mind that to keep them under the shelter of the trees would mean the entire camp has to move fifty yards south.”

Irvel suppressed a sigh. “And have you done so?”

“My lord,” Beliard said, “we are nearly set. The men are tired. Reordering the camp on the prince’s whim—”

“It is hardly a whim,” Irvel corrected. “Baerovus is quite well-informed. If he says the horses will do better with such adjustments, I believe him.”

Beliard frowned again. “Irvel, he’s your boy, but—”

“And he’s a prince of Cormyr,” Irvel reminded Beliard. “Therefore due your respect and deference.”

“So you’re asking me to—”

“Present Prince Baerovus with a full assessment of what that exchange would take and with whom he must consult to achieve it.” Knowing Baerovus, realizing he would have to argue with a dozen proud, baffled noblemen would make him back down—the lad could only handle so much conflict. He would be agitated after, but only Irvel would have to hear about the horses’ needs for the next tenday.

Beliard hesitated, and Irvel waited, wondering if the lancelord would say what he was thinking: That Baerovus was odd. That he should have been left behind in Suzail. That Irvel really ought to figure out what to do about Baerovus before it came down to having a moon-eyed fool on the Dragon Throne.

And even though Irvel had thought the same at times, it wouldn’t do to have the lancelord speaking ill of a prince of the blood that way. Nor would he stand there and let someone belittle his poor strange son. He stared Lord Greatgaunt down.

“Is there anything else?”

Beliard cleared his throat. “I will . . . make the necessary assessments. Thank you, my prince.” Irvel nodded and waved him on his way. He waited until the lancelord was out of sight and out of earshot before allowing the smallest of sighs.

“Would you kindly have someone bring Baerovus to me?” he said to Vainrence.

Baerovus arrived soon after, tense and slump-shouldered and peering through the muss of his dark hair, marshaled by another war wizard in flowing, muddy robes. A man of thirty, and still Baerovus moved like a guilty boy. Irvel quashed another sigh. “Well met, Son,” he said. “And good evening.”

“Good evening,” Baerovus said. “What did I do?”

“How are you settled?” Irvel asked. “Ready for a good night’s sleep and an early march?”

“I suppose,” Baerovus said after a moment. “I mean, we must.”

Irvel’s jaw tightened. “Yes,” he reminded the prince. “Say ‘yes, saer.’ A prince of the blood answers always with assurance and vigor,” he said. “Remember, Baerovus: your answers are Cormyr’s answers.”

“Not precisely,” Baerovus said. “Grandfather’s answers are Cormyr’s. One could say yours are Cormyr’s—you’re the crown prince. But, to be precise—”



“Son.”

Baerovus fell silent. But a heartbeat later, he finished, “It’s just I’m only a prince.”

Irvel bit his tongue. He had ridden out of Suzail with so many bright hopes for this war: Sembia’s armies would fall before them, Netheril would reconsider their reach, Baerovus would finally outgrow his oddness and become the sort of man who could inherit the Dragon Throne.

But then the rains had come, Sembia had retreated beyond Irvel’s army’s reach, messages came through the war wizards that Netheril had opened a northern front, and Baerovus was fussing with horses. And still the Great Rain poured down.

In two months, Irvel’s only daughter, Raedra, was meant to wed the son of his dear late friend. It would take a miracle to get back to Suzail in time for the nuptials—they’d moved the wedding three times already, assuming Irvel would surely be back in time. Vainrence told him the minister of protocol was strongly advocating they not move it again, and so unless Irvel managed a miracle, he would miss his daughter’s wedding.

He wondered privately if Halance Crownsilver’s spirit would watch over the ceremony. He wondered if he watched his son, Aubrin, with the same puzzlement as Irvel watched Baerovus.

When the Crownsilver matriarch had produced Aubrin in court, Irvel had scoffed. Halance’s son had died in a featherlung epidemic shortly after Hal was killed—Lady Helindra Crownsilver had sworn to it herself.

“For his safety, Your Majesty,” Helindra had explained. “His father’s claim to the throne shortened too many lives. I would not have laid a child in those same villains’ hands.”

The Hells you wouldn’t, Irvel had thought, considering Aubrin.

Where Halance had been a fierce huntsman, a boisterous goblet-hoister, and a stout-hearted second in a scuffle, Aubrin was slight and quiet, with his great-aunt’s penetrating gaze and a careful way of speaking that made Irvel always think he wasn’t being forthright.

But Irvel’s father, Foril—King of the Dragon Throne—had no such reservations.

“Watching Gods,” the aged king had breathed. “He is my brother come to flesh.”

No one could argue: the young man’s boyish features held an unmistakable resemblance to his grandfather’s, the former Crown Prince Emvar Obarskyr, the accidental architect of so many of the tangled threads that threatened to strangle the court these days.

“Though,” Foril had added a moment later, “a bit *less* flesh. Quite short.”

“Cormaeril blood,” Helindra Crownsilver had supplied.

The war wizards made their tests, brought forth their results, and confirmed the Crownsilvers’ assertions. And Irvel missed poor dead Hal all the more, for if neither of them could have made their sons into men of strength and legend, then at least they would each have had someone in whom they could confide their disappointments.

Baerovus is clever, Irvel thought to himself, as he watched his son staring off at the cavalry lines through the muss of his hair. He is a master with the bow, which is still a weapon, even if it's not a sword. He has a keen eye for detail—some detail—and a way with numbers. A king who is a strategist, not a warrior, is no great shame.

And as for Aubrin . . .

Raedra will straighten him out, Hal, Irvel promised his old friend's spirit. Or possibly drive him to drink.

What a pity Beshaba seemed to ignore all bribes, all entreaties at the prince and princess's births: his son as uncomfortable with the notion of a throne as Irvel would be of a dancing gown; his daughter, the spirited heir Irvel had hoped for, but born second and a girl. The nobles would never countenance Raedra when Baerovus was an option. They might not bear her when Emvar's bastard lines still breathed either. One tidy solution the marriage affords, Irvel thought.

"Are you going to tell me what it is I've done?" Baerovus asked. "I know you'd rather I knew for myself, but I never seem to be right about these things, and the war wizards only come for me when I've done something."

Irvel sighed. "Leave Lancelord Greatgaunt's horses alone, if you please."

"But he's wrong. Shouldn't I correct him?"

"He's a noble, they are frequently wrong," Irvel said. "Leave them to it whenever possible and you will have a long, happy reign one day." Watching Gods, he thought, give him a long, happy reign. And he wished Halance were there again, which brought another measure of grief. If Irvel hadn't seen in Halance a safer steward for his own young children, a regent who might hold the throne for them if—Watching Gods forbend!—anything should happen to Irvel; if he hadn't pressed the king to legitimize yet another bastard of the old prince . . . well, then, Hal wouldn't have been killed and Aubrin would not have become this curious puzzle.

At the very least, Irvel thought, watching his son, Raedra will make certain Aubrin stands beside Baerovus, and keep the baron off the throne. "Do make certain you're ready to leave in the morning, properly armored and all. Don't chase your squire off again, please."

Baerovus fidgeted. "I did not chase anyone off. I simply said I don't want to carry a shield. I can't shoot with a shield. No one can shoot with a shield. And it rubs my arm badly, saer."

"You are not hunting," Irvel said patiently. "You are leading a company into battle. You will carry a shield with your insignia and a sword. You will use them as you need, as befits a prince of the blood. And you will be ready to do so when we march again."

Baerovus stared down at the muddied rug. "Yes, Father. Saer."

"Go rest," Irvel said, dismissing Baerovus. After the young man had bowed and hurried off, he turned to see Vainrence, still watching.

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"I'm sure my prince is aware he could assign Prince Baerovus a shield bearer," Vainrence said. "The second Azoun was renowned for his archery skills. Prince Baerovus would not be the first."

Irvel sighed. "Prince Baerovus has too many obstacles as it is. Let him learn to look like a king while he can. And Azoun the Second may have been an archer, but he never marched into battle without a sword in hand—don't tell me otherwise."

"I can still return him to Suzail," Vainrence said. "It would be safer."

"Suzail is as full of ill-settled assassins as Sembia." Irvel snorted, even though that wasn't so. He'd be damned if all the army saw him treat Baerovus as a weakling. "He is hale, he is here, and he will lead a company."

"As you like," Vainrence said. He bowed and slipped out the rear of the tent, quieter than the constant patter of rain on the oilcloth. Irvel allowed himself another small sigh, and said a little prayer to Tempus, Tymora, and Beshaba that they'd meet the Sembians in battle soon and nothing else would go awry.



# PART I

## SYMYLAZARR

### THE FONT OF HONOR

...

*The painting hangs beside the first window in the Hall of Gazes, charmed against fading or dust. The queen bathed in a flood of sunlight is Gantharla First-Queen, and the sword is Symylazarr, the sword all have sworn their oaths of allegiance and fealty upon since Varanth, its first bearer, fell against the goblins of Hlundadim. The young knight at her feet is Oric Redsphear, who will die in his duty, defending the queen's son at Marsembler. Archons linger in the corners of the painting, and the red-haired queen is stern as Kelemvor. The sword lies heavily on the kneeling knight, so thickly painted one could trace its edges with blind touch. All is solemn. These promises are unbreakable.*

...



# 1

*12 Mirtul, the Year of the Nether Mountain Scrolls (1486 DR)*

*Suzail, Cormyr*

THE UNWELCOME POWERS OF THE NINE HELLS' PACT FELT LIKE THREADS of steel sliding up Farideh's veins. The tiefling woman focused instead on the fringe of scales just over her adoptive father's left eye and waited for the response she'd been dreading for tendays now.

Clanless Mehen stared back, silent. The rain hammering on the roof of the half-empty warehouse was the only sound.

"Think of it like . . ." her twin said, trying a different tack. Havilar frowned and met Farideh's odd eyes with her golden ones.

A curse, Farideh thought. A misfortune. A *blight*.

". . . having a sword that's weighted all wrong," Havilar declared. "It's really just an inconvenience more than anything. Almost not worth mentioning." Her tail lashed the packed earth, betraying her anxiety. "So really, we should just spar—"

"*Thrik!*" Mehen snapped, one word as sharp as a pike. Farideh looked down at the blunted short sword in her hands, at her bronze fingers—save the bone white third finger—clutched around it, at the line of the sparring circle Mehen had drawn just before she and Havilar had told him everything. The feeling of the long-neglected powers tugging at her, sliding along her nerves, demanded Farideh's attention. But they could not compete with waiting for what her father would say next.

"You tell me you're Chosen of Asmodeus," Mehen said, disbelieving. "The Chosen of the *karshoji* god of sin. You tell me Farideh sees souls and that the bursting into flames was all a part of this . . . this . . ." He blew out a breath that popped with tatters of electricity. "And now Havi."

"*Nothing's* happened to me," Havilar protested. "Maybe nothing will?" She twirled her glaive in one hand.

Mehen looked up at Farideh, his nostrils flaring, his tongue fluttering behind his teeth as he tasted the air for trouble. "I don't know," she said. "It might and it might not."

"What did you do?" he asked. "How did this happen?"

Farideh shook her head—nothing so simple. "We were born to the wrong people?" That was what Lorcan, the cambion she drew her pact from—the cambion who'd opened the door to this world of devils and danger and the chance to save people all the same—had guessed. That all the descendants of Bryseis Kakistos, the



Brimstone Angel, had been imbued with power by Asmodeus, to serve his needs in the changing world that threatened his divinity, and promised new avenues to power.

"Did Lorcan tell you it's just an inconvenience too?" Mehen demanded.

"Not exactly," Farideh said. "He says it's just a little benefit. A way for . . ." She swallowed—she still couldn't utter Asmodeus's name. "A way to show off, I suppose."

Mehen shook his head. "What do you have to do in return?"

Farideh shut her eyes, her thoughts full of the vision that had haunted her dreams ever since they had fled the Shadovar internment camp where she'd learned where the strange powers came from. Asmodeus, his ruby rod pointed at her, a strange blue glyph pulsing in his chest. *You have one task*, he'd said. *Stay alive, tiefling. Give no ground. You may find we have more than one goal in common.*

Since then, Farideh had heard nothing. Nothing but the echoing dreams.

"I don't know," she said, unwilling to believe Asmodeus had told her the fullness of his intent. "Nothing for now. Lorcan says . . ." She wet her mouth—she wasn't sure how much Lorcan's assurances should count. He might be the only one of them who knew anything, but she didn't trust him the way she once had. "He says they don't force things. That that's what *demons* do. That they'd rather just work with what I want, so everyone's happy." Mehen's yellow eyes flicked over her, and she sighed. "If nothing else, I should get a little warning."

Mehen paced the edge of the circle, so full of furious energy, Farideh could picture him knocking one of the towering piles of crates over with his fist. Havilar shot her another worried look, and Farideh could imagine exactly what she was thinking—they shouldn't have said anything. Havilar hadn't *wanted* to say anything, had stalled and faltered and it was only when Farideh had decided to tell Mehen about her own state—in the heat of sparring, what if she slipped and changed and frightened Mehen?—that Havilar had relented.

Havilar twisted the pointed end of her glaive against the packed floor and bit her lip—this was exactly why she'd wanted to wait longer. Farideh shook her head once—there was no keeping something like this a secret, not from Mehen. They'd waited long enough already.

Havilar sighed, all full of anxious energy—all of this trouble and now they'd be talking instead of sparring. Farideh reached over and squeezed her hand.

"There must be a priest," Mehen started.

"I don't think it works that way," Farideh said gently. "I think we can just hope he takes it back when he sees I'm not . . ." She shook her head again—not what? Not corruptible, when she'd already taken the infernal pact of a warlock? Not wicked, when she'd followed through on a terrible deal with a devil and aided a Netherese wizard in capturing Chosen? Not an agent of corruption herself, when she'd managed to trap herself and Havilar in the Hells for nearly eight years while the world passed by without them?

"Not the best he can do," she settled on.

That didn't calm her father. Havilar frowned at Farideh again—when Mehen got upset, when he couldn't do anything, he'd try to do too much. They'd be lucky if he didn't drag a parade of priests through here, shouting them down when they told him what he didn't want to hear and cursing the uselessness of gods.

"Does Brin know?" Mehen finally asked.

"No," Havilar said firmly. "Brin does *not* know and he doesn't need to know until something actually happens." Her tail flicked uneasily. "No one tells Brin a word until then. For all anyone knows, this is just Farideh's problem."

Farideh bit her tongue and wished she could unmake her decisions. She wished she could find the right thing to say to guide Havilar through the morass that suddenly surged around her once-fledgling relationship with Brin. She wished a little that he would end it, and at the same time that Havilar would get everything she wanted.

Farideh wondered what became of her when that happened.

"*Karshoj arsuzaailominak*," Mehen sighed. "As if we needed anything else to make this blasted city more of a disadvantage."

"It's not *that* bad here," Havilar insisted. She swept her glaive to one side, back and forth like a deadly pendulum. "I mean the worst thing is that there's nowhere to practice, and Brin's solved that by making us this space."

Farideh did not agree—Havilar was leaving out several of Suzail's difficulties. Once more, they couldn't travel safely and easily without donning cloaks and hoods. Even then, getting out of the tallhouse Brin owned unseen was a challenge—"Lord Crownsilver's tiefling mistress" had become rather notorious.

And that all aside, there was the rain—every day, every single day, it rained. Whether it drizzled or dumped oceans from thunderheads, the sun was scarce and the storms never stopped for long enough to let things dry out. The garden behind the tallhouse—the only place Havilar might have practiced—was little better than a marsh, its stepping-stones steadily sinking in the mud, day by day. It was enough to make anyone cottage-crazed.

But having to worry about what people might think, what they might do, was not Cormyr's issue alone.

"It would be the same if we were anywhere else," Farideh told Mehen. "I'd still have to worry—"

"*We*," Mehen corrected. "This is *all* of our problems, together. Don't forget that."

Problems have solutions, Farideh thought, but did not say. This is nothing but a curse.

"Not to be *flippant*," Havilar said, testing the new word. "But do you think we might still spar?" She shifted on the balls of her feet. "It would give you a chance to think about things, Mehen. And I have been waiting for so long—"

"Has she checked you?" Mehen asked. He turned to Farideh. "Have you checked her? For signs . . . Can you do that? It has to show, doesn't it?"

“She’s fine.”

“Do it now.”

Farideh hesitated. But Mehen’s worried expression wore a hole in her resolve better than any god’s will could. Farideh closed her eyes and tapped into the dark powers. The sudden presence of them gripped the back of her head like a hand made of knives and she winced against it before she opened her eyes.

In any other person, Farideh’s unwanted blessings would change the intangible mark of their soul into a mass of light and shade and color—a mark to signal how corrupted the person was, how easily their soul might be claimed, or what god had already claimed it.

But in Havilar—much as it was when Farideh looked at her own reflection with the soul sight—there was nothing, only a blurriness as if someone had smeared unguent on Farideh’s eyes, but only where Havilar stood.

Because the protection spell remains? Farideh wondered. Or because there is no soul in us to see?

“It’s fine,” she said. “Nothing’s changed.”

“See?” Havilar said. “Nothing’s changed and nothing might even happen, and Farideh’s fine. Now who’s going to try and hit me?”

“Oh, I could start,” a voice called from the dark end of the warehouse. A man strolled out from between the crates and bales, a scarf tied over his face, over his hair, hiding everything but a pair of hazel eyes.

Mehen cursed under his breath. “Turn around. This is a private warehouse, and you’re trespassing.”

“Indeed we are,” the hazel-eyed man said. Farideh spun to see another man ease out of the shadows behind her, and a third and fourth come in through the main doors. Weapons drawn, ropes ready. Farideh hadn’t even heard the doors open. Had they slipped past the carriage driver?

“Where, oh, where are your guards, pretty ladies?” the man behind Farideh said. He was spindly as a shadow, his blade pointed and sleek.

Mehen’s falchion came out so swiftly it might have melted from its scabbard. “Some silks and rugs really worth dying over?”

“We’re not here for goods,” the hazel-eyed man said. “We’ve come for Lord Crownsilver’s tiefling.”

“I *hate* when people call me that,” Havilar said, shifting her glaive around, ready to strike. Farideh felt the edges of shadows ruffling the borders of her skin, trying to hide her from this sudden threat.

“Whoever you are,” Mehen snarled, “whoever sent you, this is your last chance to walk away.” Farideh doubted the men knew to watch the sparks leaping between her father’s sharp teeth. They didn’t turn.

“We’ll take our chances,” the hazel-eyed man said. Four more bodies melted out of the shadows, four more assassins.

Mehen cursed again. Eight to three was no good at all—and Havilar was already dancing on the balls of her feet. The powers of the pact surged up Farideh's veins. She gripped the hilt of her sword hard.

"Carriage," Mehen hissed to his daughters. "Don't get cocky. Do whatever you have to, to get back in the carriage. Clear?"

"Clear," Farideh said.

"Havi," Mehen warned.

"Send the lucky girl forward," the spindly man said. "And we'll leave you to carry the message to his lordship."

Havilar laughed. "Oh, try it, *tiamash*. Let's see what you've brought."

"I said don't get cocky!" Mehen shouted at her as the attackers closed. "Fari, use the—"

"Sword. I know."

Mehen slashed at the man with the rope, forcing him back out of the blade's reach. "That's a *karshoji* practice sword. Toss it and set them on fire. Get your sister some cover."

The powers of the Hells flooded into Farideh, scaling her bones and pouring eagerly into her veins at the unexpected permission. She spread her hands and spoke a word of harsh Infernal. Missiles of brimstone burned out of the ether, sizzling the moisture from the air as they rained down on the hazel-eyed man and his companions.

Havilar slipped out of reach of the slim one's sword and swung the heavy glaive down into him as she did, striking him across the back and knocking the air from him. With the batting still wrapping the blade for safety, there was no cutting them.

Still seething with the powers of the Nine Hells, Farideh pointed two fingers at the glaive. "*Assulam*."

A bolt of dark energy shot from her, crackling through the leather and batting, which burst into tatters and fibers of smoking wool. Havilar didn't so much as spare a glance for Farideh, but caught the advancing blackguard on the blade.

"Carriage!" Mehen bellowed.

"Havi!" Farideh cried. A strong hand clamped down on her shoulder, then another on her wrist. A man's foul, wet breath assaulted her. Unholy rage chased her fury and fear—the powers of Asmodeus's blessing threatening to overtake her.

Calm, she told herself, pulling against her captor.

"Which is she?" he shouted back at the hazel-eyed man.

"Grab 'em both," another answered.

That one reached for Havilar, but froze as a fork of lightning leaped through him, skipping to his nearer fellows, chased by a dampened *boom*. Two bodies lay at Clanless Mehen's feet, and the lightning danced in the gape of his teeth.

Farideh pulled hard on the powers from the Hells, thinning the skin of the plane enough to split it like an overripe peach's. She threw her weight forward, into a fog

of shadow and brimstone, dragging the man with her and stepping free near to Mehen . . . and his deadly falchion. The man's grip tightened briefly as the blade struck, but then his wound was far more pressing than holding tight to Farideh.

"Havilar!" Mehen bellowed. "Stop showing off!"

Two of the attackers lay slumped on the ground at Havi's feet, a third retreating with his hand pressed to a belly wound. Two more circled her, no doubt reconsidering the wisdom of coming for "Lord Crownsilver's tiefling" so lightly armed.

The hazel-eyed man pulled a pouch from his belt and hurled it at Havilar's feet. It burst open, spraying a thin amber liquid over her.

"*Adaestuo*," Farideh spat. Another ball of energy shrieked past the man's ear as the fluid thickened and hardened, trapping Havilar where she stood. She strained against the stuff, trying to move her feet. A fresh flood of terror washed over Farideh. The hazel-eyed man edged around her, a damp-looking rag in hand.

Behind her, Mehen roared as the last pair came after him. Farideh could feel the fire building in her blood, her bones, as she stormed toward Havilar. *Let it go*, that voice like a cultured thunderhead seemed to say. *They don't deserve any less*.

"Havi, duck!" Farideh barked, followed by the sibilant trigger word that peeled a bolt of flames off her fingertips. Havilar dropped under its path, the edges of its flames not nearly strong enough to singe a tiefling. The bolt streaked past and hit the hazel-eyed man in the face, setting his kerchief ablaze.

Havilar straightened, still trapped. Farideh's heart lodged in her throat as the big man came at her sister. Before he reached her, Havilar hefted the polearm up, grabbing it down low and swinging. The side of the blade caught him in the cheekbone with a meaty thud.

Farideh summoned another bolt of the ruinous energy, shattering the amber lump into a burst of shards. Havilar shifted her weight and pulled—once, twice, and then the substance shattered. She stumbled backward.

*Do it. Make them sorry.*

Make for the carriage, Farideh thought, as if shouting over the other voice. She grabbed hold of Havilar and once more leaped through the fabric of the planes, yanking her sister away from the kidnappers, across the warehouse, and within sprinting distance of the door. The driver, Arlo, a youngish man who'd always been nervous around the twins, sat slumped in the seat, his throat neatly cut. The horses pranced, agitated and uneasy.

"Get inside!" Mehen shouted behind them. Another tanglefoot bag *splatted* on the ground beside him.

Farideh and Havilar had hardly shut the door behind them when Mehen hauled himself up into the seat, his suddenness and smell startling the horses into motion before he could even touch the whip. The carriage jerked and jolted over the cobbled roads, and Farideh could feel the axles fighting to stay straight beneath them.

"What in the *Hells*," Havilar panted, "was *that* all about?"

Farideh peeked out the window. Suzail's trading coster yards rushed by, the streets widening as they closed on the city's center. The flood of rage and fire was receding, but her hands were still shaking. "I think," she said, "you'll have to ask Lord Crownsilver."

• • •

THE COLDEST THING in all of the Forest Kingdom—or so said many nobles—was the heart of Princess Raedra Obarskyr. She might have a lovely face and a pleasant figure, flashing eyes and flaxen hair. She might be as graceful with a sword as she was with a dance partner. She *was* the daughter of the Blood Royal and eligible even without such virtues.

But Lord Aubrin Crownsilver, the princess's betrothed, was regarded with a mixture of envy and pity nevertheless. After all, everyone had seen what had happened to the last fellow.

"Tell me"—Raedra said as she swept into her private audience chamber where Brin waited—"that I've heard wrong."

Brin stood, driven to his feet more by the presence of the two armored Purple Dragon knights that accompanied Raedra—glaring down at him—than by the princess alone. She and he weren't that formal—usually, he thought, taking in Raedra's stony expression.

"Much as I'd love to," he said, "I suspect I can't. Although if you told me what you'd heard, perhaps? Also, well met and nice to see you too."

"Don't you dare," Raedra said. "You vanish off to Waterdeep, without so much as a *word* to me. You're gone for tendays and when you finally turn up—"

"You won't see me," Brin finished, sitting back down. "If you were so deeply concerned about me, you could have seen me."

Raedra's eyes tightened. "When you finally turn up," she said again, harder, "you've got *her* in tow. What makes you think I want to hear anything you have to say to me?"

"You're going to have to hear it," Brin said gently. "We have to talk about what we're going to do."

"We?" Raedra laughed. "They say she's staying in the tallhouse. It sounds like 'we've' already decided."

"She's staying there," Brin said. "But I'm not."

"As if that matters to anyone watching. As if you don't slip in and out at your leisure. As if you've not made yourself a little blind-spot love nest in that blasted festhall." Brin looked away—Raedra's watchers were very keen. "We had an agreement," she said.

"And I've held to that," Brin retorted. "We explicitly agreed the other could have lovers."

Raedra shot a dark look at the Purple Dragon on her left—she waved both guards back, toward the door. Her jaw tightened, and she sat down on the opposite settee. “We agreed,” she said quietly, “that whatever lovers you took, I would have the right to deny you if they weren’t . . . acceptable. And short of my own mother, I doubt there is a woman walking Toril whose presence in your bed is more humiliating to me.” She leaned forward. “You agreed to tell me before you did anything. You agreed we *both* had the right to refuse. I shouldn’t have war wizards telling me there’s a devil-child in your bed.”

Raedra was right on that score. But Havilar had come back from being trapped in the Nine Hells and everything had changed so quickly. Forgetting Havi wasn’t an option. Not going to her wasn’t an option. And when Havilar had looked into his eyes and told him she was still in love with him, there was no part of him that would have left her behind.

“You knew this day might come,” he said. “I won’t tell you I’m sorry it has.”

Now Raedra looked away. “I thought she was dead.”

“So did a lot of people,” Brin said. “But I never told you that.” He hesitated. “We need to talk about postponing the wedding.”

Raedra narrowed her eyes at him. “Absolutely not. Three postponements are bad enough. Making it four would say something.”

“Really? So you’re going to marry ‘Lord Saddlesores, the failure of Calantar’s Way’?” Brin demanded. “Who—on top of everything else—has a tiefling for a mistress?”

Raedra sighed heavily. “Tell your dear darling she chose an *excellent* time to return,” she said dryly. “There is not a thing you could have done to stop Shade’s armies opening a portal through that *blasted* ruin. Whatever everyone’s saying.”

“All the more reason,” Brin said.

She looked up at Brin as if he’d just done something unspeakable on the rug. “Watching Gods, are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, like the broken plane you don’t! Say it.” When Brin hesitated, she all but spat, “You want me to call it off.”

“It would be simplest. Give me time. I can—”

“You can what? Find some willing nobleman to relieve you of the burden I am?”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“*I’m* being dramatic? How long did you know her?” Raedra demanded. “Before she disappeared, Aubrin, how long did you know her?”

“Two months,” Brin said. “Seventeen days.” And four hours, and if he could have counted the heartbeats, too, he would have. Those days were the happiest in his life, even if he didn’t completely appreciate it at the time.

“And how long,” Raedra said coldly, “have you and I known each other? No, wait, let’s make it easy: how long have we been engaged?”



Brin shrugged. "Two years."

"Two," Raedra repeated, "*years*. She must be something *special*."

"This was never a love match!"

"No," she said. "It was a 'sensible arrangement' you offered me. And being so sensible, I should think you know better than to get all rosy-eyed over the first girl you bedded. Or is this some perversion no one without horns and a tail could satisfy?"

"That's enough!" Brin snapped. "You want to be cruel, be a little cleverer."

"*I beg your pardon?*" the princess of the blood intoned. On the other side of the room, the Purple Dragons tensed, ready hands on their blades. Brin cursed to himself. This was going all wrong, but had there ever been a way it turned out right?

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're right. You shouldn't be hearing these things from war wizards. That's why I've been trying to see you, though. Because I *did* want to tell you, and figure out a better arrangement."

"You'll forgive me if I have no interest in helping you find the smoothest way to ruin me."

"This won't ruin you," Brin said. "If anyone, it will ruin me. I promise, this has nothing to do with you, Raedra. I will do everything—"

"You're throwing me to the wolves and it has nothing to do with me?" Raedra stood, and Brin stood with her. "You want to ruin yourself, that's not my concern. You want to drag the Crownsilver name down in the dungbarrows by carrying on with some feral tiefling girl you met while running around like a vagabond, by all means please yourself."

Brin startled. "That's good of you."

Raedra smiled. "Oh, you misunderstand, *Lord* Crownsilver. I'm not calling off the wedding, and I'm not giving you two my blessings. You want to go through with this? You want to humiliate me again? Then grow some stones, do it yourself, and accept the *many* consequences."

Before Brin could utter another word, Raedra turned on her heel and stormed out, the Purple Dragons pulling the door wide before she could even consider reaching for the handle, and following her out.

Brin fell back onto the settee and ran a hand over his beard. The drum of rain on the windows, the constant accompaniment of the last many months, picked up as the storm sent slashes of water across the glass. Brin sat a moment, cursing his foul luck, Raedra's temper, devils, and Crownsilvers and anything else he could possibly blame. He cursed himself, his inability to have seen this coming, and the doubt that made him propose to Raedra in the first place.

"You aren't going to marry your lost demon-love then?" Raedra had said, a little archly.

"Listen, I won't pretend I love you. I won't pretend I will—I might. But . . ." He paused, so much he could say and none of it would make a difference. "It's not looking likely."

"You are such a romantic, Lord Crownsilver."

"I don't want the throne," Brin said. "I don't want a wife who will push me toward the throne. And I certainly don't want His Majesty dropping me in front of it, just because I look like his dead brother. He thinks he owes me this, owes Emvar this. I'm wondering if making certain I'm officially family would stop him from doing it."

"You want me to marry you so His Majesty doesn't legitimize you?"

"Yes," Brin said. "And so that you get a little respite from all that noble nonsense. You didn't betray anyone. You did the right thing."

Raedra had smiled then, a real, rare smile. "You don't think they'll talk just the same about me if I agree to wed not only a Crownsilver, but the lost scion of Emvar who everyone knows dabbles in dark magic and loves a demoness?"

"A tiefling," he had said. "And don't talk about her like that." He'd shrugged. "By my estimation, that would be people talking about *me*. Not you."

Brin cursed himself again, remembering it. But if nothing else, it had managed to satisfy King Foril's worries that his brother's grandson would be left out in the cold. Brin wondered if there were any hoping that it wouldn't come up again.

But that was a separate matter. At the moment all that he could hope for was some way to get out of the marriage without falling on his sword socially. If Raedra were angry enough, it would mean none of the nobles he relied on for intelligence would talk to him, and the ones he relied on for gossip would only talk about him. The Harpers would be stymied when they couldn't afford to be. He cursed again.

When there was nothing and no one left to curse, he left the parlor, turning new options over in his thoughts. There had to be some way to make Raedra see reason, to let him out quietly and marry someone else. Brin wouldn't give up, not yet. In the hallway beyond, his cousin, Constancia waited, her symbol of Torm bright on her armor, and her severe, dark bob sleek and unruffled.

"I take it that wasn't the smooth transition you were hoping for," the paladin of the god of duty said, falling into step beside him. "Perhaps you see it's not a simple matter."

"When was this *ever* a simple matter?" Brin demanded. Even before Havilar returned to the picture, things were complex: rival nobles, Raedra's status, Raedra's reputation, the balance of being a Harper and a lord of Cormyr, and the impending civil war nestled in the possibility that King Foril would return to the matter of Brin's father's legitimization. "I can hardly move but I step on a new trap."

"Only because you're complicating things."

"Maybe for Helindra."

"She'll want to know what came of all of this," Constancia said. "What should I tell her?"

"Tell her my love life is still not her damned business."

"Everything in your life is this family's business," Constancia said, stating it as if it were an immutable fact, nothing for Brin to be upset by.

"Then I assume you already know what to tell her. What is it you think I'm going to do? Hmm? I waited for Havi to come back, and here she is. You think my whole life is the work of Torm, so what is that? What's he saying to me?"

Constancia scoffed. "The gods are not the arbiters of every minor incident."

"Convenient," Brin said as they reached the carriage.

As much as Brin wanted to retreat to the tallhouse, his afternoon was filled with more appointments than he'd thought it could hold—conferences with other nobles, meetings with contacts, a stop in the market, and another dressing down from the Lord Magister of Suzail, Edwin Morahan, about Brin leaving his military post. The good lord's household was already preparing for evenfeast by the time Brin arrived.

"At least you chose a lucky time to run off," Lord Morahan said. "If you'd hit the Swordflow at the wrong time, you'd have been the first thing eaten by all those monsters that lady shade's stirred up from their nests. We'd be having a funeral instead of a wedding."

"When should I expect to head out again?" Brin asked.

"You're not riding up Calantar's Way *now*, my lord," Lord Morahan said incredulously. "Chances are too high you'll be shot full of arrows before you ever get to Arabel, end up some goblin's dinner, and then I'll be the one telling Princess Raedra." He shook his head at Brin, as if appalled Brin could suggest leaving him to such a fate. "Let the army handle it."

That wouldn't work, Brin thought. Cormyrean politics aside, he had Harper business relying on the fact that he made the ride north out of Suzail on a regular basis. "I'll manage. Others manage."

"If you'll pardon me saying, my lord, others aren't on the hook for an Obarskyr heir. We'll find a duty for you in Suzail."

Duty, Brin thought. Torm help him, he had grown to loathe that word.

"You think I failed by leaving," Brin said to Constancia, as they left Lord Morahan's house. "And yet, he has a point: If I'd been riding the Way, I'd likely as not have been killed. Was that my duty?"

Constancia didn't look at him. "*That's* a petulant question. To begin with, nothing says you would have been killed. Perhaps you would have carried the message quicker. Perhaps you would have killed a few more goblins."

Brin climbed into the carriage. "Perhaps I would have been torn from my horse and eaten."

Constancia had started to reply when one of his doorguards ran up to the carriage. "Lord Crownsilver, there's been an incident," he said. "You have to come back to the tallhouse."

Brin was about to leap from the carriage, to run the few blocks to the tallhouse, but Constancia blocked him and climbed in herself. "You will regret racing down

the Promenade in the rain like an errand boy, *Lord Crownsilver*,” she said, as the carriage lurched forward. “Whatever has happened, we will know soon enough.”

“Stlarn and sod the bloody carriage,” Brin said, but it didn’t make him feel better.

• • •

THE BRACING SMELL of the poultice on her ankle made Havilar’s eyes water even after it started to cool, but the ache was finally fading. Mehen sat on the opposite sofa—the softer one—while Farideh rebandaged the cut on his arm.

“Tighter,” Mehen said.

“It was too tight before,” Farideh returned. “I know what I’m doing.”

Havilar considered her feet propped up on the padded stool—the twisted one by now hardly hurt more than the one that had been simply bruised. So long as she sat. “Is it wrong,” she asked, “to think that was a *little* better than sparring?”

“Yes,” Mehen growled.

Havilar sighed. “Then I’m wrong.”

“The move where you swung the glaive by the end went well,” Farideh offered. “I haven’t seen that before.” She smiled. “And I’d rather you did it to him than to me.”

Havilar laughed. At the same moment, the door slammed against the wall. “Havi!” Brin shouted from the entryway.

“Here!” she called.

“Sit,” Mehen warned when she moved to stand.

Brin came into the front room, his stormcloak dripping on the carpet, his expression fearful. He looked Havilar over, up and down, up and down. “What happened?”

“Got caught by a tanglefoot bag.” She wriggled her toes—a twinge of pain went through her twisted ankle.

“Someone tried to kidnap her,” Mehen said, as though it were Brin’s doing.

Brin stiffened. “Did you catch them?”

“Eight assassins playing at kidnappers? No, I didn’t catch them. They killed Arlo, by the way. I sent the new doorguard to get the Dragons.”

Brin said nothing. Havilar fidgeted against the upholstery and caught Farideh’s eye. Being in love with Brin had been complicated enough, but while the twins had been trapped in the Nine Hells, Brin had become Mehen’s employer as well.

“Who did it?” Brin asked. “Did they say?”

“Someone rich,” Mehen said. “Someone who doesn’t think twice about spilling the kind of coin it takes to hire eight assassins to kidnap someone.”

“What makes you think they were assassins?”

“The blade that took Arlo was very sharp and very quick. Not some sharpjaw’s pocketknife,” Mehen said. “Short weapons, quick weapons. Even the big fellow had daggers instead of a bludgeon.”

"They slipped in while we were talking," Farideh added. "All eight of them. They never made a sound."

"Then why aren't you dead?" Brin demanded.

"Brin," Havilar said. He was mad, but that was too much.

"I mean," he said, trying again, "eight assassins should have made short work of you."

"They got confused," Havilar said. "They weren't expecting me to fight. They weren't expecting Farideh to cast spells. They couldn't even tell which of us was which, for pity's sake." She shook her head. "*They* got cocky," she said to Mehen.

"You cast spells?" Brin turned on Farideh. "What were you thinking?"

Farideh folded her hands in her lap. "That I didn't want them to kill us." Her voice was calm and measured, but Havilar knew her too well—her *and* Brin. Another fight brewing.

"Hey," Havilar interrupted. "Let's save it for the *benish* who sent kidnappers, right?" Brin turned to her and all the anger went out of him. He came to sit beside her on the hard sofa. "They were very little spells. Even Mehen said it was reasonable."

"The war wizards might not agree," he said. To Farideh he added, "I'm only concerned with your safety. All of your safety."

"Of course," Farideh said. "If they have concerns, I'll—"

"Don't talk to them," Brin said. "I'll deal with it."

Farideh looked away, and Havilar blew out a breath. She had been just as angry as Brin at Farideh, but . . . after so long it became almost a chore to stay angry. Much as she wanted those years of her life back, the more Havilar found out, the harder it was to point the finger at Farideh alone. And after what had happened in the internment camp . . . Havilar's eyes trailed to her sister's interlaced hands, the third finger that stood out, white as a skeleton's, where Adolican Rhand, the camp's keeper, had chopped it off as punishment, and a shoddy healing potion had grown it back. Farideh's mistake might have made Havilar's life harder, but she'd earned herself more than enough punishments.

Brin told her he understood. But he didn't act as if he did.

"Constancia, will you find out what the Purple Dragons know?" Brin asked. Constancia considered her cousin and Havilar beside him with a stern look. Havilar returned it—*karshoj* to her if she thought she could glower Havi away.

"I'll come along," Mehen said. "See what they missed."

They left, and Farideh and Havilar exchanged glances. "I'll . . . go see about evenfeast," Farideh said, all but leaping to her feet. Whether to give Havilar and Brin a little space or for her own reasons, Havilar didn't care.

"Well met," she said to Brin.

"Tell me you're all right."

"I've been hurt *far* worse than this, never you mind," she said. "I got a little practice and I only turned my ankle." A pang of guilt hit her. "Can you pay to raise Arlo?"

Brin rubbed his forehead. "I can try. I *will* try." He reached for her ankle, took the poultice off, and set his fingertips on the swollen joint ever so gently. "Loyal Torm, aid this servant of your justice."

The blessings of Torm weren't nearly as gentle as Brin, but the sharp pain passed quickly. "Much better." She turned, setting her feet on the other side of his lap. He slipped an arm around her waist. "Did you talk to her?" Havilar asked.

"Yes," he said with a sigh. "She's pretty angry. She doesn't want another postponement, and she doesn't want to call it off."

"Figures," she said. "What now?"

"Now, I try and find a way to force her to want to call it off."

"Like what?"

"Find something she doesn't want people to know," he said. "Find something she wants worse than a husband. Find her a better husband."

Havilar snorted. "This isn't about a *husband*. If it were, she would have seen you ages ago. This is about being right."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have a sister, and I *like* being right. Also, I've read chapbooks—if she's a princess, getting a husband isn't hard, even if you're pretty wonderful." She shifted away so she could look at him. "What are you going to do if there's nothing to hold against her?"

Brin hesitated for a terrible moment, then leaned in and kissed her temple. "Think of a new plan. Do you still want to go to Teneth's tonight?"

"I just nearly got kidnapped," Havilar pointed out. "Maybe you could stay?"

"I can't," Brin said. "Not all night."

"Then for evenfeast? And maybe a bit after? It's not as if anyone who cares hasn't seen you come and go."

"Fair point," Brin conceded. "And I would very much like to stay." He reached for the package Constancia had dropped beside him and handed it to her. "I brought you something."

Havilar picked apart the twine knot. "Jewels?" she teased. "Scents? Silks?" Brin laughed. "It's what you're meant to give your mistress, isn't it?"

She'd been trying to be light about it, trying to laugh. The whole thing was an absolute mess, and she believed Brin when he said it would end, he could fix it—but under that cheer, even Havilar had to admit not all of it sat right.

Brin regarded her seriously. "I don't have a mistress. And you don't buy the love of your life meaningless things like jewels and scents."

Havilar smiled, unfolding the paper. "What if I like jewels?" But what lay inside was far, far better. The nagging feeling that this might not turn out right dissipated as she lifted a stack of chapbooks from the wrappings and fanned them out. *The Prince of Al-Qadim. The Secrets of the Obarskyrs. The Giantess's Curse. Red Bess and the Kelpie's Regret.*

"I don't recognize any of these," she said with a chuckle. "I suppose all the stories we were reading finished ages ago."

"I'll track them down," he promised. "But these are all just starting. I don't know if they're any good—the seller said they were all the best she'd seen, but they always say that. We don't have to—"

Havilar leaned across the bench, pulled him to her and kissed him firmly on the mouth. "You're sweet, and I love you," she said, letting her hand linger on his cheek. "Although, I still hate this beard."

He took her hand and kissed the palm of it. "I love you too. And I'll shave as soon as I don't have to go to court anymore. Promise."

Havilar smiled, pulled a chapbook from the middle of her fan and thrust it at him, grinning. "Here. You start."

• • •

THE SPIRIT HAD never been to Cormyr in life—at least, not so far as she could remember. She studied her great-great-granddaughter, giggling over some frivolous printing, and wondered if the Forest Kingdom of old turned in the secret memories of the soul fragment nestled in the tiefling's own essence. All manner of answers, of stories, of ends might be trapped behind that vapid façade.

The broken ghost of Bryseis Kakistos had traveled so very far to find out what they were.

To the untrained eye, Cormyr had weathered the Spellplague and its attendant chaos and emerged nearly the peer of its historical self—albeit short a great many wizards. But the magic of the torn Weave still bucked and buckled and threatened to unravel the threads of magic Bryseis Kakistos had used to stitch her shattered soul back together. The holes that the lost fragments left behind felt so sharp and physical, she thought surely the little nobleman would have felt their absence as he passed through her insubstantial form—as if those bits of Toril were simply *missing*.

But he had not so much as shivered. Her powers were, after all, finite.

One fragment in each twin. Two pieces left tethered when the vessel that was meant to hold Bryseis Kakistos's spirit split in the womb. She would need both back, eventually. And then she would need a body to hold her soul in order to return to the world and seize what was theirs.

She caught herself. Not theirs. *Hers*.

Do it, a part of her urged, and had been urging since the first time she'd laid eyes on the lost heirs. Tear the souls out. Claim your due.

Not yet, Bryseis Kakistos reminded herself. She could not, after all, tear the fragment that was hers from the rest of the twins' souls—that would take the power of an archdevil, if not a god. Fighting against a pair of willful ghosts sealed to her spirit was not a state to stumble into.



A memory slipped through her, as if along the edge of one of the missing fragments—the feeling of being tethered to a ghost, the way it had of tugging at your own soul and a loneliness alongside it.

And then it was gone, just as so many memories were gone. She watched Havilar, needled by frustrations the young woman couldn't imagine, trying to remember exactly what her plan was. Why she had tethered herself to a ghost.

Everything in its time. She would make certain Asmodeus suffered for his trickery. That much she would never, ever forget.

In the little parlor, Havilar burst into a fresh cascade of giggles amid reciting some particularly ribald rhymes. The young man leaned over and stopped her with a kiss. The ghost hoped, quietly, Havilar was the disposable one. The one without the secret she needed.