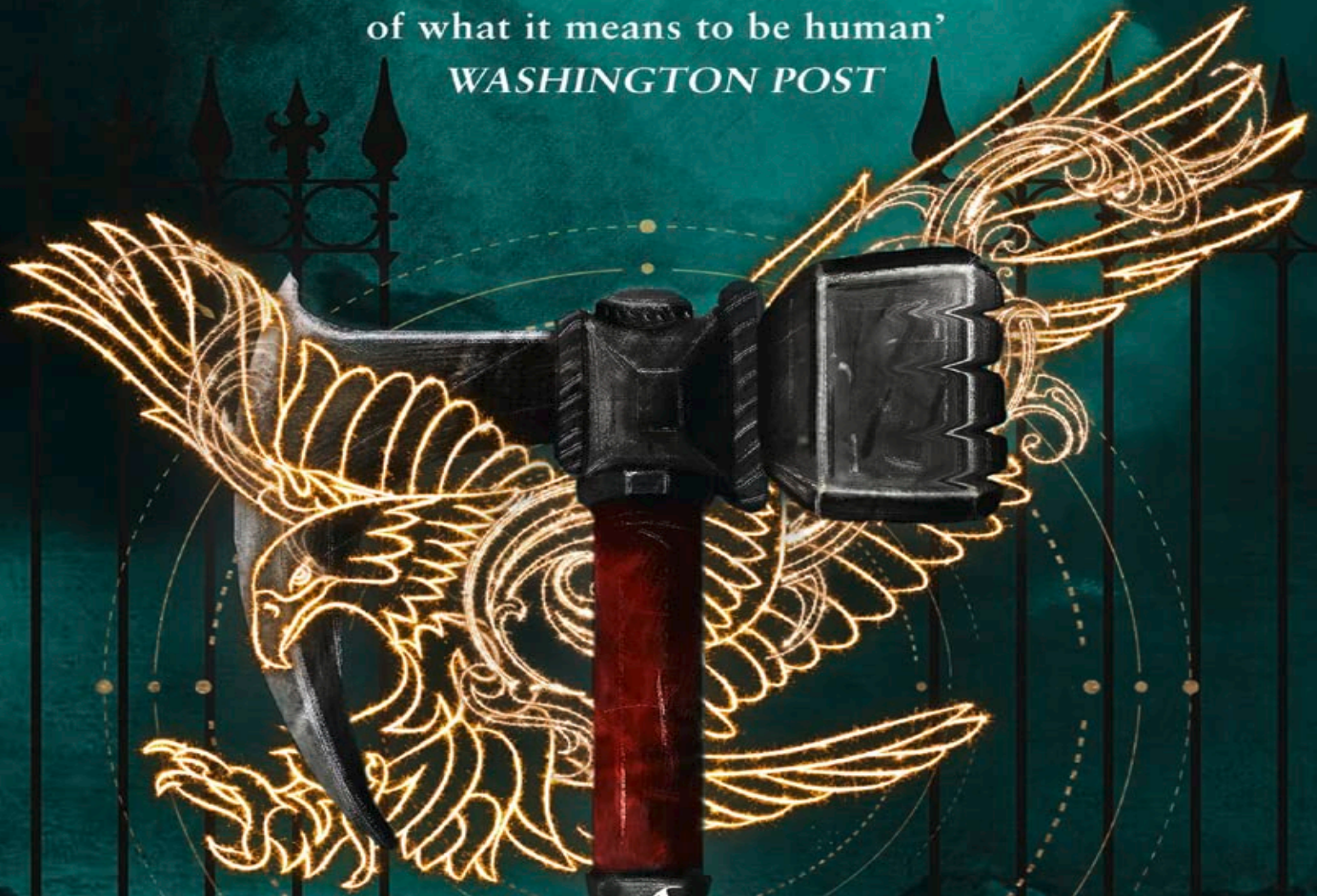


'A harrowing, haunting reminder
of what it means to be human'
WASHINGTON POST



A
REAPER
AT THE
GATES

S A B A A T A H I R

PRAISE FOR
An Ember in the Ashes

“*[An Ember in the Ashes]* thrusts its readers into a world marred by violence and oppression, yet does so with simple prose that can offer moments of loveliness in its clarity. This complexity makes *Ember* a worthy novel—and one as brave as its characters.”

—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW



“*An Ember in the Ashes* could launch Sabaa Tahir into J.K. Rowling territory . . . It has the addictive quality of *The Hunger Games* combined with the fantasy of *Harry Potter* and the brutality of *Game of Thrones*.”

—PUBLIC RADIO INTERNATIONAL



“There comes a moment when it’s impossible to put it down. Sabaa Tahir is a strong writer, but most of all, she’s a great storyteller.”

—THE HUFFINGTON POST



“A setting inspired by ancient Rome; a fierce battle for freedom in the face of tyranny; and a villain who makes Cersei Lannister and Dolores Umbridge look like a pair of pathetic amateurs . . . *An Ember in the Ashes* is at the top of our must-read list for 2015.”

—MTV.COM



“Once you get caught up in the story, it’s addictive, and there’s no way you can put it down before you figure out what happens to the characters you have fallen for over the course of the 400 some-odd pages. So I didn’t.”

—BUSTLE



“*An Ember in the Ashes* mixes *The Hunger Games* with *Game of Thrones* . . . and adds a dash of *Romeo and Juliet*.”

—THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER



“Perfect for fans of Maggie Stiefvater’s *The Scorpio Races* or Sarah Maas’s *Throne of Glass* series . . . The book is already set to be a film, which will be EPIC!”

—TEENVOGUE.COM

“This epic fantasy set in the Martial Empire has it all: danger and violence, secrets and lies, strong characters and forbidden romance and a touch of the supernatural.”

—THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION



“Here’s one of the year’s most anticipated young-adult debuts.”

—IO9.COM



“Fast-paced, well-structured and full of twists and turns, *An Ember in the Ashes* is an evocative debut that has left me invested in knowing what happens next.”

—NPR



“An epic fantasy debut about an orphan fighting for her family and a soldier fighting for his freedom. It’s a story that’s literally burning to be told.”

—HYPABLE.COM





“Tahir’s deft, polished debut alternates between two very different perspectives on the same brutal world, deepening both in the contrast. In a tale brimming with political intrigue and haunted by supernatural forces, the true tension comes from watching Elias and Laia struggle to decide where their loyalties lie.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW



“Tahir’s world-building is wonderfully detailed and the setting is an unusual one for fantasy novels. All of her characters, even minor ones, are fully realized . . . For fans of *Game of Thrones* and of Melina Marchetta’s *Finnikin of the Rock*.”

—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*



“An original, well-constructed fantasy world . . . truly engaging.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY:

AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, BUSTLE, BUZZFEED, HYPABLE, *LA WEEKLY*, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, PASTE, POPSUGAR, INDIGO, *SUSPENSE MAGAZINE*, and *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*.

PRAISE FOR
A Torch Against the Night

“Spectacular.”

—*ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*



“Fresh and exciting. . . Tahir has shown a remarkable talent for penning complex villains.”

—A.V. CLUB



“This sequel has a darker tone and even higher stakes than its predecessor, setting the stage for a thrilling conclusion.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW



“Tahir proves to be a master of suspense and a canny practitioner of the cliffhanger, riveting readers’ attention throughout . . . [An] action-packed, breathlessly paced story.”

—*BOOKLIST*, STARRED REVIEW



“An adrenaline rush till the very last page.”

—BUZZFEED



“*A Torch Against the Night* is an unabashed page-turner that scarcely ever pauses for breath.”

—*THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*



“The rare sequel that improves on the original. . . unputdownable.”

—COMMON SENSE MEDIA (FIVE STARS)



“The stakes here are high and the plot runs like a well-oiled machine, ratcheting up the tension with every chapter.”

—NPR.ORG

“Delivers in every way . . . The stakes have never been higher, and the tension is acutely felt as Elias and Laia run for their lives.”

—*USA TODAY'S HAPPY EVER AFTER BLOG*



“Fast-paced, exciting and full of adrenaline, *A Torch Against the Night* is everything fans of Tahir’s debut could possibly anticipate in a sequel.”

—*BUCKS COUNTY COURIER TIMES*



“Thrilling . . . Tahir meticulously plots these novels, ramping up the suspense and including plenty of surprises.”

—*THE BUFFALO NEWS*



“Let me tell you, it does not disappoint.”

—BOOK RIOT



“At last, it’s here . . . It’s as heartbreaking as it is action-packed, delivering a worthy second installment in Tahir’s bestselling series.”

—*PASTE*



“Excellent.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY:

TIME, *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*, AMAZON, BUZZFEED, BUSTLE, *PASTE*, POPCRUSH, and
POPSUGAR.

A
REAPER
AT THE
GATES

A NOVEL BY

SABAA
TAHIR



RAZORBILL®



An Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

Penguin.com



RAZORBILL & colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

First published in the United States of America by Razorbill, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018

Copyright © 2018 Sabaa Tahir

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE

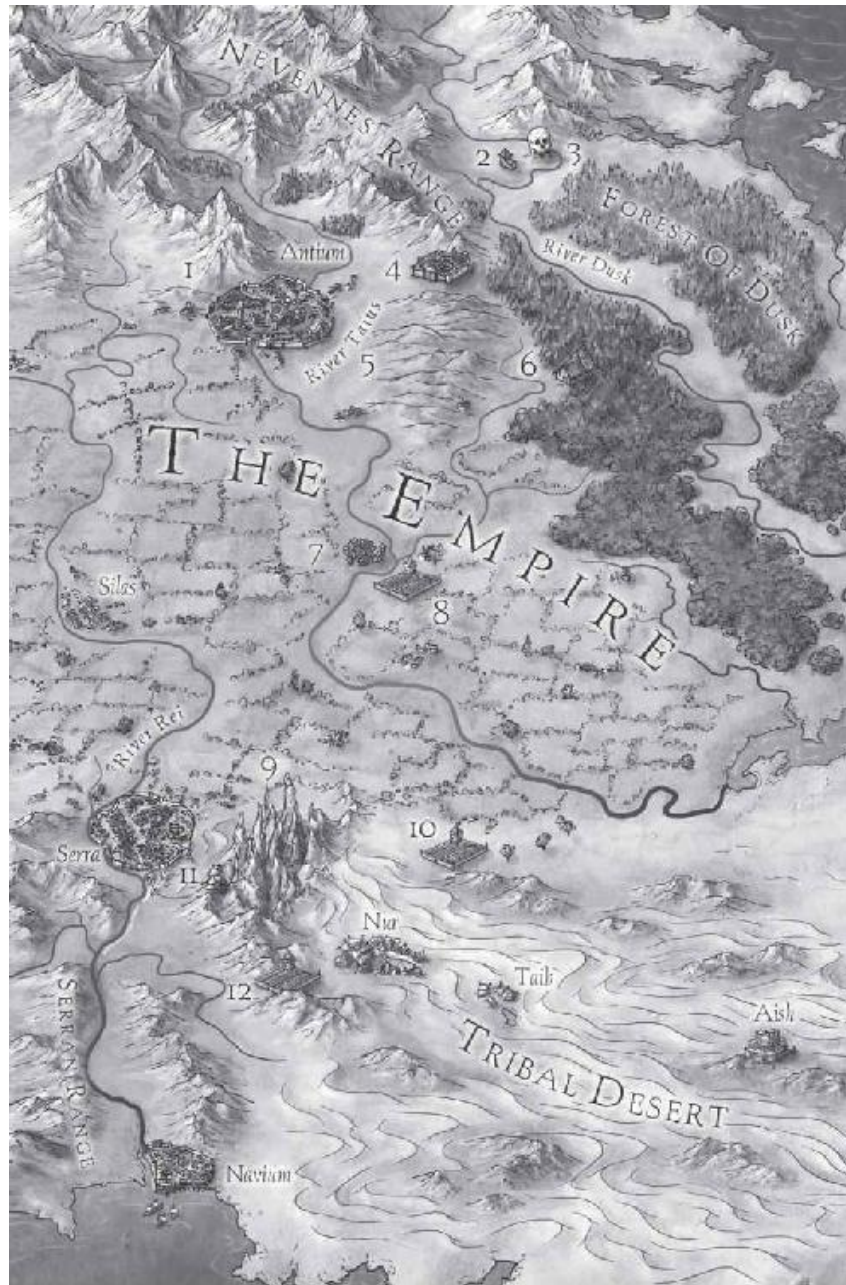
Ebook ISBN: 9780448494524

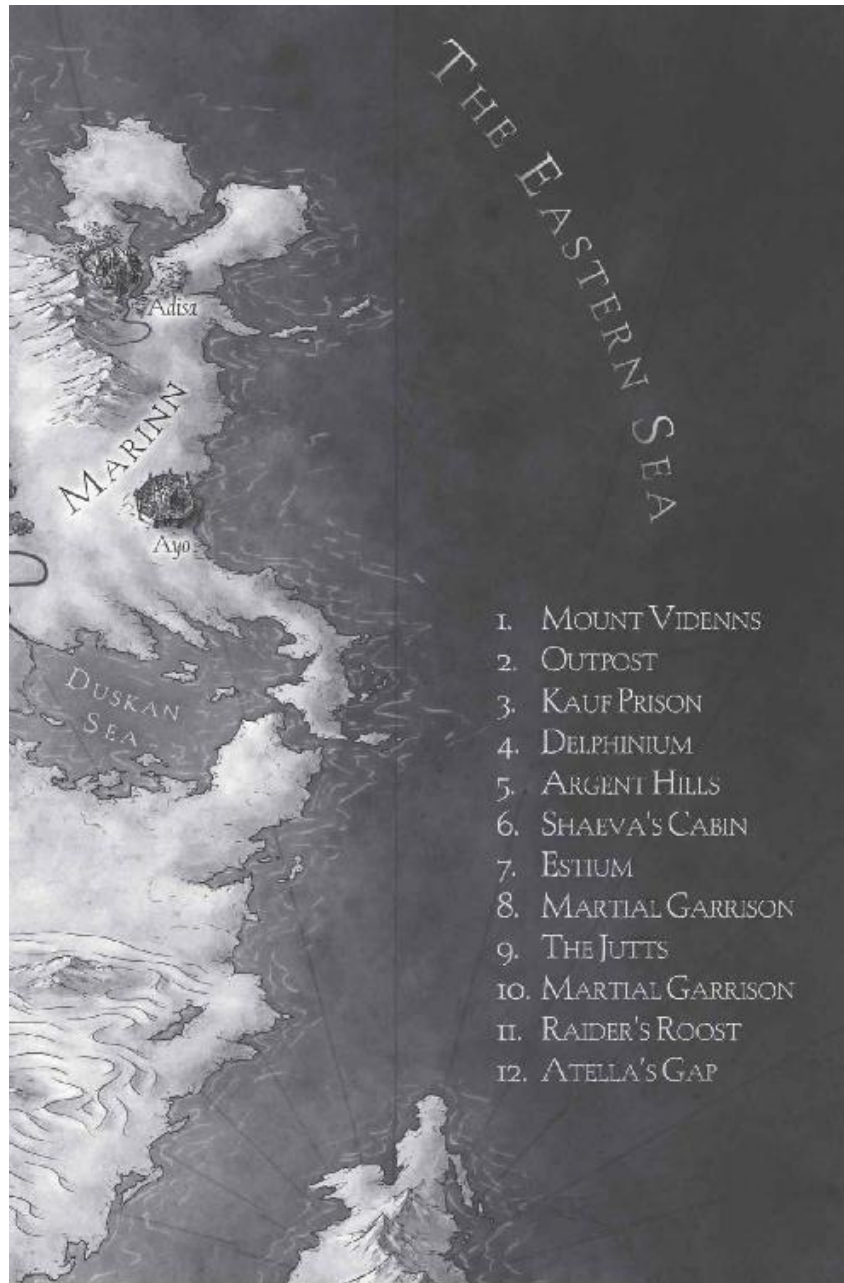
Map by Jonathan Roberts

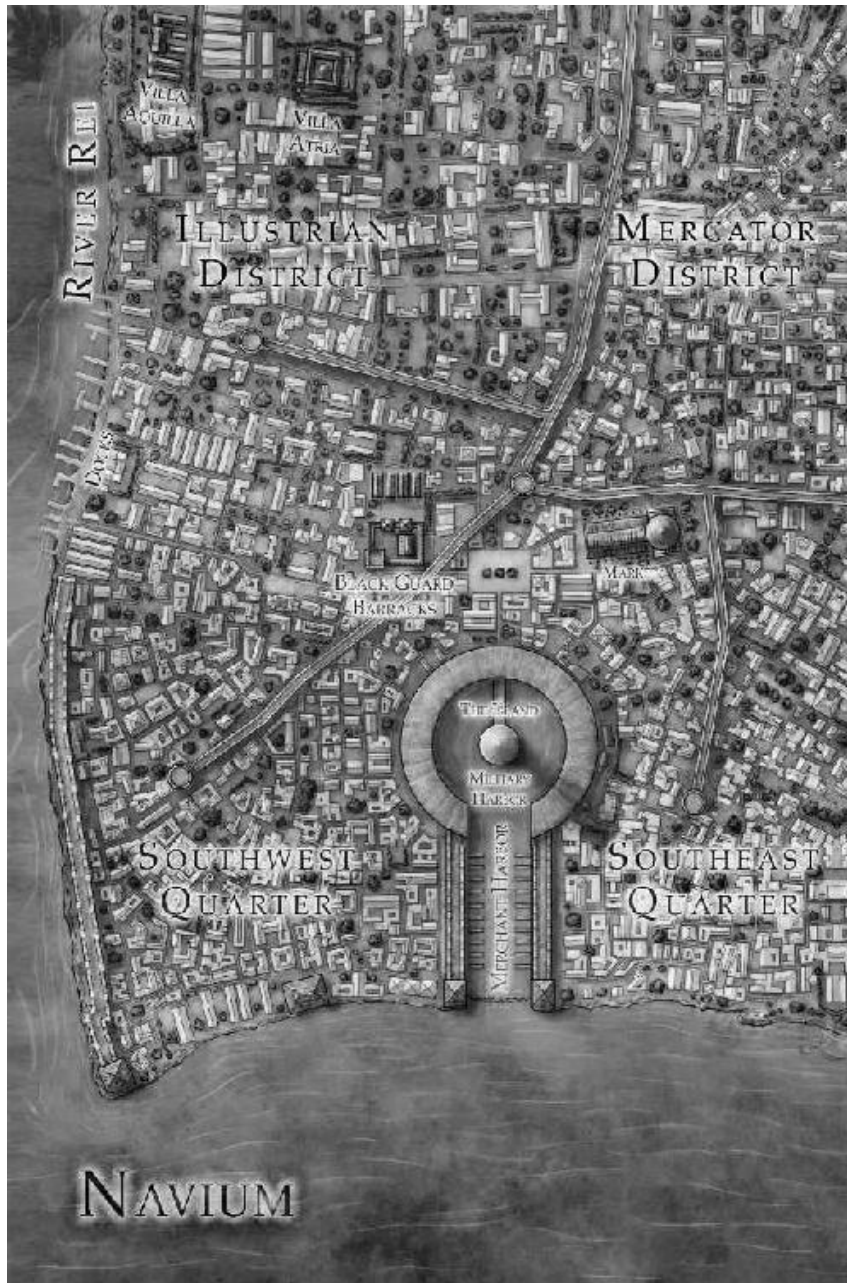
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

*For Renée, who knows my heart.
For Alexandra, who holds my hopes.
And for Ben, who shares the dream.*









CONTENTS

Praise for Sabaa Tahir

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Maps

PART I: THE KING OF NO NAME

I: The Nightbringer

II: Laia

III: Elias

IV: The Blood Shrike

V: Laia

VI: Elias

VII: The Blood Shrike

VIII: Laia

IX: Elias

X: The Blood Shrike

PART II: INFERNO

XI: Laia

XII: Elias

XIII: The Blood Shrike

XIV: Laia

XV: Elias

XVI: The Blood Shrike

XVII: Laia

XVIII: Elias

XIX: The Blood Shrike

XX: Laia

XXI: Elias

XXII: The Blood Shrike

XXIII: Laia

[XXIV: Elias](#)
[XXV: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XXVI: Laia](#)
[XXVII: Elias](#)
[XXVIII: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XXIX: Laia](#)
[XXX: Elias](#)

[PART III: ANTIUM](#)

[XXXI: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XXXII: Laia](#)
[XXXIII: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XXXIV: Elias](#)
[XXXV: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XXXVI: Laia](#)
[XXXVII: Elias](#)
[XXXVIII: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XXXIX: Laia](#)
[XL: Elias](#)
[XLI: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XLII: Laia](#)
[XLIII: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XLIV: Laia](#)
[XLV: Elias](#)

[PART IV: SIEGE](#)

[XLVI: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XLVII: Laia](#)
[XLVIII: The Blood Shrike](#)
[XLIX: Laia](#)
[L: Elias](#)
[LI: The Blood Shrike](#)
[LII: Laia](#)
[LIII: Elias](#)
[LIV: Laia](#)
[LV: The Blood Shrike](#)

LVI: Laia

PART V: BELOVED

LVII: The Blood Shrike

LVIII: The Soul Catcher

LIX: The Nightbringer

Acknowledgments

About the Author

PART I

THE KING OF NO NAME

I: The Nightbringer

You love too much, my king.

My queen spoke the words often across the centuries we spent together. At first, with a smile. But in later years, with a furrowed brow. Her gaze settled on our children as they tore about the palace, their bodies flickering from flame to flesh, tiny cyclones of impossible beauty.

“I fear for you, *Meherya*.” Her voice trembled. “I fear what you will do if harm comes to those whom you love.”

“No harm shall befall you. I vow it.”

I spoke with the passion and folly of youth, though I was not, of course, young. Even then. That day, the breezes off the river ruffled her midnight hair and sunlight poured like liquid gold through the sheer curtains of the windows. It lit our children amber as they trailed scorch marks and laughter across the stone floor.

Her fears held her captive. I reached for her hands. “I would destroy any who dared hurt you,” I said.

“*Meherya*, no.” I have wondered in the years since then if she already feared what I would become. “Swear you would never. You are our *Meherya*. Your heart is made to love. To give. Not to take. That is why you are king of the jinn. Swear it.”

I swore two vows that day: to protect, always. To love, always.

Within a year, I had broken both.



The Star hangs from the wall of the cavern far from human eyes. It is a four-pointed diamond, with a narrow gap at its apex. Thin striations spiderweb across it, a reminder of the day the Scholars shattered it after imprisoning my people. The metal gleams with impatience, potent as the glare of a jungle beast closing in on prey. Such vast power within this

weapon—enough to destroy an ancient city, an ancient people. Enough to imprison the jinn for a thousand years.

Enough to set them free.

As if sensing the armlet clinging to my wrist, the Star rattles, yearning toward the missing piece. A wrench shudders through me as I offer the armlet up, and it oozes away like a silver eel to join with the Star. The gap shrinks.

The four points of the Star flare, lighting the far reaches of the speckled granite cavern, eliciting a wave of angry hisses from the creatures around me. Then the glow fades, leaving only pallid moonlight. Ghuls swish at my ankles.

Master. Master.

Beyond them, the Wraith Lord awaits my orders, along with the efrit kings and queens—of wind and sea, sand and cave, air and snow.

As they watch, silent and wary, I consider the parchment in my hands. It is as unobtrusive as sand. The words within are not.

At my summons, the Wraith Lord approaches. He submits reluctantly, cowed by my magic, straining always to be free of me. But I have need of him yet. The wraiths are disparate scraps of lost souls, joined by ancient sorcery and undetectable when they wish to be. Even by the Empire's famed Masks.

As I offer him the parchment, I hear her. My queen's voice is a whisper, gentle as a candle on a chill night. *Once you do this, you can never come back. All hope for you is lost, Meherya. Consider.*

I do as she asks. I consider.

Then I remember she is dead and gone and has been for a millennium. Her presence is a delusion. Her voice is my weakness. I proffer the scroll to the Wraith Lord.

“See that it finds Blood Shrike Helene Aquilla,” I tell him. “And no other.” He bows, and the efrits sail forward. I order the efrits of air away; I have a separate task for them. The rest kneel.

“Long ago, you gave the Scholars knowledge that led to the destruction of my people and the fey world.” A jolt of memory ripples through their ranks. “I offer you redemption. Go to our new allies in the south. Help them understand what they can call forth from the dark places. The Grain Moon

will rise six months hence. See it done well before then. And you”—the ghuls press close—“glut yourselves. Do not fail me.”

When they have all left me, I contemplate the Star and think of the treacherous jinn girl who helped bring it into being. Perhaps to a human, the weapon would shine with promise.

I feel only hatred.

A face drifts to the forefront of my mind. Laia of Serra. I recall the heat of her skin beneath my hands, how her wrists crossed behind my neck. The way she closed her eyes and the golden hollow of her throat. She felt like the threshold of my old home when the rushes were fresh-changed. She felt safe.

You loved her, my queen says. And then you hurt her.

My betrayal of the Scholar girl should not linger. I deceived hundreds before her.

Yet unease grips me. Something inexplicable occurred after Laia of Serra gifted me her armlet—after she realized that the boy she called Keenan was naught but a fabrication. Like all humans, she glimpsed in my eyes the darkest moments of her life. But when I looked into her soul, something—*someone*—peered back: my queen, gazing at me across the centuries.

I saw her horror. Her sadness at what I had become. I saw her pain at what our children and our people suffered at the hands of the Scholars.

I think of my queen with every betrayal. Going back a thousand years, to each human found, manipulated, and loved until they freely gave me their piece of the Star with love in their hearts. Again and again and again.

But never had I seen her in the gaze of another. Never had I felt the sharp blade of her disappointment so keenly.

Once more. Only once more.

My queen speaks. *Do not do this. Please.*

I crush her voice. I crush her memory. I think I will not hear her again.

II: Laia

Everything about this raid feels wrong. Darin and I both know it, even if neither of us is willing to say it.

Though my brother does not speak much these days.

The ghost wagons we track finally roll to a stop outside a Martial village. I rise from the snow-heavy bushes where we've taken cover and nod to Darin. He grabs my hand and squeezes. *Be safe.*

I reach for my invisibility, a power awoken within me recently, and one that I'm still settling into. My breath wreathes up in white clouds, like a snake undulating to some unknowable song. Elsewhere in the Empire, spring has scattered its blossoms. But this close to Antium, the capital, winter still whips its chill fingers across our faces.

Midnight passes, and the few lamps that burn in the village sputter in the rising wind. When I am through the perimeter of the prisoner caravan, I pitch my voice low and hoot like a snowy owl, common enough in this part of the Empire.

As I prowl toward the ghost wagons, my skin prickles. I whirl, my instinct rearing in warning. The nearby ridgeline is empty, and the Martial auxiliary soldiers on guard do not so much as twitch. Nothing appears amiss.

You're just jumpy, Laia. Like always. From our camp on the outskirts of the Waiting Place, twenty miles from here, Darin and I have planned and carried out six raids on Empire prisoner caravans. My brother has not forged a single scrap of Serric steel. I have not responded to the letters from Araj, the Scholar leader who escaped Kauf Prison with us. But together with Afya Ara-Nur and her men, we have helped to free more than four hundred Scholars and Tribesmen over the past two months.

Still, that does not guarantee success with this caravan. For this caravan is different.

Beyond the perimeter, familiar black-clad figures move in on the camp from the trees. Afya and her men, responding to my signal, preparing to attack. Their presence gives me heart. The Tribeswoman who helped me

free Darin from Kauf is the only reason we know of these ghost wagons—and the prisoner they transport.

The lock picks are blades of ice in my hand. Six wagons sit in a half circle, with two supply carts sheltered between them. Most of the soldiers busy themselves with the horses and campfires. Snow gusts down in flurries, stinging my face as I get to the first wagon and begin working the lock. The pins within are enigmas to my freezing, clumsy hands. *Faster, Laia.*

The wagon is silent, as if empty. But I know better. Soon, the whimper of a child breaks the quiet. It is quickly shushed. The prisoners have learned that silence is the only way to avoid suffering.

“Where the burning hells is everybody?” a voice bellows near my ear. I nearly drop my picks. A legionnaire strides past, and a tendril of panic unfurls down my spine. I do not dare to breathe. *What if he sees me? What if my invisibility falters?* It has happened before, when I am under attack, or in a large crowd.

“Wake up the innkeeper.” The legionnaire turns to the aux hastening toward him. “Tell him to roll out a keg and prepare rooms.”

“Inn’s empty, sir. Village looks abandoned.”

Martials do not abandon villages, even in the dead of winter. Not unless a plague has come through. But Afya would have heard if that were the case.

Their reasons for leaving are not your concern, Laia. Get the locks open.

The aux and the legionnaire stalk off toward the inn. The moment they are out of sight, I get my picks in the lock. But the metal groans, stiff with rime.

Come on! Without Elias Veturius to get through half the locks, I have to work twice as fast. I have no time to think of my friend, and yet I cannot quell my worry. His presence during the raids has kept us from being caught. He *said* he would be here.

What in the skies could have happened to Elias? He’s never let me down. *Not when it comes to the raids, anyway.* Did Shaeva learn that he snuck Darin and me back across the Waiting Place from the cottage in the Free Lands? Is she punishing him?

I know little of the Soul Catcher—she is shy, and I assumed she did not like me. Some days, when Elias emerges from the Waiting Place to visit me

and Darin, I feel the jinn woman watching us and I sense no rancor. Only sadness. But skies know, I'm no judge of hidden malice.

If it were any other caravan—any other prisoner we were attempting to break out—I would not have risked Darin, or the Tribespeople, or myself.

But we owe it to Mamie Rila and the rest of the Saif prisoners to try to free them. Elias's Tribal mother sacrificed her body, freedom, and Tribe so I could save Darin. I cannot fail her.

Elias is not here. You're alone. Move!

The lock finally springs open, and I make for the next wagon. In the trees just yards away, Afya must be cursing at the delay. The longer I take, the more likely it is that the Martials will catch us.

When I crack the last lock, I croon a signal. *Snick. Snick. Snick.* Darts hurtle through the air. The Martials at the perimeter drop silently, left insensate by the rare southern poison coating the darts. A half dozen Tribesmen approach the soldiers and slit their throats.

I look away, though I still hear the tear of flesh, the rattle of a final breath. I know it must be done. Without Serric steel, Afya's people cannot face the Martials head on, lest their blades break. But there is an efficiency to the killing that freezes my blood. I wonder if I will ever get used to it.

A small form appears out of the shadows, weapon glinting. The intricate tattoos that mark her as a *Zaldara*, the head of her Tribe, are concealed by long, dark sleeves. I hiss at Afya Ara-Nur so she knows where I am.

"Took you long enough." She glances around, black and red braids swinging. "Where in the ten hells is Elias? Can he disappear now too?"

Elias finally told Afya of the Waiting Place, of his death in Kauf Prison, of his resurrection and his agreement with Shaeva. That day, the Tribeswoman cursed him roundly for a fool before finding me. *Forget him now, Laia*, she had said. *It's damned stupid to fall for a once-dead ghost-talker, I don't care how pretty he is.*

"Elias didn't come."

Afya swears in Sadhese and moves toward the wagons. She explains softly to the prisoners that they must follow her men, that they must make no noise.

Shouts and the high twang of a bow echo from the village, fifty yards from where I stand. I leave Afya behind and sprint toward the houses where, in a darkened alley outside the village inn, Afya's fighters dance

away from a half dozen Empire soldiers, including the legionnaire in command. Tribal arrows and darts fly, deft counters to the Martials' deadly blades. I dash into the fray, slamming the hilt of my dagger into an aux's temple. I needn't have bothered. The soldiers go down quickly.

Too quickly.

There must be more men nearby—a hidden force. Or a Mask lurking, unseen.

“Laia.” I jump at my name. Darin's golden skin is dark with mud to hide his presence. A hood covers the unruly, honey-colored hair that has finally grown in. Looking at him, no one would ever know he'd survived six months in Kauf Prison. But within his mind, my brother battles demons still. It is those demons that have kept him from making Serric steel.

He's here now, I tell myself sternly. Fighting. Helping. The weapons will come when he's ready.

“Mamie isn't here,” he says, turning when I tap his shoulder, voice haggard with disuse. “I found her foster son, Shan. He said the soldiers took her from her wagon when the caravan stopped for the night.”

“She must be in the village,” I say. “Get the prisoners out of here. I'll find her.”

“The village shouldn't be empty,” Darin says. “This doesn't feel right. You go. I'll look for Mamie.”

“One of you bleeding needs to find her.” Afya appears behind us. “Because I'm not going to do it, and we have to get the prisoners hidden.”

“If something goes wrong,” I say, “I can use my invisibility to slip away. I'll meet you back at the camp as soon as I can.”

My brother raises his eyebrows, considering my words in his quiet way. When he chooses to be, he is as immovable as the mountains—just like our mother was.

“I go where you go, sis. Elias would agree. He knows—”

“If you are so chummy with Elias,” I hiss, “then tell him that the next time he commits to helping with a raid, he needs to follow through.”

Darin's mouth curves in a brief, crooked smile. Mother's smile. “Laia, I know you're angry at him, but he—”

“Skies save me from the men in my life and all the things they think they know. Get out of here. Afya needs you. The prisoners need you. Go.”

Before he protests, I dart into the village. It is no more than a hundred cottages with thatched roofs that sag beneath the snow, and narrow, dim streets. The wind wails through neatly tended gardens, and I nearly trip over a broom abandoned in a lane. The villagers left this place recently, I sense, and with haste.

I tread carefully, wary of what might lurk in the shadows. The stories whispered in taverns and around Tribal campfires haunt me: wraiths tearing out the throats of Mariner sailors. Scholar families found in burned-out encampments in the Free Lands. Wights—tiny winged menaces—destroying wagons and tormenting livestock.

All of it, I'm certain, is the foul handiwork of the creature that called itself Keenan.

The Nightbringer.

I pause to peek through the front window of a darkened cottage. In the stygian night, I can see nothing. As I move to the next house, my guilt circles in the ocean of my mind, scenting my weakness. *You gave the Nightbringer the armet*, it hisses. *You fell prey to his manipulation. He is a step closer to destroying the Scholars. When he finds the rest of the Star, he'll set the jinn free. Then what, Laia?*

But it could take the Nightbringer years to find the next piece of the Star, I reason to myself. And there might be more than one piece left. There might be dozens.

A flicker of light ahead. I tear my thoughts from the Nightbringer and move toward a cottage along the north edge of the village. Its door stands ajar. A lamp burns within. The door is propped wide enough that I can slip through without disturbing it. Anyone planning an ambush would see nothing.

Once inside, it takes a moment for my vision to adjust. When it does, I stifle a cry. Mamie Rila sits tied to a chair, a gaunt shadow of her former self. Her dark skin hangs loosely on her frame, and her thick, curly hair has been shaved off.

I almost go to her. But some old instinct stops me, crying out from deep within my mind.

A boot thumps behind me. Startled, I whirl, and a floorboard creaks beneath my feet. I catch a telltale flash of liquid silver—*Mask!*—just as a hand locks around my mouth and my arms are wrenched behind my back.