

TWINS OF
SHADOW

ABBY ARTHUR

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TWINS OF SHADOW
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To Avery Arthur

24th of Állû¹ 1234 J.E. (Jorik Era)
In the 18th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

¹ (AH-loo) Like July, literally means *praise* in Classic Naerthen

TARREK

Snakes slither through the grass. Dry, rough scales brush against tall green blades, hiding them from view. My magic counts five. Venom drips from their fangs. Tongues shooting from their mouths seek me, Tarrek Vaydmehn, Crown Prince of Jasikx. The mask I wear over my nose and mouth hides my identity. I'm not here on matters of court. I'm here on secret business—and not by choice.

Standing in the center of an open field, I have a bow in one hand and arrows in the other. Magic spins around me, in vain, to hold my invisibility. Bending light and dark only works on those who have eyes to see, like the man controlling the snakes. He's running on the edge of the field, using a staff to deflect needles shooting out of the shadows behind him. He's my target, a Jäyûn with the gift

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to control snakes. His staff skills are a surprise, but mortal. No magic is involved there.

The needles are from my twin brother, Albree, a Jäyûn who can walk in the shadows. Let him take down the man. I'd rather deal with the snakes. Perhaps by facing them, the man can get away. I always hope my targets run to a place I can never find them. It'd be better for us both.

The snakes' tongues nip through the energy around me, bringing me back to the situation at hand. One lunges. I drop my powers, since they're useless in this fight. I snap my bow in a flash. An arrow shoots through the creature's mouth. It falls dead.

Three more strike. I have four arrows left in my hand, so I fire three within two seconds. Two snakes die like the first. The last I merely clip. I spin out of his way, but the final snake lunges and devours my calve.

I scream. Its fangs dig deep, its venom dripping into me. Before I can think, I draw a dagger and chop off its head—which remains stuck to my leg. The other snake strikes again. I move to slice it, but a hand materializes out of the shadows and three needles shoot through the snake's eyes. Another hand appears with a dagger and stakes the creature's head into the ground.

"That went well," Albree says as he forms his entire figure in a crouch before me. He's cloaked in black. A mask like mine covers his face. A purple eye stares at me,

the other is hidden behind his hair.

“You could’ve been sooner,” I say and sink to my knees. I pry the snake head out of my leg.

“You know how the spell works. I couldn’t just let him go.”

Indeed, I do. The spell from the dragon runs through my veins like this venom. It controls us, makes the princes of Jasikx her personal assassins.

“But he did get away,” I say. The spell pulls at my chest, beckoning me to follow the man. *Bring him to me*, it demands. *Alive*.

“Someone jumped him out of here,” Albree says, his tone flat. “He has powerful friends, it would seem. We’ll continue this another day.”

Because we have no choice but to fulfil the mission. The spell will drive us crazy if we don’t.

My heart’s drumming, and my head’s starting to spin as the venom claws at my calf. I hiss and pull up my pant leg. My veins are turning green and popping out a little.

“Here.” Albree takes a flask from under his cloak. “Drink this. It’ll slow the venom.”

“From Csharynn?” I ask as I reach for it.

Albree tilts his head. The only brow I can see is lifted. “The dragon knew what she sent us after.”

“Of course she did.” I pull my mask down and take a swig. A dry burn grinds down my throat. My nose

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scrunches and my lips pull with a grimace. It burns in my stomach too, then through my veins. Even though I can't feel anyone else around, I pull my mask back up.

“Come on.” Albree holds out a hand. “Let's find someone to heal you.”

“Ever thought of just letting me die?”

“And leave me alone with the mission? You're crazy. Besides, what would Dad say if I brought you home dead?”

I chuckle, though it lacks humor, and take his hand. “Maybe I'd be the nudge he needs to kick Csharynn out of our lands.”

My brother's purple eye darkens. “It would take more than your death to get rid of her.”

Albree grips my hand tightly and suddenly everything's black.

ALBREE

I bring Tarrek into the shadows. It's faster to travel if I carry him. I can slide through darkness faster than he can run on land. I take us north, through the woods to a small village. There's an unyielding pull in my chest that says the Jäyûn is that way. *Bring him to me, it says. Alive.*

I turn off course towards an inn. The tug on my heart pulls hard enough that I wince. I can tell Tarrek feels it too, by the way he grunts. The venom can't be helping.

"You can't have the Jäyûn alive if Tarrek can't fight him," I hiss at the spell. It seems to back off, but only just. It won't let me forget it's there—won't fail to tell me I'm its slave until I do exactly what that gods-awful dragon commands.

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I reform myself and Tarrek in an alley. I let him slump against my shoulder and pull my hood up so my face is hidden in shadow. Tarrek does the same while fumbling to put his bow over his shoulder. I help him before we start moving. There's an inn around the corner. I choose this place precisely because of it; I know the healer there.

"A room for the night," I tell the clerk. The man looks from me to my brother, whose head is nearly laying on my shoulder. The clerk can't see the cold sweat sliding down Tarrek's face, but I can feel it, just as I can feel him shivering against me. I can feel anything moving through shadows.

"Double the cost if it'll make you give us a room." I pull out a card from my pants pocket. A First Kingdom Bank card—generic since every Alëunná kingdom has at least twenty of them. A plus that it doesn't say my name.

"Fine," the man says and taps buttons on his screen. He swipes my card.

"Room 204."

"Thanks." I jerk my card and the key he offers out of his hold. I help Tarrek from the lobby. Once we're out of sight, I pull him back into the shadows and slither up the stairs. I find our room and don't bother with the key. I pull us under the door and reform us by the bed. Tarrek falls onto it and pulls his hood back. His skin is unusually white, his purple eyes too pale.

"I'm gonna get Hinya." I sink back into the shadows. I'm

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already past the door before he replies.

I slink down the stairs to search the servants' quarters and the kitchen, but I don't see her. I rush through every room next and find her changing linens on the third floor. She's an Ètâscèn—a nearly human creature with magic intended for healing. Her eyes are neon red. Her hair has neon red streaks, and a signature dark-blue Ètâscèn birth mark wraps around her hand; it's made up of swirling lines.

She pauses as I materialize behind the door and push it shut.

"Albree?" She looks over her shoulder at me. Those neon eyes find mine, and there's wisdom there—old wisdom, though her skin would say she's young. If I remember correctly from the last time I was here, she's one hundred and nine.

"Why are you back?" she says. "I told you never to come back."

I step forward. "Tarrek needs you." I grab her by the hand and take her into the shadows.

TARREK

The spell pulls at my chest. *Get him. Bring him to me. Alive.*

I don't know why Csharynn wants the Jäyûn. His powers are special, but he would never serve her. He hates her, hates what she is and who she fights for. The symbol on his arm proves it. A golden sun. It's the opposite of the black star etched into my stomach, just above my hip bone. The two marks set us apart. His speaks of his freedom. Mine speaks of captivity.

My limbs are trembling, and my heart's pounding. I can't shake the spell—its words are screaming in my head.

Rolling to my side, I try to get up, but I hit the floor with a thud.

Get him!

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I crawl to the wall.

Bring him to me!

I force myself to stand, every inch of effort makes my limbs quake.

Alive!

Trembling feet bring me a step forward. Then another step. I make it to the door, but before I can open it, Albree's back. He grabs me by the arm and sucks me back into the shadows. He drops me on the bed.

"You idiot. Stay put."

Pain grows in my stomach, and I wince. I've lost feeling in my leg.

A person shows up behind him. No, not a person. An Ètâscèn. Her neon eyes singe my thoughts. They glare at my soul, screaming at my deeds. *Murderer*, they cry.

ALBREE

I pin Tarrek to the bed. He's pushing against me as if he's desperate to get away. Damn spell. The venom must be taking away his ability to resist it. It's also made him weak or pinning him down would be a lot harder.

"He's gonna get himself killed, Hinya. Please, do something."

She looks to me, her eyes glistening with a look I know all too well. Sympathy. That's what every Ètâscèn feels towards people like me—killers. They can't judge us. They can't hate us. It's not in their makeup. They were created to help, to heal humans. But that doesn't make them emotionless.

"I can make a salve and use a potion, but it will take a bit. Keep him here while I work." She moves towards the door.

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"No." I grab her arm. "Send me. I'll be faster. I'll bring whatever you need."

Hinya nods once and moves to place her hand on Tarrek's head. Her birthmark glows and magic seeps into his skin. He stops struggling against me, and his eyes shut.

"He's asleep," Hinya says and pulls up Tarrek's pant leg. It's turning purple now, and the green veins are black.

"Do you know what kind of snake bit him?"

I shake my head. "I've never studied reptiles before. Do you know?"

"It looks like it might be a nimbus bite. It's a snake native to the meadows here in South Lémuel."

I freeze. I've heard of a nimbus before. Their venom works fast. "If he hadn't drank that potion earlier, he'd already be dead."

Hinya nods.

"What do you need?"

Hinya lists her ingredients. I rush to her room in the back of the inn and grab her things. When I return with them on a tray, she takes it from me and starts working. Tarrek moans and arches his back in his sleep.

"There is one more ingredient I need." Hinya looks at me with sadness in her red eyes.

"Which is?"

"The snake's venom."

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I slump against the nearest wall. "How am I supposed to get that?"

Hinya looks to my hands where the snake's blood splattered when I staked it. "A dead snake will still have venom in its fangs. Can you get it for me?"

I look to Tarrek. "I don't know how fast. We killed them miles ago."

Tarrek moans again. His face is drawn in pain.

"I'll go as fast as I can."

TARREK

I hear them talking, but I can't say anything. I can't tell them about the pain, though I try. The realm feels like it's spinning, and I can't open my eyes. I fall into darkness. It's cold. A voice calls out, telling me to hold on.

One tear leaks down my cheek. I know that voice, but it's from a person who died a long time ago.

"Don't give up, Tarrek. Don't ever give up."

Mum. I try to say, but I can't get the words out.

Another tear falls and agony claws at my stomach. I want to scream, but I can't.

"You'll be okay, Tarrek. Just hold on."

It's so hard, I want to say. I'm not who I should be.

But I can't tell her that. My mouth won't move. Something about her voice makes me fight. I won't stop

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fighting. *Someday I'll be free.*

ALBREE

It's dark by the time I return to the meadow. Wind blows through the grass. I stand on the edge of the forest, looking out. I need one of those snakes. I can feel them out there, decomposing in the grass. But I can feel something else too, something that makes me wait, makes me listen.

I'm running out of time. Tarrek's running out of time.

Jumping into the shadows, I slither across the meadow. The moon casts shadows everywhere. I make it to the place where Tarrek was bit. A figure appears and light radiates from him. It hits me, ripping me from the shadows and forcing me to form into my body. It's then I'm grateful for all the times Tarrek used to throw light at me when we were little. It taught me how to land on my feet. The moment my feet hit the ground, I have two

daggers drawn, one in each hand.

The figure before me just stares. His skin is bronze. His eyes are fire, as is his hair. I don't need him to call up his wings to know what he is. "What business does an archangel have here?" I ask.

He holds out his hand. One of the snake heads is there.

I just stare. I know better than to trust him. "We're after one of your men. Why would you offer me what I need?"

The angel tilts his head, and the fire leaves his eyes, turning gold. Their shape changes into the almond curved eyes the warriors of Sarden have—at least the Kuromai ones. His hair turns black, and his skin turns pale. He looks exactly like a Kuromai now. I like him better this way. He isn't glowing anymore.

"I'd like your help." The angel tosses the snake head at my feet. "Csharynn has someone in her cage, and he shouldn't be there."

"Should anyone?"

The angel stares. "There are people who serve her by choice. Others who fight her, even under her command."

I swallow. "What are you getting at?"

"There's a Kuromai in the dungeons under Fire Peak. I need you to get him out." The angel looks behind him, in the direction I chased the Jäyûn earlier that day. "He's different than the man you hunt, but they share a purpose in your dragon's plans."

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I grind my teeth. "She's not *my* dragon."

He lifts a brow. "But you are hers. Are you not?" The way he asks seems to hold a deeper meaning.

"I'm not sure I follow you."

He nods to the snake head at my feet.

I'm still holding my daggers ready to strike.

"Save your brother. When you get home, you'll know what I'm talking about. Make up your mind then."

TARREK

The pain's gone. I can't feel anything but coldness. It's hard to swallow.

“Stay with me,” I hear the Ètâscèn say. “I owe your brother. You're not dying on my watch.”

What did he do for you? I want to ask, but I can't. All I can do is think of Albree. We've been on numerous missions together now—if being ordered out under a spell can be considered a mission. But we've had a few on our own. I wonder if he crossed Hinya's path during one of those solo assignments.

Sinking into myself, I can't help but think of what life would be like if Csharynn had never entered it. What would normal be for me? I'm still the crowned prince, and that part of my life wouldn't change. School would be

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easier, I guess. I wouldn't disappear for random amounts of time and have homework to cram in when I return. Maybe I'd find someone in the court I like. Or date someone at school. Not that I come up short in the department of lady friends. But anything serious has never been in the cards.

If I don't survive this venom, I'll never have the chance to fall in love.

Strange thing to cross my mind now. Who could even stand the thought of being with me, being that close to me? I know love's real. I once saw it in Mum. She said true love is caring for someone no matter their flaws.

My flaws run too deep. The darkness hiding in the back of my chest won't let me forget. Part of me wants the venom to win. Part of me wants the battle to end.

ALBREE

“Shut up!” I scream at the spell spinning in my chest. It’s yelling at me again, telling me to find that Jäyûn. I gulp as its pull urges me north, away from the inn. “I’ll go after we save him,” I spit.

The spell seems to glare at me but settles back again as I slide under the inn’s door and up to our room. I drop the snake’s head on Hinya’s tray and form myself beside her. I don’t mention the angel. I haven’t decided what to make of him yet.

Hinya takes the snake and holds its fangs over the concoction she made while I was gone. Three green drops fall into the brown goop. They sizzle. She stirs them in and takes a spoonful to Tarrek’s lips. He doesn’t open his mouth. He already looks dead.

Hinya forces the mixture in. “Swallow,” she demands. “Do

it, Prince.”

Tarrek’s throat moves slightly.

“Is that enough?” I ask.

Hinya shakes her head. “He needs all of it.”

I rub my face in disbelief. It’s a good eight ounces. “Is there an easier way to get that in him?”

“I can put a tube down his nose.”

“Where can I get it for you?”

“I don’t know anyone around here who would have one. It’s a small village.”

“So we spoon it.” I take the mixture from her and force another spoonful into Tarrek’s mouth. “Come on. You’re not leaving me alone here. I’m not carrying all the pressure. Swallow all this goop, or so help me I’ll kill myself and leave Jasikx in Sheva’s hands.”

Tarrek swallows. I don’t know what gave him the strength—me threatening to die or letting our insane little sister ascend the throne—but he drinks it all.

He lies still, his skin pale but no longer looking like death.

“He needs to rest,” Hinya says, placing her hand on my shoulder.

I can feel the spell pulling at me again. Its urgency makes me stand, but to keep it from ushering me away, I pull Hinya into a close hug. It feels right to have her body pressed against mine. Her breath is hot against my neck as she hugs me back. I

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nuzzle my face into her hair. "Thank you."

Her fingers stroke the hair at the nape of my neck. She pulls back, her neon eyes glistening. "You're welcome." She moves her fingers to the cloth covering my mouth. I forgot it was there. Pulling it down to reveal my lips, her fingers find a metal loop piercing one side of my lower lip. "This is new."

I smile slightly, glad to still have her close. "I felt like changing it up."

"Something else to make you different?" She looks to Tarrek, whose technically identical to me.

"At least I try."

"He's not all bad."

"It's not that ... I just want something that's my own."

Hinya pushes out of my hold and goes to stand by the window. "Your looks may be the same, but you are two different people, Albree Vaydmehn."

I walk beside her and stare out to the streets below. It's where I once lay half-dead—where Hinya first found me.

Sliding my arm around her back, I kiss her cheek. "You're too kind."

She smiles at me softly, but there's a hint of sadness. Hinya looks to Tarrek. "Stay with him. He'll need you to help him through the night."

When she starts to leave, I grab her by the wrist, pulling her close again. I look to her lips, but she puts her fingers over my

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mouth. "You weren't supposed to come back."

I stare at her, feeling my heart sink. "But I've always wanted to."

"I'm not the one for you, Albree. An Ètâscèn is not a good match for a human. You need a girl with spunk, someone who can give it back to you as fast as you dish it out. A girl full of emotion and wisdom."

"But I don't want some other girl. You said in Ètâscèn age, you're almost the same age as me."

Hinya's red eyes find mine. "But that doesn't mean we're a match."

I sigh. Everything in me wants to kiss her, but I'm aware of my brother's presence. I can feel him breathing and sense his strength coming back. I brush my thumb along the side of Hinya's mouth. She smiles then pulls free. I let her go.

25th of Állû 1234 J.E.

In the 18th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

TARREK

It's bitterly cold when I open my eyes. Dawn has barely touched the horizon outside the window. Albree's asleep in a chair beside the bed. My throat's dry, my head throbs, and my stomach feels empty, but I can move. I slide my legs over the side of the bed. My feet touch the floor. I'm still wearing my shoes from yesterday, but cold leaks through my soles. I rub my eyes and blink, wondering if I'm still asleep.

Frost lines the room's walls and cracks across the floor. It's beautiful ... but wrong. It's summer here in South Lémuel, and there shouldn't be frost inside.

"Albree."

His eyes flash open, and he sits upright. He's still dressed in last night's clothes. His mask hangs around his

neck, and his breath comes out in puffs before he sees the frost. He looks to me and pulls on his mask. I do the same and stand. My leg hurts, but I can handle it. I extend my power from somewhere inside me, and I disappear. Albree sinks into shadows. I grab my bow along the wall. Albree must have put it there. A quiver of arrows is there too. Pulling it over my back, I carry a handful of arrows in one hand and have one strung as I push open the room's door. Frost is everywhere when I enter the hall.

“Something's wrong,” Albree whispers in my ear, still a shadow.

I don't answer and look to the ceiling, watching the frost grow. I don't know what kind of magic this is. A Draffle Faerie is my first thought since they're made from snow, but last I knew they only visited Alëunná through Ridgámá, a kingdom on the other side of the realm. They wouldn't venture here. Besides, they're peaceful. This frost feels deadly, violent.

I move slow as not to slip. Albree's already run ahead. He comes back as I'm making my way down the stairs.

“The frost is everywhere,” he says. “It's coming from the edge of the village.”

“They're not after us,” I say. “The Warriors don't fight like this—disturbing others. Who do you think it is?”

“They're not just disturbing...” Albree's voice shakes “...they're freezing people with the frost.”

“What?” I snap. “Why?”

“I glimpsed the man with the frost power. His skin is different, dark and marked.”

My stomach drops. “*Zègur* slave traders?”

“I think we’ve fallen in the middle of a raid.”

I grind my teeth. Our home, Jasikx, is the only kingdom that borders the realm of *Zègurkō* to the north. They hate anyone from Alëunná, thinking we are no better than swine. They honor anyone who brings one of our people north to live a life of servitude or die in one of their arenas. In my kingdom, we’ve had plenty of struggles against them, even with my uncle marrying their empress.

“Why would they come so far south?” I ask, stepping into the lobby. No one’s here except for the desk attendant. Her skin is blue, her eyes wide, and frost is in her hair. She’s frozen.

“And inland,” Albree says. “We’re miles away from the coast.” He stops. “Remember what Dad said about what they treasure most to bring back from their raids?”

My mind quickens to a court meeting with my father. The *Zègur* love to see us suffer. If we injure ourselves, they would revel in our pain. What better way to keep us suffering than to take away those meant to heal us?

“Hinya,” I say. But Albree’s already gone.

ALBREE

Ice claws up Hinya's legs. My heart stops when I see it. She's sitting on her tiny bed in the servants' quarters. Her blanket is half pushed away, as if she tried to get up before the ice found her. Her Ètâscèn birthmark is glowing blue on her hand in an effort to keep the frost at bay.

I jump from the shadows and appear before her. "*Zègur* slave traders," I say.

Hinya's neon red eyes widen as she looks to me. Panic.

"The others." She tries to move, but the frost has her stuck.

It claws at my feet, trying to grab me. I slink into the shadows and hover at her side. "I need to get you out of here." I touch her, but I can't pull her in. The frost holds her out of my reach.

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I curse. "What can I do Hinya? How can I get you out of here?"

"You can't." A tear falls down her cheek. "I've heard of this magic. He's an artisan. He freezes his victims, making them easy to capture. When he's ready to sell them, he thaws them out. They're unharmed, but they're in *Zègurkò*. They don't even have a fighting chance."

I form myself again to hold her shoulders and look her in the eye. "You do."

"But what about the others? Not just me. This village. You can't let them take anyone."

Closing my eyes, I feel my chest swarming with anxiety and uncertainty. "Hinya, I can't save everyone. I don't have the magic for that."

"Could your sister? She's an artisan."

"But she's not here."

Hinya touches my face. Her eyes meet mine. She's about to say something, but the door bursts in. I can't see anyone, but I can feel him.

"They're coming," Tarrek says. "We have to go."

There's a tug at my chest. The spell I'm under urges me to leave everything behind. I have a mission to capture a *Jäyûn*, not to save a village.

"We can't leave," I say.

"I know." Tarrek walks into the room and shuts the door.

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“What kind of princes would we be if we left these people behind—even if they aren’t our subjects.” He drops his invisibility. I see frost on his feet, but he’s still able to move.

“How?” He knows what I’m talking about.

“Some magic doesn’t work on an heir. Must be something to do with the magic of the realm.”

Hinya says, “It protects you because it chose you.”

Tarrek meets my eyes. “Spells aside, maybe we’re here for a reason ... How many are there?”

“Ten.”

“How many have magic?”

“Just the artisan.”

“Artisan? He doesn’t just use frost?”

“His name is Lupel,” Hinya says. The frost is halfway up her legs, despite fighting it with her magic.

Tarrek looks to the ceiling. “Where’s Sheva when you need her?”

“Press conference,” I say. “New album, remember?”

He looks to me. “Lucky us.”

“We know basic magic,” I say. “At least Csharynn was nice enough to teach us that.”

Tarrek says “fire” in Grâstömèn, a language Csharynn’s taught us since we were children. A small blaze ignites in his hand. “Not sure how much help this will be, but we need a plan.”

TARREK

The village is eerily quiet. Frost coats every building. No one's stirring. I fear what that means.

My feet burn from the chill, but at least I can still feel them. Albree's waiting in the shadows somewhere. I'm hiding around a corner, my invisibility hugging me like a tight suit.

I hear them before I see them—heavy feet crunching frozen ground. Ten dark men appear down the street, their skin is drastically different than the pale frost their companion made. I can tell which one he is—Lupel, the artisan. His ice-blue eyes give him away.

I shoot four arrows. Two find their homes in the heads of two slave traders. They drop to the frosted

ground, but Lupel's magic jumps to stop the other two. One hovers between his eyes, the other before the face of a comrade beside him. Lupel lets the arrows fall and looks to where they came from.

I've already moved across the street, my footsteps light, leaving no tracks thanks to the magic Csharynn taught me.

I shoot four more arrows, and Albree swoops in amongst them, shooting needles from his gauntlets.

Two more men go down. The rest are saved by the artisan, whose face is contorted with frustration. His comrades have their weapons drawn now, but they're looking around frantically. I scale a wall while Albree swoops in again. I make it to the roof and shoot more arrows.

None of our attacks get through. The artisan has a wall up. "Get the villagers," he says to his men in the *Zègur* tongue. He doesn't know Albree and I are fluent—courtesy of our uncle and his diplomatic passion. "I'll get these Alëunná scum."

Frost claws harder at my feet. I run to keep his magic from grabbing me. His men are breaking down doors and entering houses. Albree shoots needles at them, but none hit. The artisan still has them shielded. Frozen villagers are pulled from their beds. An unmarked vehicle with a storage area in back comes rolling down the street. The

driver has dark *Zègur* skin.

I say the word for fire in Grâstömèn and throw my hand towards the vehicle. Fire erupts around its wheels. The artisan puts them out before they barely have a chance to glow.

His eyes search for me as I leap to a new roof. He knows I'm here.

An invisible lasso wraps around my ankle. I slam onto the roof with a thud, but I save my face with my hands. My bow doesn't fare the fall and snaps in half.

Cursing, I throw myself around, jerking against the lasso and throwing myself to my feet. I pull free and sprint towards the roof's edge and jump, but the lasso's back. It pulls, and I hit the edge of the roof. I grab whatever I can to keep from falling. The lasso is jerking me down, but I hold on, grimacing with the effort. I glance down to see shards of inverted icicles reaching towards me—sharp and ready to impale me when I fall.

I pull harder against the lasso, but it pulls back. My hand slips from the roof's edge. I'm left hanging with one hand, and the lasso won't let go.

Gritting my teeth, I try to hold on as my fingers slip. I attempt to swing my other hand back, but it's caught in another lasso.

My grip fails, and I'm falling to my death.

ALBREE

I can feel Tarrek slipping from the roof. He still has his invisibility up, which makes it easier to sense him. The way he bends light and dark messes with the shadows, so I can't miss it. I'm there just as his last finger slides from the roof.

Reaching a hand out from between the icicles protruding from the ground, I pull him into darkness, but not before his arm hits one. A piece of the icicle breaks off with him when I tug him to me. He's screaming in my ear. Blood drips down the icicle's stake.

I bring him behind a building and reform us. The ice crystal is sticking through his arm. He's cursing up a storm and hesitating to pull it out.

"I'll say it if you pull it," he says.

TWINS OF SHADOW

We don't have time for pleasantries. Lupel's hunting us. More villagers are being dragged away. I jerk it free.

Tarrek screams a word in Grâstömèn—the one that stops too much blood from leaking out. It works, but it still looks painful.

He sighs, leaning back against the wall. I feel it too, a release in our chest. Csharynn's called off our mission.

"Damn it," I say, not that I dislike being free. "She knows."

"She'll send someone—we should have left when we had the chance."

"And leave these people?"

Tarrek looks me in the eye. Tears glisten in his. "You know I wouldn't just leave these people. I want to help as much as you."

"We still can." I look to Tarrek's chest. "She'll be coming. Shouldn't we give it all we got before she gets here?"

Tarrek closes his eyes. A tear falls down the side of his face. "Don't ask me to use that."

"I'm here. I won't let you lose control."

He shivers, and I know it has nothing to do with the cold. His eyes shut and darkness spills from his chest like smoke. It surrounds him, swirling like a suite. His eyes open, and they're completely white. I seep into the shadows and slink away before he can use the power on me.

TARREK

I've fallen deep within myself. I can't feel the pain in my arm anymore. I can't feel the frost at my feet. Darkness surrounds me like a cloak—similar to my invisibility, but different. With this there's power, control, death. I hate it. I don't feel myself stand. I don't feel myself walk back to where Lupel waits in the street. I do, however, see the villagers being piled into the wagon on top of each other, as if they were corpses from a genocide.

I have no emotion. No thought. Just the need to strike.

Lupel sees me coming. He turns to face me with this evil grin on his dark face. His teeth stand out against his skin. The darkness in me wants to rip them out, one tooth at a time.

TWINS OF SHADOW

He holds up a hand. Ice shoots from it, but the darkness grabs it like a shield. It sucks the power into itself, growing stronger.

Lupel tries again. Half the darkness stops his attack. The other grabs him by the throat and squeezes. Lupel waves his hand, and my darkness loses contact with his neck.

Some of the other *Zègur* stop gathering villagers and come for me, as if swords and spears can take me out now.

The darkness pounces. It bends their swords and snaps their spears before it claws down their throats. They don't stand a chance and fall limp on the frosted ground.

"Leave him to me," Lupel yells in his language to the few men he has left. His eyes are wide as he takes me in. "This is Csharynn's creation. Her Night Slayer."

I feel my lips pull with a grin, not that he can see it behind my mask. The darkness loves his fear, revels in it.

Clawing against the darkness, I try to reach the surface, but I'm suffocating inside myself. The darkness is taking over. It lurches forward, feeling life not just in Lupel but in the villagers frozen in the wagon. It craves it, wants to devour it.

I scream, but no one can hear me. The power has me suppressed. It has a mind of its own.

ALBREE

“Stop!” I scream at Tarrek, but he can’t hear me. His mutilated power swirls around Lupel. It claws against the man’s magic, but it doesn’t stop there. It reaches past him, seeping towards the villagers.

The darkness craves life. That’s how Tarrek explained it once. It’s a power Csharynn put in him—an experiment. I should have never asked him to use it. I knew better, but they had Hinya. I saw them drag her out, frozen solid like the others. I wasn’t going to let these slave traders win. Csharynn and her spells be damned.

“Tarrek!” I roar. I’m in the shadow at his feet. I can feel the darkness spinning. It’s reaching the villagers. “We’re trying to help them!”

TWINS OF SHADOW

I look at the death he's causing. The other slave traders are cowering in Lupel's shield. He lets his magic sink towards the villagers. He knows Tarrek's killing them, and that's not Lupel's goal. He can't sell dead bodies.

"Tarrek!" I scream and jump into that darkness. It claws at me, wanting to devour. But I'm shadow—formless. It can't touch me.

"I know you're in here," I say. "Pull back, Tarrek."

I choke. His magic's found a way into my shadows. "Tarrek," I rasp, but the darkness is clawing down my throat.

TARREK

I can hear him yelling. Albree's begging me to stop. I'm trying. I feel like I'm nine feet under water and being pulled deeper down. I claw my way up, but I only gain so much ground.

Albree's screaming stops. I hear him choking instead.

"No!" I yell. "*No!*"

I fight harder. Claw faster. Press harder. The darkness is like a parasite taking over. I asked him not to make me do this, but the darkness wanted it. It gladly headed his call.

"Don't you kill him!" I shiver. "That's my brother!"

The darkness grins at me.

Everything goes black.

26th of Állû 1234 J.E.

In the 18th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

ALBREE

I sit in the back of a wagon. We've been on the road for a day now. Tarrek's still passed out, lying at my feet. Chains clang around my wrist and ankles. The captured villagers are still frozen, but they seem to be thawing now. From what Hinya said, they were supposed to remain frozen until they get to *Zègurkò*. The fact they're thawing makes me think Lupel's magic is strained; Tarrek's darkness must have done that.

Tarrek stirs, and I sit up straight. His eyes flash open. Purple irises stare back at me.

"What happened?" he asks. His voice is hoarse, like he's been yelling too much. His eyes are sunken, and he doesn't sit up. His wrists and ankles are chained like mine.

"Lupel stopped you. Something made the darkness pause,

TWINS OF SHADOW

and Lupel took the chance to suffocate it. It sank back into you, but you passed out. I couldn't get to you fast enough, and I wasn't going to let Lupel take you alone."

"How many?" he asks. His mouth is turned down. I know that look.

I don't want to answer.

"How many?"

"I don't know. You killed most of the slave traders. There's only four left, including Lupel and the driver."

"And the villagers?"

"I don't know. They haven't woken up. I can't tell who's dead."

Tarrek closes his eyes. I can't imagine how he feels, but I know the misery in my own gut. I'm the one who asked him to do it. We still failed them.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He doesn't answer.

TARREK

I don't blame Albree. It's not his fault the darkness came. I should have stifled it and not let it take over. I'm paying for it now. My entire body feels like acid just went through my veins. It's comparable to the venom I recently survived. This must be what death feels like. Is the darkness trying to kill me too?

I don't want to know. I don't want it to come back again, so I stop thinking about it. I try to breath smoothly, try to stay calm.

“Why didn't they freeze us?”

Albree tilts his head. “They didn't want to piss Csharynn off.”

“They know we work for her?”

“Lupel knew where your darkness came from.”

TWINS OF SHADOW

“Csharynn did come from Zègurkò.” I rub my face. The chains clang at my wrist. “Do they know who we are?”

“I haven’t heard them say anything about it. Your eyes were white when they saw you.”

“If they see us together, it won’t be hard to figure out, even with your mask still on.”

“Use your light bending skills and change the appearance of your eyes. That’ll help. We don’t want South Lémuel knowing we were here.”

I try, but nothing happens.

Albree curses. “He enchanted the chains. I was hoping they wouldn’t affect you.”

“We can’t use our powers?”

Albree blows out a breath. “I guess we’re stuck here waiting for Csharynn to save us then.”

I moan and roll over. A frozen body is at my side. They’re all around. “You care about Hinya, don’t you?”

Albree just looks at me.

“She’s in here somewhere. Isn’t she?”

More staring.

“How do you know her?”

Albree looks away.

“Come on. We’re stuck in this enclosed trailer for the gods know how long. I’ll get you to tell me eventually.”

“She saved my life once.” He picks at the lock on his

TWINS OF SHADOW

wrist with his thumb. “Csharynn sent me after a fire bender. Her powers singed me out of the shadows. Melted me. Hinya found me and nursed me back to health.”

“That fire bender you brought to Csharynn a year ago?”

He nods.

I look to the ceiling. We’ve captured seven skilled Jäyûns for Csharynn now. We’ve never asked why. It never matters when we’re under her spell. We do what we’re told so we can be free again.

“Hinya said she owed you. What’d you do for her?”

Albree stares again. The wagon stops, and he squirms to his feet, glad for the distraction. He peeks through a hole in the wood and gasps.

ALBREE

"It's Sheva," I whisper. Our sister. She's standing in the middle of the road. Her small frame looks tiny amid the trees rising up on either side. She's wearing a red wig and is dressed in skin tight pants. Her shirt hugs her body but has a wide-open neck to expose parts of her I don't care to look at. Ever since she hit her teen years, she's enjoyed showing herself off. I once told her Mum wouldn't have approved. She fried my arm with her magic and let me deal with it for a day before she healed it. I've never brought it up again.

"She must've flown in overnight," Tarrek says.

I nod but keep looking outside.

"Who are you?" Lupel asks in a gurgled accent, speaking our language. He jumps down from the wagon.

TWINS OF SHADOW

Sheva's ice-blue eyes meet his. "I'm a messenger from the Dragon of Darkness. You have what belongs to her."

"They interfered with my business."

"How do you know you didn't interfere with theirs?"

Lupel stares Sheva down, like he's calculating something. "They weren't strong enough to stop me."

"That's why I'm here."

"You? How old are you, twelve?"

"Fifteen, thank you."

Lupel scoffs, and I just hope Sheva realizes we're in the wagon before she decides to destroy him.

"Csharynn wants to present a peace offering."

"Csharynn? I don't trade with dragons."

"You don't trust her?"

"Never."

"That's too bad." Sheva walks towards him.

Lupel stands his ground, but his fingers twitch at his side. Frost sparks in his hand.

"I'll ride with you," Sheva says, standing inches before him. She looks up at his face. "I'll get you to your check point. You take what you want. I take what I want."

"That simple?"

Sheva's mouth quarks into one of her sly grins. "That simple."

Lupel stares her down a few moments longer. He angles his

TWINS OF SHADOW

body between her and the vehicle's front cab. He holds out a hand. "Join me."

Sheva nods in a subtle bow and climbs up. I know she's keeping an eye on the man, even with her back to him. Her magic spins around her like a shield; she's too smart not to let it do so.

Lupel's brow narrows. He can feel her power.

"This doesn't have to get ugly," Sheva says, sparks playing in her hand.

Lupel's brow settles. Even if he thinks Sheva's a novice, I don't think he wants to take a chance. First smart move he's made. He takes the driver's seat, and we roll down the road again.

TARREK

It's quiet for a while. I don't know how long. The dull pain in my limbs makes it hard to count time. Albree doesn't talk. He's listening to what's going on outside, not that there's anything to hear. Sheva hasn't spoken to Lupel since she got in, and he hasn't seemed inclined to talk either.

"What's that?" Lupel says, his gargled accent strained, as if he's nervous.

"What's what?" Sheva says. I can hear the edgy smile in her voice.

"If I can feel that, artisan, so can you."

I try to push my power out—my natural light bending powers—but it hurts. The darkness pulled hardest against my magic, it seems. Not that the enchanted manacles help.

TWINS OF SHADOW

“What are they talking about?” I whisper to Albree.

He looks to me with his one visible eye. “I don’t know.” He shakes his arms to rattle his chains. “I can’t feel anything, but I have an idea since Csharynn’s involved.”

“Her experiments,” I say in the faintest whisper I can muster and leave it at that. I don’t want Lupel overhearing me somehow. Who knows what sort of magic he’s still wielding against us? I wouldn’t put it past him to have some sort of listening spell.

The vehicle comes to another stop. I hear the door open and heavy feet hit the ground. Albree slithers to his feet and peeks through the hole again.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“Nothing yet.”

ALBREE

No one's there—at least that I can see. We're surrounded by trees. A gentle breeze flutters the leaves, but I don't hear anything else. No birds. No bugs. Just the wind.

I feel a burning in my chest and realize I'm holding my breath. They're here. They have to be. Csharynn wouldn't have trusted this mission to anyone else.

I don't tell Tarrek. He wouldn't know what I'm talking about. I don't even know all of it. Just that Csharynn's been working on something deadly and unnatural. I've felt it in the shadows at home. I haven't been daring enough to investigate. I haven't wanted to.

Lupel's standing in the road, looking up to the trees. His magic crackles all around him, ready to strike. His remaining

TWINS OF SHADOW

men are still with the vehicle. I think one's in the cab with Sheva, so the other two must be at the back guarding the trailer door.

"Did you bring them?" Lupel asks, his eyes blazing as he looks to my sister. I don't see Sheva's response. She's silent. Must have gestured her reply. I bet it was full of deceitful malice. Of course she brought these things. Csharynn would have sent them with her.

In unison, seven figures jump from the trees. I've never seen them before. They're shaped like humans, but their skin's black and marked with runes from the Grâstömèn tongue. Their eyes are black too, and their hair falls in mangled clumps, missing large gaps as if it'd been pulled from their head.

Each of these things stare Lupel down. They have him surrounded, but Lupel doesn't attack. He can see they have power. One has water swirling around her body. Another has light glowing in his hand. Most of the others I can't tell what powers they have, but one has fire.

I swallow. I know these skills, so I can guess at the rest of the abilities. They're the powers of the Jäyûns Tarrek and I hunted for Csharynn. But these aren't the Jäyûns we caught. I remember what they looked like. Even the black skin can't change the fact that their heights and build are different. Not to mention the fire bender I took down was female. This is a guy.

"Why are you doing this?" Lupel asks. He's looking to the cab, so I know the question is directed at Sheva.

TWINS OF SHADOW

"You tried to steal," Sheva says. "There's a price for that."

"Csharynn's never cared about what I trade before."

She wouldn't, I think. She is from Zègurkö.

"And she still doesn't," Sheva says. "But I do."

I see ice-blue light crackle from the cab—Sheva's magic. It strikes after Lupel. The things help her. Lupel tries to fight, but his magic is still drained from facing Tarrek and freezing the villagers. It's not long before Sheva has him chained with glowing rays of her magic. It swirls around his wrists like shackles of power.

Sheva turns, looking at something I don't see. "Get them," she orders the other things. "Kill them. Csharynn only wants the artisan."

TARREK

I can't see anything. I'm stuck lying on the trailer floor. Albree tries to relay what's happening, but I hear the fighting clear enough. Sheva's winning. She would. She's a skilled artisan, and with those things she brought bearing the powers of those Albree and I captured, there's no way she'd lose.

Part of me sinks into myself. Albree said these aren't the people we faced, but it is their magic. It seems Csharynn found a way to strip it from them and put it into someone else. I hate thinking about it.

A door near us pulls open. It's the entrance from the cab to the trailer. Sheva stands there. I blink at her. The light coming in is too bright for me.

"What? No thank you?" she says.

TWINS OF SHADOW

“Thanks,” Albree says flatly. “Now get these shackles off.” He holds his arms out, and Sheva glares at him. “Please,” he adds just as flat.

Sheva grabs the chains in her hands, which are glowing with her ice-blue magic. They melt off his wrists but leave Albree unharmed. She does the same for the ones around his feet.

He sighs, closing his eyes. I know what he’s doing. Feeling his magic’s power return. He slinks into the darkness.

“Your turn,” Sheva says to me.

I try to sit up, but dizzying pain pounds in my head.

“He used the darkness,” Albree says from the shadows. He sounds like he’s deeper in the trailer, as if he’s searching for something.

Sheva pins me with those ice-blue eyes of hers. If looks could kill ...

“Why?” she says sharply.

“Because he wanted to save them,” I say and look to the villagers.

“You did a pretty cracked up job of it now, didn’t you?”

“You don’t have to remind me.”

Sheva removes the shackles and takes my hand to help me sit up. I cry out with the effort, not just from the spinning in my head, but the clawing ache in my limbs and

the burning in my arm from the icicle wound.

Sheva takes my injured arm and observes the damage. “What happened here?”

“Can’t you tell?” My lips twitch, and I’m surprised I have the effort to tease. “Ever know icicles could hurt so bad?”

Sheva rolls her eyes and waves her hand over my arm. Her magic seeps into me, and I feel the skin knit back together. It pulls taught in places, reflecting her mood, and I grimace.

“Tarrek Jentry Vaydmehn,” Sheva says my name like a curse. “You’re heir of Jasikx, and yet you risked your life for these South Lémuens? You’re lucky ice didn’t stab your heart.”

“Or artery, or brain, or gut,” Albree rants. “He fell from a roof towards a whole slew of inverted icicles. Would have stabbed through everything.”

“Not helping,” I say through my teeth, just as Sheva’s magic pulls my wound harder. She’s grinding her teeth. I hiss and nod to her mouth. “That’s a bad habit, you know.”

She jerks her wrist, and I scream as her magic tugs my wound. I keep my mouth shut after that and wait until she’s finished. She pulls her magic back, and I rub my hand along my new skin. The pain’s gone.

“What else should a prince do?” I finally ask her.

TWINS OF SHADOW

She looks sideways at me. “Let the South Lémuen king deal with his own slave trader infestation. You had a mission, and you put that in jeopardy.”

“Seems Csharynn still got something out of it.” I look to Lupel, now unconscious and guarded by the things.

“Lucky for us. And let’s not forget I got him faster than you’ve been able to get that snake whisperer.”

“Only because we wore Lupel down for you. It wasn’t a fair fight.”

“Too bad for him. Now get up. Csharynn wants to talk to you.”

I lean all my weight into my little sister. Her legs tremble. I’m at least a hundred pounds heavier.

“Albree, help me,” she hisses.

He’s at my side in a blur of shadow. I lean into him instead. He helps me to the cab where I see the things outside more clearly. Their black skin and missing hair are disgusting.

“They’re called Xershay,” Sheva says, but it’s not her voice coming out of her mouth. I glance to her and see her irises are now black. The pupils are vertical slits that flash white before turning black again.

“Hello, Csharynn,” I say. I know the dragon isn’t actually here. She and my sister are linked. She’s probably still back at our home in Jasikx. I’ve never seen her travel any farther south before.

TWINS OF SHADOW

“They’re my latest creation,” she says, ignoring me. “They aren’t done. Eventually, they will look human again.”

“What did you do to them?”

“Nothing to concern yourself with, little one.”

I clench my jaw, grinding my teeth, but I know to keep my mouth shut about it. “What do you want from us?”

“I want the snake whisperer.”

“And what about the people?” I nod to the carriage.

“Leave them.”

My heart burns in my chest. I glare, and I can feel Albree fuming at my side.

“You have wasted my time with this humanitarian act. I will not sit around and wait for you to save these people.”

A relentless pull returns to my chest. I look to Albree. He can feel it too. But he’s not looking at me, he’s gazing back at the pile of frozen bodies starting to thaw—at the Ètâscèn with neon red streaks in her hair, piled under two other people.

I know the look in his eye, but there’s nothing he can do. The image of the snake whisperer comes to mind. *Bring him to me*, the spell says. *Alive.*

29th of Állû 1234 J.E.

In the 18th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

ALBREE

I hover in the shadows of a bar, waiting for my target, the snake whisperer. Heat swarms in my limbs—a fusion of anger and frustration. It mixes with the spell pulsing through my body—the spell that forced me to leave behind the villagers I fought to save. They were still frozen on the road the last I knew. That was three days ago. I can't help but think of Hinya. Her neon red eyes plead with me in my dreams. I fought the slave traders for her, and Tarrek nearly died twice helping.

My heart tears at me, telling me I should be there with her. Even if Hinya claims she won't be mine because she's an Ètâscèn and I'm human, I love her. I know I do. But here I am, hundreds of miles away, on a mission I don't believe in.

I feel my teeth grinding in my shadow form. I hate knowing

TWINS OF SHADOW

I'm helping to create the Xershay. I've assisted in capturing five of the seven Jäyûns Csharynn's used to make them. Make that six, because I'm sure that's why my sister took Lupel. I can't say I'm sorry about him, a slave trader. How many Aluens has he taken from their homes? How many still live in servitude in the northern realm? How many died in their grotesque arena fights? Whatever the dragon has in mind for him won't be torture enough to pay him back for what he's done.

But the snake whisperer? What did he ever do to deserve this fate? He's an Aluen through and through. Our last fight together told me that. His accent is from Ridgámá, and his skin is sun-kissed, like the people from the southern half of the kingdom. I don't know what brought him to South Lémuel, but it won't matter where he is. We'll find him—Tarrek and I. The spell demanding us to take the snake whisperer will lead us to him no matter where he is.

TARREK

I sit in a corner table at a bar with my cloak's hood up. My magic swirls around my eyes, changing them from purple to green in case the shadows aren't dark enough. Purple eyes would make people think of me and my brother immediately. It's not that we're the only Jäyûns with eyes that color, but we are the most popular ones.

A pull in my chest tells me my target's close. I hope this will be our last encounter. I want to get back home. I can imagine the amount of homework piling up on me. I think I'll ask Csharynn to save any more missions until break. It'd be easier.

My lips twitch at the idea. Only I would think of school at a time like this. I'm sure Albree couldn't care less.

TWINS OF SHADOW

My chest pulls again, and I lift a dark glass to my lips. It's filled with water, but the glass conceals it so no one can tell I'm not drinking something special. I need my wits about me if I'm going to end this today. Besides, if I let down my guard, the darkness in me will take over. I can still feel the effects from when I last let it loose, though the pain has lessened. Food and sleep helped with that. Getting rid of this spell reverberating through my bones will help even more.

The door opens, and I watch my target enter. I have a perfect view of him from my table. He's tall but hidden behind a green cloak. I probably wouldn't know it was him without the spell screaming that it is.

I stay put. I won't engage him yet. Too many people around. Three companions walk in with him. I curse inside. They're loaded with weapons and walk like trained warriors. Probably a part of the same group the snake whisperer is—the ones that calls themselves the Warriors of Radiance. Knowing how they work, this won't be as easy as I'd hoped.

"I'll stay close," I hear Albree whisper in my ear from the shadows. He doesn't say more. We're both watching, both waiting.

The snake whisperer approaches the bar. I watch him get a drink and slide into a chair with his comrades. They talk. I don't hear what they're saying, but I notice how

they're aware of their surroundings, as if they expect us to be here.

One looks directly at me. He's young. His irises are gold, and his eyes are shaped like almonds. His hair is black. Like the Kuromai warriors. I curse under my breath. I know my hood is drawn far enough forward. I know I'm sitting at an inconspicuous angle. Out of everyone here, there's no way he should know I'm watching him.

Albree curses at my side. I swallow to keep from asking him why. He slithers into the shadows under my hood.

"He's an angel," Albree says so quietly I can barely hear him. "I've seen him before."

My jaw clenches, and I stand. I want to ask how Albree came across him, but I know not to speak. Part of me is cursing inside. We can't take on an angel. Not without a plan. And even then, it might kill us.

I take my glass one last time and chug it, as if I'm a customer who cares about the drink I paid for. Setting it on the table with a small thud, nothing too showy, I make my way out and avoid the snake whisperer and his comrades, afraid of what would happen if I got too close to the angel. Albree stays in the shadows under my hood until we're outside. After I walk a block away, he finally jumps to take back his human form.

TWINS OF SHADOW

“There’s no way we’re gonna live through this,” Albree says. I can see his eyes are wide in fear. He failed to pull up his hood, but he’s wearing his mask. “The two of us can’t take on an angel. Not alone. Maybe not even with help.”

“I guess it might depend on the type of help,” I say.

Albree growls, but I briskly walk away. He keeps up with me. “Are you suggesting we get a fallen angel involved?”

“You have a better idea?”

I sense his fists clench. “Do you even know where to find one?”

“No, but I have an idea who might.”

He doesn’t ask more questions and sinks back into the shadows to follow me. I glance around at the buildings. They’re tall, which makes sense. We’re in a city called Tepper in South Lémuel. It’s just south of the capital, Liflindle City. It goes without saying there’s a lot of people here. I use my powers to go invisible and take us underground to the sub-trains that run within the city. Albree sneaks after me so neither of us have to pay.

I wait four stops. That’s when the announcer says we’ve entered Liflindle City. I’m still invisible and step off the sub-train. I can feel Albree follow. I don’t get up the stairs before someone holds their hand out to me. I stop, puzzled. I’m still wielding my power.

TWINS OF SHADOW

“It only works on those who see with their eyes,” the young man says. He doesn’t look much older than me. His skin is pale, like the locals. His eyes are curved at an angle slightly different than the Kuromai from the next kingdom over. One iris is black. The other is half-green and half-red. He’s not blind. His eyes are too attentive for that. But by the strangeness of his irises, I can tell his magic is complicated, intricate, bizarre. “You were looking for me, Prince?”

“Kody?” I ask. I’ve never met the guy before, just heard of him and knew he lived in the area.

He turns to walk away, beckoning me to follow with his hand. His movements are confident but different. Like he doesn’t quite understand how to blend in. Or maybe he just doesn’t care. He pulls something out of his pocket as I follow. When he pops it in his mouth, I realize it’s a sucker. He pulls another one out and offers it to me with a lifted brow. We’re still walking.

“No thanks,” I say.

He lifts a shoulder as if to say, *your loss*, and holds it out to the shadows.

“How ’bout you?” he says.

It disappears, and I can’t help chuckle. A wrapper appears on the ground.

“Ah, no.” Kody stops to stare at it. “There will be no littering in my presence.”

TWINS OF SHADOW

“Sorry,” Albree says and forms himself. The sucker sticks out from his mouth as he bends to pick the wrapper up. “It slipped.”

“Sure it did,” I say, getting an eye roll from my brother.

“I thought princes would be more environmentally friendly,” Kody says and starts to walk again. We’re on a street now with so many people I find it hard to breathe properly.

Albree sticks his face in Kody’s. Not close enough to be a challenge, but close enough to get his attention. “You know a lot of things.”

“I do.” Kody seems unfazed.

“Then mind keeping who we are to yourself.”

“You mean don’t tell my king you are here?”

Albree runs a nervous hand through his hair. “Gods no. We aren’t here as diplomats.”

“No.” Kody looks him in the eye. “You are not ... Tell me, why should I help you? You seek to steal. What makes you better than the slave traders?”

Albree’s jaw drops. The sucker hangs onto the corner of his mouth. “H-how d-do you know about that?”

Kody taps his head. “I am supposed to know.”

Albree’s eye narrows, and he takes his sucker in hand before looking to me. “Why’d you bring us to this guy? He’s Dakota Lee. He works for the South Lémuel

government.”

I nod once. My hood is still up, so Albree can't see my expression clearly. I try to keep it smooth anyway. “He might be able to help us.”

“Find a fallen angel?” Kody says. “It would do you more harm than good to have one of them join your mission.” He rubs his chin and moves his sucker around. I watch the stick slide across his lips. His strange eyes are hard to look at. It seems like they're reading me.

“But I am glad you came looking for me.”

He holds out his hand. A green and red swirl appears in his palm. As fast as it comes, it disappears. A small box is in his hand. “Take it.”

I do, though with caution. I open it to see a ring with a large red stone.

“What's this for?”

“You'll know when the time is right.”

ALBREE

“That was a waste of time,” I say as Kody walks away. “All we got out of it was a surprisingly good sucker and a stupid ring.” I can feel it in his pocket. There’s a pulse to it, like it’s enchanted.

“He knows about the villagers,” Tarrek says, making me pause. “He must have sent someone to help them.”

I feel my heart squeeze and think of Hinya. “I hope so.”

“He would,” Tarrek says. “He’s not the type of person to forget about them.”

“How do you know?”

Tarrek shrugs. “I just do. And so do you. We’ve seen enough people in court to recognize the ones who care.”

I lift my brow in a gesture of quick agreement. Even though Kody’s weird, Tarrek’s right. I’ve never told my brother, but I

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actually know the guy. Helped save his life once. Not my favorite person, but he's not the selfish type.

Bring him to me, I feel the familiar pull from the spell. It sends a surge through my body that makes my head spin. *Alive*.

"We need to figure something out," I say, "or we're gonna cross paths with the snake whisperer and engage him out of spite to this spell." I lurch forward, feeling it pull with impatience.

"Csharynn can't have him if we're dead," Tarrek says, as if to calm it. It works a little, and I can breathe more smoothly.

"What do you propose we do?" I ask.

"Lure the angel away somehow, get the snake whisperer alone."

Tarrek starts to walk back to the sub-train station. He pulls on his invisibility, and I slink after him in the shadows. He's quiet, like he always is when he's thinking.

We sneak back onto a sub-train heading towards Tepper. The snake whisperer is still there, I can feel it. Must be getting cocky now with that angel around. He used to always flee when he knew we were close.

Tarrek and I ride in silence. I feel him in the back of the sub-train trailer, staying invisible and out of the way as people come and go. Suddenly, I don't feel him at all.

I dash through the shadows to where I last felt him. "Where are you?" I whisper.

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"Shh," he hisses back.

I clamp my mouth shut. The person closest to us is looking around to try and prove they heard something.

A moment later, I feel Tarrek's presence again. I feel his power bending the light and dark and know he's there. The sub-train stops, and I follow him off. We head up the stairs leading from the sub-trains and drop our magic in a shadowed area of the streets. We keep our hoods up.

"What happened?" I hiss around my sucker. It was hard to keep the question in.

Tarrek holds out his hand to show me the ring Kody gave him. "I put this on."

I stare at the red stone. It's glowing. "Did you feel ... strange or anything?"

"No. I didn't feel any different."

I pull my sucker from my mouth. It's almost gone. "That's so weird. I couldn't feel you at all. Like you disappeared ... or died."

"Mmm." Tarrek puts the ring back on. I can still see him standing exactly where he was, but in the place where I normally feel magic, my connection to him is dead.

"Anything?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"So Kody did give us something helpful."

I look to the ring. "I'm not sure how helpful it is. The angel

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may not see or feel you, but he's not stupid. We won't fool him for long, even with that. And who's to say it doesn't just work between you and me. Do you really trust Kody that much?"

Tarrek looks to me, keeping the ring on. "I didn't say I trusted him. I said I thought he might be able to help us. There's only one way to test this ring. Let's go find that angel."

TARREK

I follow the pull of the spell beckoning me towards the snake whisperer. Albree shadow-walks with me. We've always found that it's less suspicious if I'm the only cloaked figure.

I'm thinking about the ring and Kody as I walk. I can't help but wonder why he's helping us. I know he doesn't belong to Csharynn or anyone else in her circle of friends. He wouldn't have any unyielding spell forcing him to act against his will. And yet he helped us. Part of me had only sought him to be a distraction, an attempt to postpone the inevitable.

But here's the ring—and with it I may just put Csharynn's spell to rest.

My gut twists with the idea. The snake whisperer's

power will be used to make another one of those mutations—the Xershay. I hate that I have to do this. I always wish for another way.

I find the angel with the snake whisperer out at a park. It's late, but there's a crowd of people around. Food vendors and merchants line the sidewalk winding through the park. I pull on my invisibility and enter the crowd. Weaving through, I take a breath before I draw near the angel. I keep my eyes on him, moving slow until I walk past him. Nothing happens. The angel, the snake whisperer, and the other two warriors don't even turn to see me.

I exit the crowd. I don't want to engage them there. Too many civilians.

"Albree," I whisper, but I don't hear anything. He must have lost me when I went invisible. "Albree," I say again. I pull the ring off to try and let him feel me. "Albree, you there?"

I feel a presence behind me and turn. A palm finds my chest, and I'm thrown backwards. One of the snake whisperer's friends is there. I jump to my feet, struggling to breathe, and manage to block another strike with my arm. Thank the gods for all the Kung Fu my dad forced me to learn as a kid.

He's striking at me again, a dagger in his hand now. It's small for quick, pointed wounds. I dodge his strikes

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three times before I catch him in my grasp and try to break his arm. He pulls out, and this proves he's skilled. I can usually break a man's arm in seconds.

Blocking his next blow, I spin, sliding out from my cloak and pulling a dagger from my leg in the process.

I take a stance a few feet away from him. But he's coming at me, unwilling to relent. I feel another figure at my side and duck. It's the snake whisperer's other friend. I haven't encountered the angel yet.

Jumping, I flip back through the air, avoiding both of my opponents. I land back on my feet, and I'm instantly attacked high by my first opponent and low by the other. I manage to dodge them both, but I feel a blade take a thin slice from my leg. Nothing I can't handle.

I kick one guy in the chest, sending him far enough away that I can get a few blows into the other. I nick that guy's cheek, and he gets my shirt sleeve.

The other guy is back. I want to get another weapon, but I still have the ring in my hand.

"Found you!" Albree cries and appears in the middle of the fight. He shoots needles from his gauntlets and neither of our opponents are fast enough to block them all. Some land in the first guy's shoulder, some in the other's face. He screams as one gets his eye. I'm about to finish him off when I feel a force of magic push me back. Albree and I tumble through the air. We hit the ground in

unison and our breaths are sucked from our lungs.

The angel's magic keeps us pinned and pushes air away from our mouths. We gasp for air and can't seem to get up. I hear Albree choking at my side.

You were close that time, I hear the angel's voice in my head.

I don't have a retort. I'm still trying to breathe. I hear a hissing noise, and my eyes widen as a snake appears on my body. It's slithering across my torso. I don't dare look to see if Albree has one too.

Venom drips from the snake's fangs. It's the same type of snake that bit me before. I remember the pain and panic wants to settle in. Before it can take over, I feel the ring in my hand.

I get it now, I think.

The angel holds up his hand, as if to tell the snake whisperer to wait. I feel his magic let off my face, and I gasp in fresh air. "Speak," the angel tells me.

Albree's still choking, so I talk fast.

"Take this." I open my hand and look to the ring then to the snake whisperer. "Put it on."

He glares at me. "Why would I do that?"

"Because it will stop us."

My heart pounds. Albree stops choking. I glance at him to see his mouth open, begging for air. A snake stares him down, but if he doesn't breathe soon, he'll suffocate

before the snake gets him.

I look back to the snake whisperer. “Please. Just put it on.”

He glances to the angel. I don’t blame him for not trusting me.

The angel nods, and the snake whisperer comes to take it out of my hand. I can’t move, so I watch as he looks from me to the angel, as if making sure he understood the creature right.

The angel nods again, and the snake whisperer puts the ring on.

I feel a snap in my chest, as if a taught cord connected to my heart was snapped in two.

Sinking to the ground in relief, I enjoy the freedom. I hear a loud gasp at my side and see Albree roll over to suck in air on his hands and knees. He coughs and gasps some more.

A tear rolls down my cheek, and I stare at the sky. Fireworks have started to fill the night with color. My lips pull into a small grin.

“You’re free,” I tell the snake whisperer. “You’re free. Don’t ever take that ring off, and we will never hunt you again. It’s coated with some of the most powerful cloaking magic I’ve ever encountered. It’s as if you’re dead. And that’s exactly what you need to be to avoid the Dragon of Darkness. She’s the one who sent us. I can’t tell you much

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more, but if you keep that ring on, she will never be able to hunt you again.”

ALBREE

Air, glorious air. I've never been so happy to breathe. I'm almost too lost in my joy that I nearly miss what Tarrek did. He gave the ring to the snake whisperer. Brilliant. I don't know why I hadn't thought of it. The spell is gone from my chest, and what a blessing that is. I know it's not the last time we'll be under Csharynn's influence, but it feels so good right now to be free. Feels so good to know we beat her.

I'm laughing, and I don't realize it until everyone else is looking at me.

I can't stop laughing, and I bury my head in the dirt. I feel so stupid.

"Don't forget what I asked you," the angel says to me.

I look up from the ground and stifle my chuckles. Tears

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stream down my cheeks. As he stares, I remember my encounter with him in the woods the night Tarrek was dying from the snake bite.

“Remember the Kuromai I told you about. Remember to find him when you get home.”

I nod and get to my feet. “Until we meet again,” I say and pull Tarrek into the shadows with me.

“Let’s go home,” he says. And I want to. Even though it’s where Csharynn will be and we’ll have to explain how we failed.

“Let’s tell her we killed him,” I say to Tarrek when we’re on the edge of the city and I reform our bodies. “I gave him the killing blow.”

“Oh, you get to take the glory for it?” Tarrek’s grinning.

“I mean, Csharynn will probably be pissed that he’s dead. You can totally be the villain if you want.”

Tarrek shakes his head. “No, you can play that role. Let’s just make the story convincing. He put his snakes on us. We had no other choice but to end him or we’d be dead ourselves.”

“And the battle took place in a park with fireworks.”

“The truth mixed in a lie is good. And we burned his body. Not a trace left behind.”

“I like it.” I look to the horizon. Now that we’re out of the city, I can see stars. “Before we go home, I have one thing I want to do.”

“Check on the villagers?” Tarrek asks.

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I nod.

His lips twitch with a slight smile, and he holds his hand out to me in agreement. I take it and pull him into the shadows with me. I head back down the road we would have taken if we brought the villagers to the capital. It's even easier to shadow-walk at night, and I make it down the road faster than a vehicle would travel during the day. I stop when I find the wagon. No one's there. It's empty of all the villagers, though I see five graves dug beside the road.

Tarrek stairs at them. The names of the villagers are listed on grave markers. He doesn't say anything, but he's tense. He knows it's his darkness that killed them.

I run into the trailer to see if I'll find anything. There's a note on the vehicle's windshield saying the South Lémuel government was here and would return to take the vehicle away. I slink into the cab to see the wires that made it run are cut. It's definitely going nowhere fast.

I go to stand by my brother. "I bet they went back home. Their village might have been ransacked, but they're humans. There's something about home that connects to you, no matter what happens there."

Tarrek holds his hand to me again. "Let's go see if we can find them."

I take us down the road. What took a day to travel in that trailer, I pass in a few hours. It's dawn when we get to the village.

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The frost is gone, and South Lémuen soldiers stand guard in the streets.

I drop Tarrek off in an alley. “Can you handle yourself for a while?”

He gives me this crooked grin, and I know he knows what I’m up to.

I leave him like that and find the inn we stayed at. I sneak into Hinya’s room and find her sitting up in bed.

She smiles before I reveal myself. “I thought you’d come back.”

I chuckle once and kneel before her. I’m close enough I can touch her, but I place my hands on her bed instead, caging her with my arm. “Of course I would.”

She looks at me seriously. Her neon red eyes are soft. Her hair drapes around her face, and I want to trace the red streaks that naturally decorate it. “You saved us.”

“We did.”

“Thank you.”

I move a little closer. “Why did you tell my brother you owed me?”

She bit her lip. “Because I hurt you.”

“How?”

She looks to my shoulder to avoid my eyes. I bend my body so I’m back in her line of vision. “Hinya, how? You don’t owe me anything.”

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She licks her lips, and I can't help it. My eyes follow the movement of her tongue. I move closer, slowly. She doesn't move. My mouth finds hers, and her lips are warm against mine. She kisses me back, and my heart pounds loud in my chest. My hands move, and I soon have one hand in her hair and the other pressing her against me.

I drown in her mouth, and I don't care that she's an Ètâscèn healer and I'm a human prince. I want her and only her. That's all that matters to me.

I taste salt on my lips.

"Albree," she says against my mouth. Her voice quivers.

I open my eyes to see she's crying. I pull back enough to look at her, but I don't let her go.

"Albree ..." She touches my face and her tears fall harder. "We can't do this."

"Even if you want to?"

"Even then, Albree Vaydmehn. I told you, I'm not right for you. Ètâscèns don't feel the same feelings humans do. We live longer. We don't have as many children. And humans and Ètâscèns can't make children together. You need to have a family. You're a prince. And I've seen glimpses of your future. I'm not right for it. Believe me when I tell you, you will find someone who loves you with all her heart and can face everything you will face with more courage and power than I

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can. It's not right for me to try and take her place."

I sigh. I've heard of Ètâscèn sometimes seeing the future of the people they heal. It usually happens when their patient is on the brink of death. It's like an incentive to help them finish their work, even if it's hard. It tells them what they're saving the person for.

I can't explain the emotions swimming in my heart. I think Hinya knows because she places her hand over my chest, the one with her Ètâscèn birth mark, and the swirls of her mark glow blue. Magic pulses into my chest, and I feel her there, but with peace.

She grabs a lock of her red hair. "There's a reason you love this color," she says with a smile, and I think she's talking about the girl I'll meet someday.

I kiss Hinya one more time, and she lets me. "I won't be forgetting you," I say as I get up to leave.

"I'd never expect you to."

I stop at the door. "Thank you," I say over my shoulder, but I don't look back before I disappear.

~

Tarrek and I take the long way home, making sure we have our story down. We've recited it to each other at least fifty times before we break the news to Csharynn. She's furious, of course, but she's the sort of creature to contain her anger, letting it out in vile experiments.

I'm glad when the confrontation's over. I didn't fear for my

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life. I know she values the skills she's gained in my brother and me. And it's not like she can kill us without having our dad tear into her.

My brother and I part ways for a while, and I venture to the volcano under the castle. I find the dungeon where Csharynn keeps her most prized specimen. It's there I see Lupel. I watch from the shadows as he's dragged from his cage by one of the black skinned Xershay. He's beaten and bruised. Blood leaks from his wounds. He still has shackles around his wrists made from my sister's magic, and I bet that's making him unable to wield his own power.

The Xershay takes him to a room where Csharynn meets them. She's a dragon, but her species is able to change into a humanoid form. She's wearing that form now, but she's dressed in her scales. I watch her magic leak from her. It's dark-blue with swirls of black smoke. It binds Lupel and lifts him from the ground. He arches in pain as her magic digs into him. His screams make me cringe.

It's not long before Csharynn's magic pulls a strand of something blue and white from Lupel's chest. A strand of his magic.

Csharynn lets it twirl into a ball. Lupel screams as if she's skinning him alive. He's still screaming when Csharynn waves her hand and throws open a door. It's then I see the boy with almond shaped eyes and black hair—the Kuromai the angel

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told me about. His eyes are black, and he sits in a daze, as if he's under a stupefying spell.

Csharynn moves her arms and thrusts Lupel's magic into the boy. He convulses on the ground, but he doesn't scream. He shakes until Csharynn's put all the magic she wants into him. Lupel's body is placed in a glass case filled with fluid. Tubes of magic are hooked to him, and I watch as he floats in there half alive but not dead.

The Xershay wheel him out, and I bet they're taking him to a room where the other captured Jäyûns are kept.

The Kuromai boy, however, lies limp on the ground. His eyes are open but look like lifeless black orbs. I think he's dead until he suddenly gasps and jolts upright.

"Very good," Csharynn says. "Now it's time for you to learn how to use the artisan's magic."

The boy looks at her. "Will my skin turn black like theirs?" He nods to the remaining Xershay.

"Yes," Csharynn says. "But when I'm finished with you, I will make you look human again."

The boy nods, but I can tell by the way he's staring at the Xershay he's not excited. In fact, he looks sick with the idea. "Whatever it takes," he says, though his voice wavers.

I watch as Csharynn guides him out of the cave, and I wonder how in the realms I'm going to help him escape this fate.

