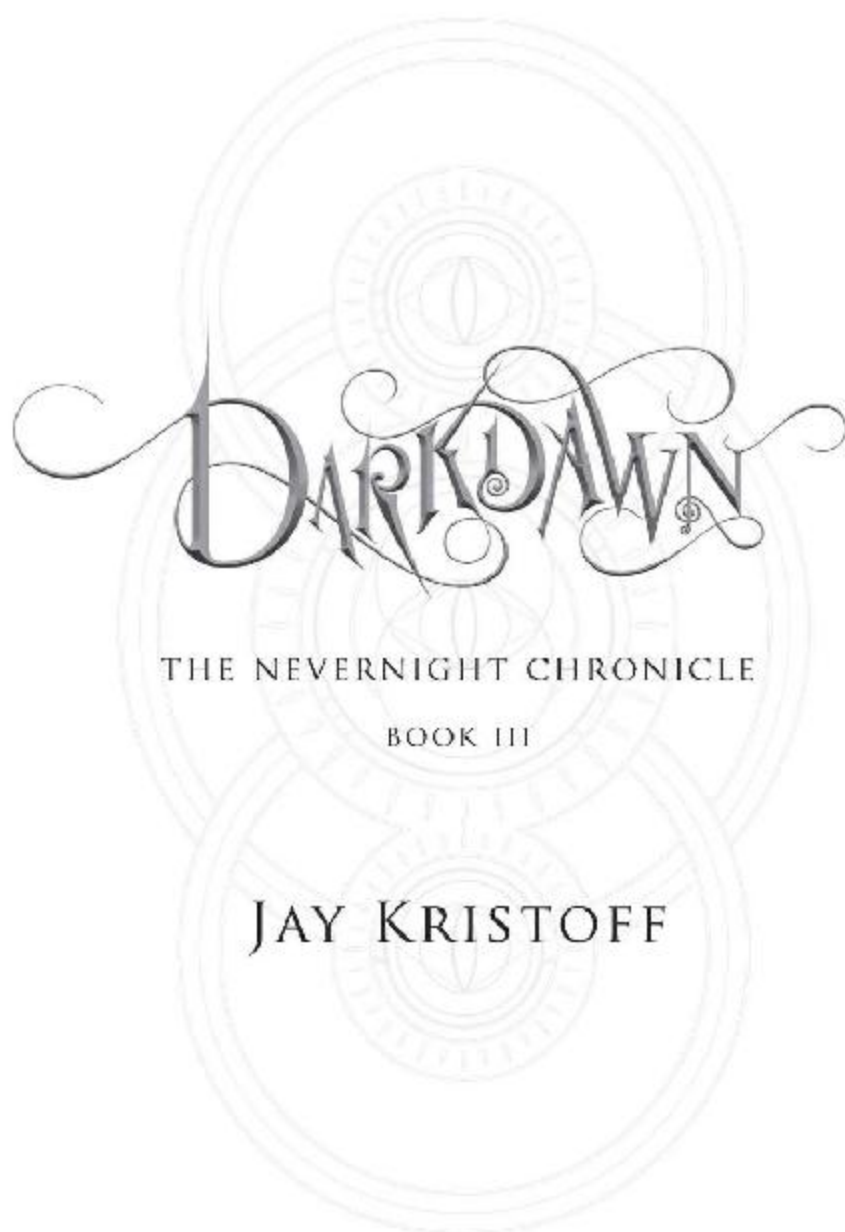


DARK DAWN

BOOK THREE OF
THE NEVERNIGHT CHRONICLE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

JAY KRISTOFF



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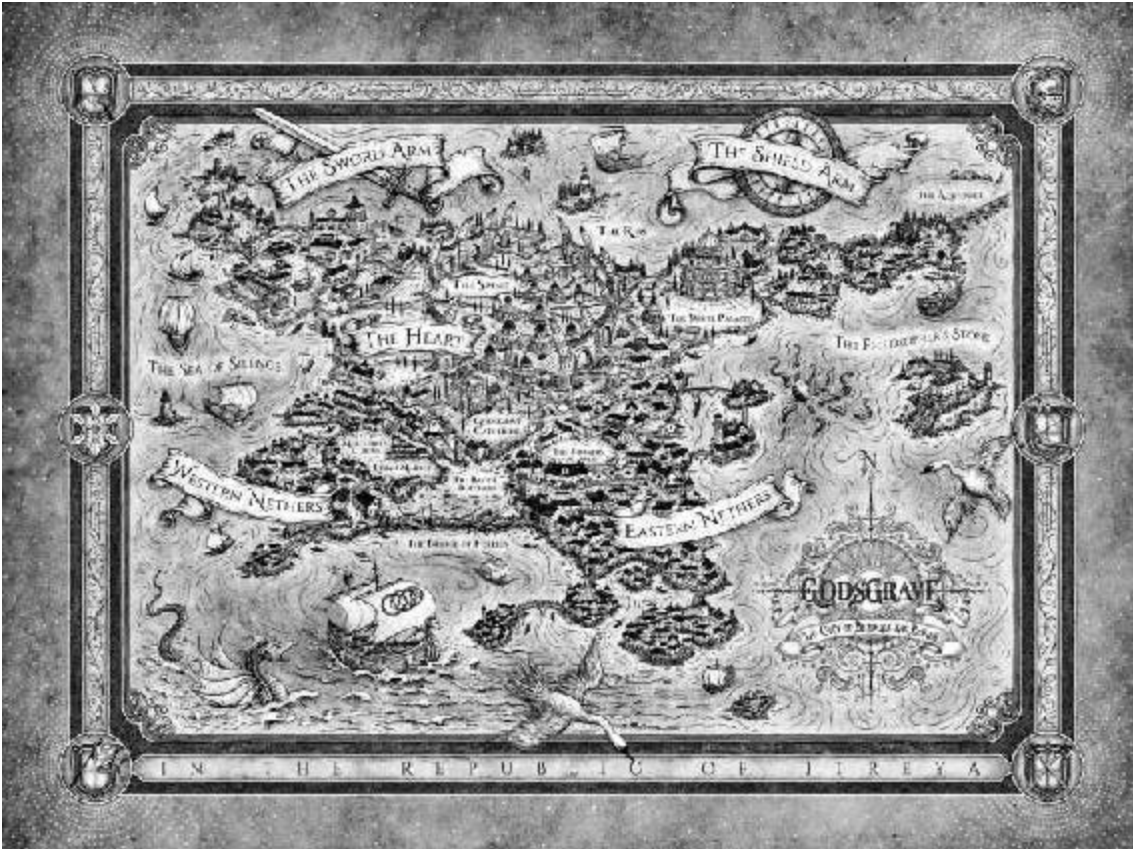
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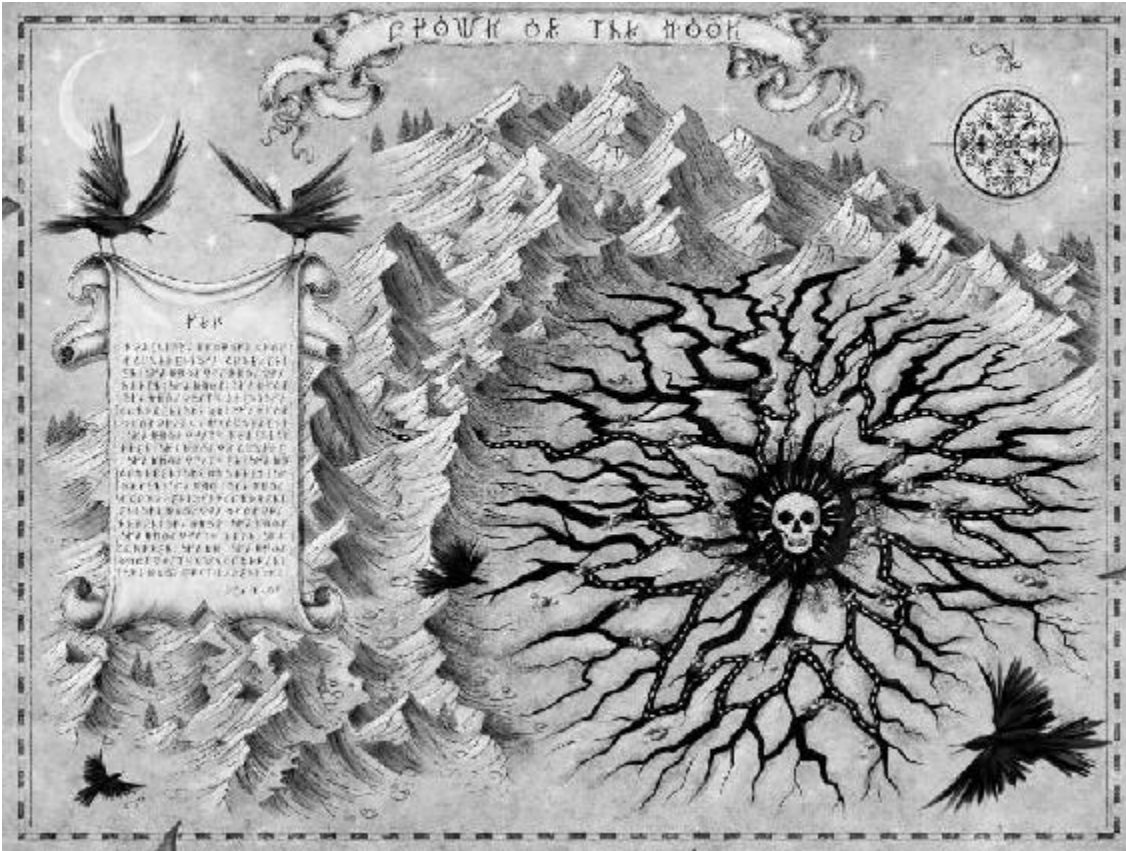
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For my readers I couldn't have done it without you, either







Well, here we are again, gentlefriend.

I think perhaps an apology is in order. Both for the conclusion of the second part of Mia's tale, and for the state I left you in afterward. You seemed quite upset. Be assured there will be no cliff-hangers in this, our final dance together. As promised, her birth you've witnessed, her life you've lived. All that remains is her death.

But before the smut and butchery begin in earnest, allow me one final refresher for those with memories as reliable as your narrator. And then we can get on with killing our murderous little bitch, yes?

[DRAMATIS PERSONAE](#)

Mia Corvere—assassin of the Red Church, gladiatii of the Falcons of Remus, and now the most infamous murderer in the Itrean Republic. The child of a failed rebellion, Mia has spent the last eight years of her life pursuing a murderous vendetta against the men who destroyed her familia. After discovering the Red Church had a hand in her father's murder, Mia broke ranks with the assassins and sold herself to a gladiatii stable. Upon winning the grand games of Godsgrave, Mia made several stunning discoveries in quick succession:

Her baby brother, Jonnen, whom she presumed dead, had been stolen by her mortal enemy, Consul Julius Scaeva, and raised as his son.

Jonnen actually *is* Scaeva's son. Meaning Mia's mother, Alinne, was sleeping with the man who would eventually oversee her husband's murder and her own death in the Philosopher's Stone.

Like Mia, Jonnen is darkin, possessed of the ability to control shadows.

At the conclusion of the grand games, Mia assassinated Grand Cardinal Francesco Duomo. She also apparently murdered Scaeva and stole back her brother before falling to her almost-certain death in a flooded arena full of stormdrakes.

... Maw's teeth, that really *was* a thrilling finale, wasn't it?

Mister Kindly—Mia’s companion since childhood, Mister Kindly is—depending on who you ask—a daemon, passenger, or familiar, with the ability to eat people’s fear. He is made of shadows and sarcasm. Despite his acerbic wit, he obviously has a deep and abiding fondness for Mia. Just don’t let him hear you say that.

He wears the shape of a cat, though like most things about him, his appearance is not entirely genuine.

Eclipse—another shadow daemon, Eclipse was passenger to Cassius, former Lord of Blades in the Red Church. She bound herself to Mia when Cassius died.

Eclipse wears the shape of a wolf, and she and Mister Kindly get along about as well as most cats and dogs do.

Ashlinn Järnheim—a former Red Church acolyte of Vaanian blood.

Ashlinn betrayed the Ministry to avenge her father, Torvar, and almost brought the Red Church to its knees. After Mia foiled her plot, Ashlinn fell into the service of Cardinal Duomo, who tasked her to retrieve a map to an undisclosed location in Old Ashkah—a map of some vital import to the Red Church. Fearing betrayal, Ashlinn had the map scribed on her back with arkemical ink, which will fade in the event of her death.

Ashlinn assisted Mia with her plot to win the grand games, and the pair

eventually became [lovers.](#)* After the conclusion of the games, Ashlinn was accosted by the Church Ministry and Consul Scaeva—still very much alive—who revealed Mia had only killed a doppelgänger crafted by the Flesh Weaver, Marielle, and that Scaeva had been working with the Red Church to see his rival, Cardinal Duomo, killed.

For an encore, Scaeva revealed he was also Mia's father.

Ashlinn was then attacked by Red Church assassins, but rescued by a familiar shadowy figure ...

Tric—an acolyte of the Red Church of mixed Itreyan/Dweymeri blood, also Mia's former lover. He was murdered by Ashlinn Järnheim as part of her plot to capture the Red Church Ministry, and his corpse was pushed off the side of the Quiet Mountain.

Tric has apparently returned to life, albeit in a darker, magikal form. He accosted Mia in the necropolis of Galante and gave her several cryptic warnings without revealing his identity. He later rescued Ashlinn from Red Church assailants.

How he returned from the realm of the Black Mother or why he saved the girl who murdered him is anyone's guess.

Old Mercurio—Mia's confidant and mentor before she joined the Red Church. Mercurio was a Church Blade himself for many years and was

serving as bishop of Godsgrove. Despite being a terminally grumpy old prick, he assisted Mia with her plot to kill Duomo and Scaeva, fully aware his actions would incur the Ministry's wrath.

During the finale of the grand games, he was captured by the Church and taken back to the Quiet Mountain by order of ...

Julius Scaeva—thrice-elected consul of the Itrean Republic, known as the “People's Senator.” The position of consul is usually shared, but Scaeva has maintained sole leadership of the Senate since the Kingmaker Rebellion eight years ago.

Using the rebellion as an excuse to extend his tenure, Scaeva has been working with the Red Church with the goal of claiming the title of emperor and perpetual emergency powers over the Republic. He presided over the execution of Mia's father, sentenced his lover, Mia's mother, to die in the Philosopher's Stone, stole Mia's baby brother, and ordered Mia drowned in a canal, despite knowing she was his daughter.

The word “cunt” doesn't really seem to do him justice.

But speaking of ...

Drusilla—Lady of Blades in the Red Church and, despite her apparent age, one of the deadliest assassins in the Republic. Though she claims devotion to the Black Mother, Niah, Drusilla has been working in league with Consul

Scaeva to ensure his ambition of seizing control of the Itreyan Republic.

The Lady of Blades has disliked Mia ever since the girl failed her trials as a Red Church acolyte. Presumably Mia's recent betrayals have not elevated her in Drusilla's opinions.

Solis—Revered Father and Shahiid of Songs, master in the art of steel, and surliest man alive. He is apparently blind, though he displays little impediment when wielding a sword. Solis was once a prisoner in the Philosopher's Stone and was the only survivor of a bloody cull known as "the Descent," in which the prisoners were encouraged to murder each other en masse in exchange for freedom. Solis's victory earned him his name, which in the tongue of Old Ashkah means "the Last One."

Mia cut his face during their first sparring session in the Quiet Mountain. He cut off her arm in retaliation. Solis chose to keep the scar, along with his grudge for the girl who bested him.

Spiderkiller—Shahiid of the Hall of Truth and mistress of poisons. Mia was one of Spiderkiller's most promising acolytes, but the Shahiid's fondness for the girl had all but disappeared—even *before* Mia chose to betray the Church's teachings.

If she ever offers you a glass of goldwine, I'd advise you to refuse.

Mouser—master of thievery and Shahiid of Pockets. A charming fellow

with a young man's face, an old man's eyes, and a penchant for wearing ladies' underthings.

The Mouser had no enmity toward Mia before her betrayal, though presumably she's been struck off his Great Tithe gift list thanks to her recent fuckarsery.

Aalea—mistress of secrets and Shahiid of Masks. Seductive and beautiful, Aalea's tally of murders is seconded only by the notches on her bedpost. She was actually quite fond of Mia before the girl's betrayal, but no member of the Church Ministry attained their position by being sentimental.

Marielle—one of two albino sorcerii who serve the Red Church. Marielle is a master of Flesh Weaving, a form of ancient magik practiced in the fallen Empire of Ashkah. She can sculpt skin and muscle as easily as clay, but the toll she pays for her power is terrible—her own flesh is hideously deformed, and she has no power to alter it.

In keeping with her unsettling appearance, Marielle also seems overly fond of her brother, Adonai.

Adonai—the second sorcerii who serves the Quiet Mountain. Adonai is a blood speaker who works with human vitus—he can pass messages in blood, manipulate it with but a thought, and transport people and once-living objects through the blood pools in Red Church chapels. Thanks to

Marielle's arts, he is handsome beyond compare.

He murdered Ashlinn's brother, Osrik, during the Luminatii assault on the Mountain, and he owes a debt to Mia for saving his life, yet to be called in.

“Blood is owed thee, little Crow. And blood shall be repaid. ”

Aelius—chronicler of the Quiet Mountain. Aelius is master of the Red Church's great Athenaeum—a vast and ever-growing library of books that were destroyed, lost to time, or never even written in the first place. He also wrangles the enormous carnivorous “bookworms” that roam the dark between the shelves, and his tasks are made ever more difficult by the fact that, like everything else in the Black Mother's library, Aelius himself is dead.

Still, it's a living ...

Naev—a Hand of the Red Church who manages supply runs in the Whisperwastes of Ashkah. After some initial difficulties, she and Mia became friends and confidants.

Naev was disfigured by Weaver Marielle out of jealousy over an affair with her brother, Adonai. But after Mia foiled the assault on the Quiet Mountain, Marielle restored Naev's beauty as a favor to her savior.

Naev keeps her face veiled, and her feelings beside.

Hush—an accomplished Blade of the Red Church. Apparently mute, Hush communicates through a form of sign language known as Tongueless.

Though he and Mia were acolytes together and he assisted her in her trials, he remains loyal to the Ministry. He attempted to capture Ashlinn at the Ministry's behest, though the girl escaped with Tric's help.

Francesco Duomo—Grand Cardinal of the Church of the Light and the most powerful member of the Everseeing's ministry. Though apparently allied with Julius Scaeva, the cardinal and the consul were in fact bitter rivals. Along with Scaeva and Justicus Marcus Remus, Duomo passed sentence on the failed Kingmaker rebels, including Mia's father, Darius. It's safe to say Mia took the cardinal's actions personally—she trimmed his beard all the way to the bone in front of a hundred thousand screaming people.

Alinne Corvere—Mia's mother, and a fearsome politician who almost succeeded in bringing down the Itrean Republic. Her marriage to Justicus Darius turned out to be one of friendship and political expedience—she was, in fact, lover to Julius Scaeva and bore him two children: Mia and Jonnen.

Despite her relationship with Scaeva, the consul showed no compunction in casting her aside after her husband's failed rebellion. Alinne was

imprisoned in the Philosopher's Stone, where she died in madness and misery.

Mia has only recently learned her mother was not the paragon she once believed.

Darius “the Kingmaker” Corvere—the man Mia called “Father.” Former justicus of the Luminatii Legion, Darius forged an alliance with his lover, General Gaius Maxinius Antonius, which would have seen Antonius crowned as king of Itreya.

However, with the assistance of the Red Church, both men were captured on the eve of battle, and Darius was hanged with his would-be king, Antonius, beside him.

To say Mia took his death badly would be something of an understatement.

Jonnen Corvere—Mia's baby brother. Thought to be dead along with his mother, Mia has recently learned the boy was raised as Scaeva's legitimate son under the name “Lucius”—Scaeva's wife, Liviana, is apparently unable to bear him children.

Jonnen has no idea about his true parentage, and was taken too young to remember his true name or sister at all.

Furian—the Unfallen, and champion of the Remus Collegium. Furian was

darkin like Mia, able to bend the shadows to his will. However, he had no passenger and refused to explore his gift, believing it an abomination.

Mia killed Furian during the climax of the grand games. At the moment of his death, she was shown a brief vision of a night sky, set with a large, glowing orb, and heard the words “*The many were one. And will be again.*”

After seeing this phantasm, Mia realized her shadow was dark enough for four.

Sidonius—a former member of the Luminatii who served under Darius Corvere. Sid was drummed out of the legion after he refused to participate in General Antonius’s planned rebellion against the Senate. Sold into slavery, he was eventually purchased by the House of Remus and fought as gladiatii in the *Venatus Magni*.

When Mia was sold to the same collegium, Sidonius learned of her identity and took the girl under his wing, acting as a surrogate older brother to the young Blade.

He has the manners of a goat and the heart of a lion.

The Falcons of Remus—Bladesinger, Bryn, Wavewaker, Butcher, Felix, and Albanus—gladiatii of the Remus Collegium all, and Mia’s friends and allies throughout the games. Though she apparently betrayed and murdered them all, Mia actually orchestrated their escape from Godsgrove.

They are currently at large somewhere in Itreya, and presumably quite drunk.

Aa—head of the Itreyan pantheon, Father of Light, also known as the Everseeing. The three suns, known as Saan (the Seer), Saai (the Knower), and Shiih (the Watcher), are said to be his eyes, and one or more is usually present in the heavens, with the result that actual nighttime, or truedark, in the Republic occurs only for one week every two and a half years. At the time of this tale, truelight—the moment all three suns shine in the heavens—has come and mostly gone.

Truedark approaches, gentlefriends.

Tsana—Lady of Fire, She Who Burns Our Sin, The Pure, Patron of Women and Warriors, and firstborn daughter of Aa and Niah.

Keph—Lady of Earth, She Who Ever Slumbers, The Hearth, Patron of Dreamers and Fools, secondborn of Aa and Niah.

Trelene—Lady of Oceans, She Who Will Drink the World, The Fate, Patron of Sailors and Scoundrels, thirdborn daughter of Aa and Niah, and twin to Nalipse.

Nalipse—Lady of Storms, She Who Remembers, The Merciful, Patron of Healers and Leaders, fourthborn of Aa and Niah, and twin to Trelene.

Niah—the Maw, the Mother of Night, and Our Lady of Blessed Murder.

Sisterwife of Aa, Niah rules a lightless region of the hereafter known as the Abyss. She and Aa initially shared the rule of the sky equally, but, commanded to bear her husband only daughters, Niah disobeyed Aa's edict and bore him a son.

In punishment, Niah was banished from the skies by her beloved, allowed to return only for a brief spell every few years.

And as for what became of their son?

Well, gentlefriend, I believe it's time for some answers.

When all is blood,

blood is all.

—MOTTO OF THE FAMILIA CORVERE

BOOK 1

THE DARK WITHIN

CHAPTER 1

BROTHER

Eight years of poison and murder and shit.

Eight years of blood and sweat and death.

Eight years.

She'd fallen so far, her little brother in her arms, fingers still sticky and red. The light of the three suns above, burning and blinding. The waters of

the flooded arena below, crimson with blood. The mob howling, bewildered and outraged at the murders of their grand cardinal, their beloved consul, both at the hands of their revered champion. The greatest games in Godsgrave's history had ended with the most audacious murders in the history of the entire Republic. The arena was in chaos. But through it all, the screams, the roars, the rage, Mia Corvere had known only triumph.

After eight years.

Eight fucking years.

Mother.

Father.

I did it.

I killed them for you.

She'd hit the water hard, the sights and sounds of Godsgrave Arena swallowed up as she plunged beneath the surface. Salt burning in her eyes. Breath burning in her lungs. Crowd still roaring in her ears. Her little brother, Jonnen, was struggling, punching, wriggling in her arms like a landed fish. She could sense the serpentine shadows of stormdrakes, cruising toward her through the murk. Razor smiles and dead eyes. Truelight was so bright, even here beneath the surface. But even with those three awful suns in the sky, even with all the outrage of the

Everseeing pouring down, her own shadows were with her. Dark enough for four now. And Mia reached toward the outflow in the arena floor—the wide spout from which all that salt and water flowed and she

Stepped

into the

shadows

inside it.

It left her dizzied and sick—she could still feel that blinding sunlight in the sky above. Mia sank like a stone in her armor, weighed down by black iron and sodden falcon’s wings. Pulling Jonnen down with her, she hit the bottom of the outflow pipe with a dull *clunk*. She had only moments, only the breath she’d brought with her. And she’d not planned to have a struggling child in her arms when she did this.

Dragging herself and the boy along the pipe, she found a pocket of air inside the pressure valve, just as Ashlinn had promised. Surfacing with a ragged gasp, she pulled her brother up beside her. The boy sputtered in her arms, wailing, struggling, flailing at her face.

“Unhand me, wench!” he cried.

“Stop it!” Mia gasped.

“Let me *go*!”

“Jonnen, stop it, please!”

She wrapped the boy up, pinning his arms so he couldn't punch anymore. His cries echoed on the pipe above her head. Struggling with her armor's clasps and straps with her free hand, she dragged the pieces away, one by one. Shedding the skin of the gladiatii, the assassin, the daughter of vengeance, sloughing those eight years off her bones. It'd been worth it. All of it. Duomo dead. Scaeva dead. And Jonnen, her blood, the babe she'd thought long buried in his grave ...

My little brother lives.

The boy kicked, thrashed, bit. There were no tears for his murdered da, only fury, rippling and red. Mia had thought the boy dead years ago—swallowed up inside the Philosopher's Stone with her mother and the last of her hope. But if she'd had any lingering doubts he could be a Corvere, that he could be her mother's son, the boy's bloody rage put them all to the sword.

“Jonnen, listen to me!”

“My name is Lucius!” he shrieked, his voice echoing on the iron.

“Lucius, then, listen!”

“I won't!” he shouted. “You k-killed my father! You *killed* him!”

Pity swelled inside Mia, but she clenched her jaw, hardened her heart

against it.

“I’m sorry, Jonnen. But your father...” She shook her head, breathed deep. “Listen, we need to get out of this pipe before they start draining the arena. The stormdrakes will come back this way, do you understand?”*

“Let them come, I hope they *eat* you!”

“... *O, I LIKE HIM...*”

“... *why does that not surprise me...*”

The boy turned to the dark shapes coalescing on the wall beside them, the air around them growing chill. A cat made of shadows and a wolf of the same, staring at him with their not-eyes. Mister Kindly’s tail twitched side to side as he studied the child. Eclipse simply tilted her head, shivering slightly. Jonnen fell silent for a moment, wide, dark eyes looking first to Mia’s passengers, then to the girl who held him.

“You hear them, too...,” he breathed.

“I’m like you,” Mia nodded. “We’re the same.”

The boy stared at her, perhaps feeling the same sickness, hunger, *longing* she did. Mia looked him over, tears welling in her eyes. All the miles, all the years ...

“You don’t remember me,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “You were only a baby when they t-took you away from us. But I remember you.”

She was almost overcome for a moment. Tears in her lashes and a sob caught in her throat. Recalling the baby boy wrapped in swaddling on her mother's bed the turn her father died. Staring up at her with his big, dark eyes. Envyng him that he was too young to know their father had ended, and all their world besides.

But he wasn't Jonnen's father at all, was he?

Mia shook her head, blinked back those hateful tears.

O, Mother, how could you ...

Looking at the boy now, she could barely speak. Barely force her jaw to move, her lungs to breathe, her lips to form the words burning in her chest. He had the same flint-black eyes as she, the same ink-black hair. She could see their mother in him so clearly, it was like peering into a looking glass. But beyond the her in him, something in the shape of Jonnen's little nose, the line of his puppy-fat cheeks ...

She could see him.

Scaeva.

"My name is Mia," she finally managed. "I'm your sister."

"I have no sister," the boy spat.

"Jonn—" Mia caught herself. Licked her lips and tasted salt. "Lucius, we have to go. I'll explain everything, I swear it. But it's dangerous here."

“... *ALL WILL BE WELL, CHILD...*”

“... *breathe easy...*”

Mia watched as her daemons slipped into the boy's shadow, eating away at his fear as they'd always done for her. But though the panic in his eyes lessened, the rage only swelled, the bunched muscles in his little arms suddenly flexing against hers. He wriggled and bucked again, slipping a hand free and clawing at her face.

“Let me go!” he cried.

Mia hissed as his thumb found her eye, whipping her head away with a snarl.

“Stop it!” she snapped, temper flaring.

“Let *go!*”

“If you'll not be still, I'll hold you still!”

Mia pushed the boy hard against the pipe, pressing him in place as he kicked and spat. She could understand his rage, but in truth, she had no time to spend on hurt feelings right now. Working at the remaining buckles on her armor with her free hand, she slipped off the long leather straps that held her breastplate and spaulders in place, dropping the armor to the floor of the valve. She kept her boots, her studded leather skirt, the threadbare, bloodstained tunic beneath. And using the straps, one each for his wrists

and ankles, she bound up her brother like a hog to slaughter.

“Unhand m—*ffll-ggmm!*”

Jonnen’s protests were muted as Mia tied another thong about his mouth.

And gathering the boy into her arms, she held him tight, looked him hard in the eyes.

“We have to swim,” she said. “I’d not waste my breath on shouting if I were you.”

★ ★ ★

Dark eyes locked on hers, glittering with hate. But the boy seemed sensible enough to comply, finally dragging a deep draft into his lungs.

Mia pulled them below and swam for their lives.

They surfaced in sapphire water a half hour later to the sound of pealing bells.

With Jonnen in her arms, Mia had swum through the vast storage tanks below the arena, through the echoing dark of the mekwerk outflow pipes, catching her breath where she could and spilling finally out into the sea a few hundred feet north of Sword Arm harbor. Her brother had glared at her all the while, bound hand and foot and mouth.

Mia felt wretched at having to tie her own kin up like a spring lamb, but she had no idea what else to do with him. She couldn’t possibly have left

him up there on the victor's plinth with the cooling corpses of his da and Duomo. Couldn't ever have left him behind. But in all her planning with Ashlinn and Mercurio, she'd not bargained on having to wrangle a nine-year-old boy after having murdered his father right in front of him.

His father.

The thought swam behind her eyes, too dark and heavy to look at for long. She pushed it aside, focusing on getting them into shallower waters.

Ash and Mercurio were waiting for her aboard a swift galley named the *Siren's Song*, berthed at the Sword Arm. The sooner they were out of Godsgrove, the better. Word would be spreading across the metropolis about Scaeva's assassination, and if they didn't know already, the Red Church would soon learn their richest and most powerful patron was dead. A storm of knives and shit was about to start raining down on Mia's head.

As she swam toward the Sword Arm docks, she saw the streets of the metropolis beyond were in chaos. Cathedrals were ringing a death knell across the City of Bridges and Bones. Folk were emerging from taverna and tenements, bewildered, outraged, terrified as rumor of Scaeva's murder uncoiled through the city like blood in the water. Legionaries were everywhere, armor glinting under that awful sunlight.

With all the fuss and bother, precious few folk noticed the bedraggled

and bleeding slavegirl paddling slowly toward the shore with a boy trussed up in her arms. Picking her way carefully through the gondolas and dinghies bobbing about the Sword Arm jetties, Mia reached the shadows beneath a long timber boardwalk.

“I’m going to hide us for a moment,” she murmured to her brother. “You won’t be able to see for a while, but I need you to be brave.”

The boy only glared, dark curls hanging in his eyes. Stretching out her fingers, Mia dragged her mantle of shadows about her and Jonnen’s shoulders. It took real effort with truelight blazing above her—the sunlight scorching and bright. But even with her passengers now riding with her brother, the shadow beneath Mia was twice as dark as it had been before Furian’s death. Her grip on the dark felt stronger. Tighter. Closer.

She remembered the vision she’d seen as she slew the Unfallen before the adoring crowd. The sky above her, not bright and blinding, but pitch-black and flooded with stars. And shining high above her head, a pale and perfect orb.

Like a sun, but somehow ... not.

“THE MANY WERE ONE. AND WILL BE AGAIN. ”

Or so the voice she’d heard had said. Echoing the message from that Hearthless wraith with the gravebone blades who’d saved her skin in the

Galante necropolis.

Mia didn't know what it meant. She'd never had a mentor to show her what it was to be darkin. Never found an answer to the riddle of what she was. She didn't know. *Couldn't* know. But she knew this, sure as she knew her own name: since the moment Furian had died at her hands, a newfound strength was flowing in her veins.

Somehow, she was ... *more*.

The world fell into muzzy blackness as she pulled on her shadowcloak, and she and her brother became faint smudges on the watercolors of the world. Jonnen squinted in the gloom beneath her mantle, watching her with suspicious eyes, but at least his struggles had ceased for now. Mia followed Mister Kindly's and Eclipse's whispered directions, slowly climbing a barnacle-encrusted ladder and up to the jetty proper with Jonnen under one arm. And there, in the shadow of a shallow-bottomed trawler, she curled down to wait, cross-legged, dripping wet, arms around her brother.

Mister Kindly coalesced in the shadow at Jonnen's feet, licking at a translucent paw. Eclipse melted from the boy's shadow, outlined black against the trawler's hull.

"... *I WILL RETURN*..., " the not-wolf growled.

"... *you will be missed*..., " the not-cat yawned.

“... WILL YOU MISS YOUR TONGUE AS MUCH, WHEN I TEAR IT FROM YOUR

HEAD...?”

“Enough, the pair of you,” Mia hissed. “Be swift, Eclipse.”

“... AS IT PLEASE YOU...”

The shadowwolf shivered and was gone, flitting along the cracks in the jetty’s boards and off along the harbor wall.

“... i hate that mongrel..., ” Mister Kindly sighed.

“Aye, so you’ve said,” Mia muttered. “About a thousand times now.”

“... more than that, surely...?”

Despite her fatigue, Mia’s lips twisted in a smile.

Mister Kindly continued with his pointless ablutions and Mia sat cradling her brother for long minutes, muscles aching, salt water stinging in her cuts as the suns blazed overhead. She was tired, beaten, bleeding from a dozen wounds after her ordeals in the arena. The adrenaline of her victory was wearing off, leaving a bone-deep fatigue in its wake. She’d fought two major battles earlier in the turn, helped her fellow gladiatii from the Remus Collegium escape their bondage, slaughtered dozens, including Duomo and Scaeva, won the greatest contest in the history of the Republic, seen all her plans come to fruition.

An emptiness was slowly creeping in to replace her elation. An

exhaustion that left her hands shaking. She wanted a soft bed and a cigarillo and to savor the taste of some Albari goldwine on Ashlinn's lips. To feel their bones collide, then sleep for a thousand years. But more, beneath it all, beneath the longing and the fatigue and the pain, looking down at her brother, she realized she felt ...

Hungry.

It was similar to what she'd felt in the presence of Lord Cassius. Of Furian. She'd felt it when she first saw the boy on his father's shoulders at the victor's plinth. She felt it as she glanced at him now—the longing of a puzzle, searching for a piece of itself.

But what does it mean? she wondered.

And does Jonnen feel the same?

“... i have an ill feeling, mia...”

Mister Kindly's whisper dragged her eyes from the back of her brother's head. The shadowcat had stopped pretending to clean his paw, instead staring out at the City of Bridges and Bones from within Jonnen's shadow.

“What's to fear?” she murmured. “The deed is done. And all things considered, nothing went too badly tits up.”

“... what difference does it make, the direction your breasts are pointing...?”

“Spoken like someone who’s never owned a pair.”

Mister Kindly glanced at the boy he was riding.

“... *we seem to have some unexpected luggage...*”

Jonnen mumbled something unintelligible beneath his gag. Mia had no doubts his sentiments were less than flattering, but she kept her eyes on the shadowcat.

“You worry too much,” she told him.

“... *and you not enough...*”

“And whose fault is that? *You’re* the one who eats my fears.”

The daemon tilted his head, but he gave no reply. Mia waited in silence, staring out at the city beyond her veil of shadows. The sounds of the capital were muted beneath her cloak, the colors naught but dull white and terracotta blurs. But she could still hear tolling bells, running feet, panicked shouts in the distance.

“The consul and cardinal slain!”

“Assassin!” came the cry. “*Assassin!*”

Mia glanced down to Jonnen, saw he was staring at her with unveiled malice. She knew his thoughts then, as surely as if he’d spoken aloud.

You killed my father.

“He imprisoned our mother, Jonnen,” Mia told the boy. “Left her to die

in agony inside the Philosopher's Stone. He killed *my* father, and hundreds more besides. Do you not remember him on the victor's plinth, throwing you at me to save his own wretched skin?" She shook her head and sighed. "I'm sorry. I know it's hard to understand. But Julius Scaeva was a monster."

The boy bucked suddenly, violently, smacking his forehead into her chin. Mia bit her tongue, cursing, grabbing her brother and squeezing him tight as he launched into another bout of struggling. He tugged against his waterlogged straps, bruising his skin as he strained to free himself. But for all his fury, he was only a nine-year-old boy. Mia simply held him until his strength ran out, until his muted cries died, until he finally went limp with a soft sob of rage.

Swallowing the blood in her mouth, she wrapped him in her arms.

"You'll understand one turn," she murmured. "I love you, Jonnen."

He flailed once more, then fell still. In the awkward quiet afterward, Mia felt a cool shiver down her spine. Goosebumps prickled on her skin, and her shadow grew darker as she heard a low growl from the boards beneath her feet.

"... *THEY ARE NOT THERE...*," Eclipse declared.

Mia blinked, her belly lurching a little to the left. Squinting in the glare,

she peered at the murky blur of the *Siren's Song*, rocking gently at berth a few jetties down.

“You’re certain?” she asked.

“... *I SEARCHED FROM BOW TO STERN. MERCURIO AND ASHLINN ARE NOT*

ABOARD...”

Mia swallowed hard, her tongue thick with salt. The plan had been for Ash and her old teacher to meet each other at the Godsgrove chapel, gather their belongings, then make their way to the harbor and await Mia aboard the *Song*. With the time it took for her to swim from the arena to the ocean and out again ...

“They should be here by now,” she whispered.

“... *shhhh...*, ” came a murmur at her feet. “... *do you hear that...?* ”

“... Hear what?”

“... *it appears to be the sound of ... breasts tilting skyward...?* ”

Mia scowled at the jest, dragging her sopping hair over her shoulder. Her heart was beating faster, her thoughts racing. There was simply no way Mercurio or Ash would have been late—not with all their lives at stake.

“Something’s happened to them...”

“... *I CAN SEARCH THE CHAPEL, REPORT BACK...?* ”

“No. If she ... If they...” Mia chewed her lip, dragged herself to her feet

despite her fatigue. “We go together.”

“... *even our new luggage...?*”

“We can’t just leave him here, Mister Kindly,” Mia snapped.

The not-cat sighed.

“... *and the tits continue to rise...*”

Mia looked down at her brother. The boy seemed temporarily defeated, sullen, shivering, silent. He was soaking wet, dark eyes clouded with anger. But with Mister Kindly riding his shadow, he was unafraid at least. So Mia stood, pulling Jonnen up afterward and slinging him over her shoulder with a wince. He was heavy as a bag of bricks, bony elbows and knees jabbing her in all the wrong places. But Mia was hard as nails after the months she’d spent training in the Remus Collegium, and wounded as she was, she knew she could manage him for a time. Moving slowly beneath Mia’s shadowcloak, the unlikely quartet groped their way down the jetty and onto the crowded boardwalk, gentle water lapping beneath them.

Following her passenger’s whispered directions, stealing past the patrols of legionaries and Luminatii, Mia slipped out into the streets beyond the harbor. Her brother’s weight on her shoulders made her muscles groan in protest as she made her way through the warren of Godsgrave’s back alleys. Her pulse was thumping in her veins, her belly turning slow, cold

somersaults. Eclipse was prowling out ahead. Mister Kindly was still riding Jonnen. And without her passengers, Mia was left trying to fight off fearful thoughts about what might've delayed Mercurio and Ash.

Luminatii?

The Ministry?

What could have gone wrong?

Goddess, if anything has happened to them because of me ...

Creeping through squeezeways and over little bridges and canals, the group finally reached the wrought-iron fences surrounding the city's necropolis. Mia's boots were near soundless on the gravel, one hand stretched out before her, groping blind. Almost inaudible beneath the peal of cathedral bells, Eclipse's whispers guided her through the twisted gates to the houses of the city's dead, along rows of grand mausoleums and moldy tombs. In a weed-choked corner of the necropolis's old quarter, she stepped through a door carved with a relief of human skulls. A passageway leading down to the boneyards waited beyond.

It was sweet bliss, being out of the light of those awful suns. Her sweat was burning in her wounds. Throwing aside her shadow mantle, Mia slipped Jonnen off her shoulder. He was little, but Goddess, he wasn't light, and her legs and spine practically wept with relief as she placed him onto

the chapel floor.

“I’m going to free your feet,” she warned. “You try to run, I’ll tie you tighter.”

The boy made no sound behind his gag, watching silently as she knelt and loosened the strap about his ankles. She could see the mistrust swimming in those black eyes, the unabated anger, but he made no immediate break for freedom. Looping the strap through the bonds at his wrists, Mia stood and walked on, tugging the little boy along behind her like a sullen hound on a soggy leash.

She made her way quietly through twisted tunnels of femurs and ribs—remains of the city’s destitute and nameless, too poor to afford tombs of their own. Pulling on a hidden lever, she opened a secret door in a stack of dusty bones, and finally slipped into the Red Church chapel hidden beyond. Mia crept down the twisting hallways, lined with the skeletons of those long perished. Shuffling behind her, Jonnen was wide-eyed, gazing at the bones all around them. But surrounded by the dead as he was, Mister Kindly stayed coiled in his shadow, keeping the worst of his fear at bay as they moved farther into the chapel.

The corridors were dark.

Silent.

Empty.

Wrong.

Mia felt it almost immediately. Smelled it in the air. The faint scent of blood wasn't out of place in a chapel to Our Lady of Blessed Murder, but the lingering aroma of a tombstone bomb and burned parchment certainly was.

The chapel was far too quiet, the air far too still.

Suspicion ever her watchword, Mia pulled Jonnen closer and worked her mantle of shadows back about their shoulders. Creeping onward in near blindness. Jonnen's breathing seemed far too loud in the silence, her grip on his leash damp with sweat. Her ears strained for the slightest sound, but the place seemed deserted.

Mia stopped in a bone-lined hallway, the hair on the back of her neck prickling. She knew, even before she heard Eclipse's warning growl.

“... *BEHIND*...”

The dagger flashed from out of the darkness, gleaming silver, poison-dark. Mia twisted, damp hair whipping in a long black ribbon behind her, spine bent in a perfect arch. The blade sailed over her chin, missing her by a breath. Her free hand touched the ground, pushed her back up to standing, heart hammering.

Her mind was racing, brow creased in confusion. Beneath her cloak of shadows, she was almost blind, aye—but the world should have been just as blind to her.

Blind.

O, Goddess.

He stepped out from the dark, silent despite his bulk. His gray leathers were stretched taut across the barn-broad span of his shoulders. His ever-empty scabbard hung at his waist, dark leather embossed with a pattern of concentric circles, much like a pattern of eyes. Thirty-six small scars were etched into his forearm—one for every life he'd taken in the Red Church's name. His eyes were milky white, but Mia saw his eyebrows were gone entirely. The once-blond stubble on his head was crisped black as if burned, and the four sharp spikes of his beard were charred nubs.

“Solis.”

His face was swathed in shadows, blind eyes fixed on the ceiling. He drew two short double-edged blades from his back, both darkened by poison. And, hidden as Mia was beneath her mantle, he still spoke directly to her.

“Treacherous fucking quim,” he growled.

Mia reached for her gravebone dagger with her free hand. Heart sinking

as she realized she'd left it buried in Consul Scaeva's chest.

"O, shit," she whispered.

CHAPTER 2

BONEYARDS

The Revered Father of the Red Church strode forward, blades raised.

"I wondered if you'd be fool enough to return here," he snarled.

Mia tightened her sweating grip on her brother's leash. Sensing movement, she glanced over her shoulder and saw a slender boy with shocking blue eyes stepping from the necropolis shadows. He was death-pale, dressed in a charred black doublet. Two wicked knives gleamed in his hands, their blades black with toxin.

Hush.

"Well?" Solis sneered. "Nothing to say, pup?"

Mia stayed silent, wondering how Solis could sense her under her shadowcloak at all. Sound, perhaps? The scent of her blood and sweat? Regardless, she was exhausted, unarmed, wounded—in no shape to fight. Sensing her fear, the spreading cold in her gut, Mister Kindly slipped from the boy's shadow into her own to quell it. And as the daemon flitted away from the dark about his feet, little Jonnen kicked Mia hard in the shins and snatched his hands from her sweating grip.

“Jonnen!” she cried.

The boy turned and bolted. Mia reached for him, hand outstretched and trying to catch him up. And Solis simply hefted his blades, lowered his head, and charged.

Mia swayed aside, the Shahiid’s blade whistling past her cheek as Hush closed in behind her. Spinning swift, she threw aside her shadowcloak, werking the shadows and tangling up the boy’s feet instead. He stumbled, fell, Mia slipping under another one of Solis’s sweeping strikes. Glancing to the cool dark in the corridor behind the Shahiid, she saw Jonnen fleeing back the way they’d come. And clenching her jaw tight she

Stepped

into the gloom

at Solis’s back

and bolted down the corridor after her fleeing brother.

“Jonnen, *stop!*”

Eclipse growled warning, and Mia twisted aside as one of Solis’s short swords came whistling at her out of the black. It struck the bone wall in front of her as she reached a sharp corner, remained quivering inside some long-dead skull. Mia grabbed it as she rushed past, twisting it loose and clutching it in her left hand as she ran on.

Dashing on his little legs, Jonnen found himself overtaken quickly. As Mia pounded up the corridor behind him, he glanced over his shoulder, put on a new spurt of speed. His hands were still bound, but he'd managed to drag the gag free from his mouth, shouting as she picked him up and slung him under her arm.

"Unhand me, wench!" he cried, wriggling in fury.

"Jonnen, be still!" Mia hissed.

"Let me go!"

"... *still like him, do you...?* " Mister Kindly whispered from Mia's shadow.

"... *LESS AND LESS WITH EACH PASSING MOMENT...*," Eclipse replied, flitting out ahead.

"... *well, now you appreciate how i feel about you...* "

"Shut it, the pair of you!" Mia gasped.

She bounced off a bone wall and stumbled around another corner, Solis and Hush close on her heels. Kicking through the tomb's doorway, Mia dashed up the crumbling stairs and back into the awful glare of those three burning suns. Despite Mister Kindly feasting on her fear, her heart was threatening to burst from her ribs.

She'd spent the entire turn fighting for her life already—she was in no

shape to tackle a fully armed Blade of the Red Church, let alone the former Shahiid of Songs. Charred eyebrows aside, Solis was one of the deadliest men alive with a blade. The last time they'd tangled, he'd hacked her arm clean off at the elbow. Hush was no slouch, either, and whatever kinship Mia and the boy might have had in their turns as acolytes seemed long evaporated. She was a traitor to the Red Church in his eyes, worthy only of a slow and very painful murder.

She was outnumbered. And in her current state, outclassed.

But how the 'byss could Solis see me?

Mia Stepped through the shadows to give herself some kind of lead, but with the three suns blazing overhead and her exhaustion from the great games thickening her blood, she only managed to travel a few dozen feet. She clipped her shin on a tombstone, staggered, and almost fell. She might've pulled on her mantle again, but Solis seemed able to sense her anyway. And truth told, she was too tired to manage it all—the wriggling boy in her arms, the desperate chase, working the dark. Wild eyes searching now for any way of escape.

She skipped up onto a low marble tomb and vaulted the wrought-iron fence of the necropolis. Hitting the ground hard, she gasped, almost falling again. She was in the grounds of a grand chapel to Aa now, built beside the

houses of the dead. She could see a broad cobbled road scattered with citizens beyond the churchyard, tall tenements lining the street, flowers in the window boxes. The chapel itself was limestone and glass, the three suns on its belfry mirroring the three suns above.

Black Mother, they were so bright, so hot, so—

“... *MIA, BEWARE...!*”

A dagger sailed from Hush’s outstretched hand, whistling toward her back. She twisted with a cry, the blade slicing through a lock of her long, dark hair and sailing past her scarred cheek, close enough for her to smell the toxin on the blade. It was Rictus—a fast-working paralytic. One good scratch and she’d be helpless as a newborn babe.

They want me alive, she realized.

“Release me, villain!” her brother shouted, thrashing again.

“Jonnen, please—”

“My name is Lucius!”

The boy bucked and kicked under Mia’s arm, still trying to free himself from her grip. He managed to drag his hand loose from the sodden leather bonds about his wrists, and with a gasp, he threw it up into Mia’s face. And as if the suns were suddenly extinguished in the sky, all the world went black.

She stumbled in the sudden dark. Her boot clipped a broken flagstone, and her legs went out from under her. Mia gritted her teeth as she hit the ground, hissing in pain as she tore her knees and palms bloody. Her brother also fell, crying out as he tumbled across the gravel to a graceless halt. The boy rose from the dirt. The boy she'd thought long dead. The boy she'd just snatched from the clutches of a man he should have hated.

“Assassin!” he roared. *“The assassin is here!”*

And fast as he could, he dashed out into the street.

Mia blinked hard, shook her head—she could hear Jonnen yelling as he ran, but she could see nothing at all. In a rush, she realized her brother had somehow werked the shadows over her eyes, completely blinding her. It was a trick she'd never learned, never tried, and she'd have admired the boy's creativity if he wasn't turning out to be such a troublesome little prick.

But the shadows were hers to werk just as much as Jonnen's, and death was running right on her heels. Mia curled her fingers into claws, tore the darkness away from her eyes just as the Revered Father and his silent companion vaulted the iron fence and dropped into the churchyard behind her.

Mia hauled herself to her feet, blinking hard as her sight returned. Her

arms felt like putty. Her legs were shaking. Turning to face Solis and Hush, she was barely able to raise her stolen sword. Her shadow writhed around her long leather boots as the two killers fanned out to flank her.

“Call the guards!” Jonnen cried from the street beyond. *“Assassin!”*

The citizens turned to stare, wondering at the ruckus. A priest of Aa stepped out from the chapel doors, clad in his holy vestments. A cadre of Itreyan legionaries down the block turned their heads at the sound of the boy’s cries. But Mia could pay heed to none of it.

Solis lunged at her throat, his blade a blur. Desperate, drawing on the dark new strength in her veins, she reached out, tangled up the Shahiid’s feet in his own shadow before he could reach her. Solis snarled in frustration, his strike falling short. Hush hurled another knife and Mia cried out, smashing it from the air with her stolen sword in a hail of bright sparks. And then she charged the silent boy, desperate to even the scales before Solis could break loose of her shadow working.

Hush drew a rapier from his belt, met her charge, steel on steel. Mia knew the boy from the brief comradeship they’d shared as acolytes in the halls of the Quiet Mountain. She knew where he’d come from, what he’d been before he joined the Church, why he never spoke. It wasn’t because he lacked a tongue, no—it was because the owners of the pleasure house he’d

been enslaved to as a child had knocked out all his teeth so he could better service their clientele.

Mia had been training in the art of the sword since she was ten years old. Hush had still been on his hands and knees on silken sheets. They'd both trained under Solis, true, and the boy had proved himself no novice with a blade. But in the last nine months, Mia had trained under the whip of Arkades, the Red Lion of Itreya—schooled in the arts of the gladiatii by one of the greatest swordsmen alive. And though she was exhausted, bleeding, bruised, her muscles were still hardened, her grip still callused, her form drilled into her hour upon hour beneath the burning sunlight.

“Guards!” came Jonnen’s call. “She’s *here!*”

Mia struck low, forcing Hush aside, her backswing whistling through the air. The boy stepped away like a dancer, blue eyes glittering. Mia raised her blade, telegraphing another strike. But with a deft flick of her boot, she scooped up a toeful of grit from the earth beneath them—an old gladiatii trick—and kicked it right at Hush’s face.

The boy reeled back and Mia’s blade sliced him across the chest, just a few inches short of splitting his ribs clean open. His doublet and the flesh beyond parted like water, but still the boy made no sound. He staggered back, one hand pressed to his wound as Mia raised her blade for the

deathblow.

“... *MIA*...!”

She turned with a gasp, barely deflecting the strike that would have split her head apart. Solis had hacked his boots away, left them wrapped in tendrils of his own shadow, and charged Mia barefoot. The big man collided with her, sent her flying, her backside and thighs shredded on the stone as she hit the ground. She tumbled back up onto her feet with a black curse, fending off the flurry of strikes Solis aimed at her head, neck, chest. She struck back, sweat-soaked and desperate, long black hair stuck to her skin, Mister Kindly and Eclipse working hard to eat her fear.

“Guards!”

This was no fresh Blade of the Church she faced now, no. This was the deadliest swordsman in the congregation. And no cheap tricks learned in the arena would avail Mia here. Only skill. And steel. And sheer, bloody will.

She struck back at Solis, their blades ringing bright beneath the burning suns. His white eyes were narrowed, fixed somewhere in the empty over her left shoulder. And yet the blind man moved as if he saw her every strike coming from a mile away. Forcing her back. Beating her down. Wearing her out.

The crowd in the street had gathered outside the chapel gates now, drawn like flies to a corpse by Jonnen's cries. The boy stood in the middle of the thoroughfare, waving at the cadre of legionaries, who were even now *tromptromptromp* ing toward them. Mia was tired, weak, outnumbered—she

had only moments before this situation dissolved into a puddle of shite.

“Where's Ashlinn and Mercurio?” she demanded.

Solis's blade streaked past her chin as he smiled. “If you've a wish to see your old master alive again, girl, you'd best drop your steel and come with me.”

Mia's eyes narrowed as she struck at the big man's knees.

“You don't call me girl, bastard. Not as if the word were kin for ‘shit.’”

Solis laughed and launched a riposte that almost took Mia's head off.

She twisted aside, sweat-soaked fringe hanging in her eyes.

“Perhaps you only hear what you want to hear, girl.”

“Aye, laugh now,” she wheezed. “But what will you do without your beloved Scaeva? When your other patrons learn the savior of the fucking Republic died at the hands of one of your own Blades?”

Solis tilted his head and smiled wider, stilling the heart in Mia's chest.

“Did he?”

“Halt! In the name of the Light!”

The legionaries burst through the chapel gates, all glittering armor and blood-red plumes on their helms. Hush was on his knees, the Rictus from Mia's stolen blade rendering him numb and lethargic. Mia and Solis hung still, swords poised as the legionaries spread out into the courtyard. The centurion leading them was burly as a pile of bricks, heavy brows and a thick beard bristling beneath his glittering helm.

"Put down your weapons, citizens!" he barked.

Mia glanced at the centurion, the troops around them, the crossbows aimed square at her heaving chest. Jonnen forced his way through the soldiers, pointing right at her and shouting at the top of his lungs.

"That's her! Kill her now!"

"Get back, boy!" the captain snapped.

Jonnen scowled at the man, drew himself up to his full height. *

"I am Lucius Atticus Scaeva," he spat. "Firstborn son of Consul Julius Maximillianus Scaeva. This *slave* murdered my father, and I *order* you to kill her!"

Solis tilted his head slightly, as if taking note of the lad for the first time.

The centurion raised an eyebrow, looking the little lordling up and down.

Despite his disheveled appearance, the grime on his face and sopping robes, it could hardly be missed that he was clad in brilliant purple—the color of

Itreyan nobility. Nor that he wore the triple-sun crest of the Luminatii legion upon his chest.

“Kill her!” the boy roared, stamping his foot.

The crossbowmen tightened their fingers on their triggers. The centurion looked at Mia, drew breath to shout.

“Lo—”

A chill stole over the scene—the legionaries, the assassins, the crowd gathered in the street beyond. Despite the blazing heat, goosebumps shivered on Mia’s bare skin. A familiar shape rose up behind the soldiers, hooded and cloaked, twin gravebone swords clutched in its ink-black hands. Mia recognized it immediately—the same figure that had saved her life in the Galante necropolis. The same one who’d given her that cryptic message.

“SEEK THE CROWN OF THE MOON.”

Its face was hidden in the depths of its cloak. Mia’s breath hung in white clouds before her lips, and despite the heat, she found herself shivering in its chill.

Without a word, the figure struck the closest soldier, its gravebone blade splitting his breastplate asunder. The other legionaries cried out in alarm, turning their crossbows upon their assailant. As the figure wove among them, blades flashing, they fired. The crossbow bolts struck home, thudding