



Fate and Fury

Author: *Emily Colin*

Category: Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: Walk the fine line between dire consequences and deadly desire in this addictive, Slavic-inspired romantasy.

“Break me like your promises...”

Katerina Ivanova is the most powerful Dimi in Iriska. She uses her command over the four elements alongside Niko, her blood-bonded Shadow, to guard the portals to the Underworld and protect their realm from demonic invasion. When the two are recruited to compete to join Iriska’s most elite force, no one suspects their secret: the bond they share goes beyond magic and enters taboo territory. Love between a Dimi and her Shadow isn’t just a bad idea, it’s been prophesied to set an ancient Darkness loose upon the world.

But some forces are too powerful to resist, and despite their best intentions, one night Niko and Katerina surrender to the undeniable pull between them...with devastating results. As they struggle to save Iriska from the forces they’ve unleashed, the last person they expect will risk anything to tear them apart—even make a deal with the Devil.

Please note: This book is the first in a duology and ends in a bit of a cliffhanger. Perfect for fans of L.J. Andrews, Carissa Broadbent, and Sarah J. Maas, it’s filled with forbidden love, hot demons with attitudes, nasty prophecies, fated mates, witchy magic, morally grey characters galore, soul-bonds and shapeshifters, and fade-to-black spice.

Total Pages (Source): 106

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KATERINA

In Katerina Ivanova's twenty-one years, she had been many things.

A witch, certainly. The strongest Dimi that the dukedom of Iriska had known in three centuries, able to command all four elements rather than just fire, wind, water, or earth.

A protector, sworn alongside her blood-bonded Shadow to defend Iriska from Grigori demons, hungry to devour their souls.

A secret-keeper, along with everyone else in her village of Kalach. For if the Kniaz—the duke who ruled Iriska and its Seven Villages—discovered what Katerina could do, he would covet her beyond measure. Damn the Trials; he would have Reaped her years ago for his own, and left Kalach without its best defender.

And above all, a liar and a traitor. For if Baba Petrova, the Elder Council, and—Saints forbid—the Kniaz himself knew the truth of what her heart harbored, her death would be swift.

But never, except for once, long ago, had she been weak. Her mother had died because of it, and Katerina had never forgiven herself. Now here she was, preparing to let Baba bind her magic. Hobbling herself on purpose, and risking the death of the man she loved most.

She watched as Baba knelt in front of the fireplace, dipping her fingertips into a bowl of ash. The ancient Dimi traced a circle on her cottage's wooden floorboards, just large enough to hold Katerina and her Shadow. Above her, from the ceiling's blackened crossbeams, swayed thin-skinned braids of garlic, for healing, and ropes of gray-green sage, for purification.

There would be no healing what Baba was about to do to her, not until the old Dimi decided to break the binding. As for purification, as far as Katerina was concerned, it was far too late. She'd lost her heart to a man who was off-limits long ago, and every time she looked at him, she was reminded of how much she craved his body. Good luck purifying that with a handful of dried herbs and a prayer to the long-dead Saints.

Unable to help herself, she glanced across the hearth at her Shadow. Eight years ago, she and Niko had stood in this very room, beside a cauldron seething with ink and blood, sealing their vows as Shadow and Dimi. Then, he had regarded her with barely tempered eagerness; now, his expression was guarded, his face carefully blank. He didn't like this any better than she did, but he would endure it, for the sake of the village. Of the two of them, he had far more to lose by rebelling.

Baba's knobbly finger completed the circle, and the power within it snapped into place: a low hum that set Katerina's teeth on edge.

Next would come the rune. Then the binding spell.

She was running out of time.

Katerina drew a deep breath, letting the layered air fill her lungs: the burn of herbs, the bite of the oil Niko used to cure his blades, the smoke of the rowan-fire as it curled upward. "There has to be another way," she said for the umpteenth time since Baba and the Elders had demanded she do the unthinkable. "I can control myself. If you trust me to fight for Iriska, then surely you believe I can command my gifts."

The words emerged haughty, a challenge rather than an entreaty, and Niko arched one dark eyebrow in warning. Along with the Elders, Baba's word was law. Arguing would get Katerina exactly nowhere. And yet she couldn't help herself.

Baba Petrova was a small, gnarled woman who had long fought on the front lines of their war against the Grigori. Her back was bent now, her face wrinkled, and she spent more time training Dimis and Shadows than patrolling the village's borders. Still, her air of authority was formidable. It rolled off her in waves as she straightened and glared at Katerina.

"You are wasting time," she said.

Irritation bubbled through Katerina's veins, and, as if to disprove her point, the fire in the hearth leapt high in response. Now, it was Baba's turn to raise an eyebrow.

Katerina ignored her. "With the rise in attacks, how is it wise to send us to Rivki hobbled, with me only having the use of my fire? What if we encounter demons on the road? Why cripple us like this?"

Next to her, Niko made a disgruntled noise low in his throat, perilously close to his black dog's growl. "Are you insinuating that I can't protect you, Katerina?"

For a Shadow, blood-sworn to fight beside his Dimi and stand between her and evil in his human form or the form of his black dog, there was no greater insult. And Niko was the alpha of the village's Shadow pack. Such an accusation pierced his pride, Katerina knew. And yet?—

"We protect each other," she said, meeting his storm-gray eyes. "We fighttogether."

As they would in the Bone Trials at Rivki Island, the seat of Iriska's dukedom. As they had been commanded by the Kniaz to do.

Baba didn't reply. Instead, she knelt to draw the rune. Freed from her scrutiny, Niko took the moment to mouth, What are you doing? at Katerina.

She hazarded a glance at him, then wished she hadn't. He'd tied his hair back with a piece of rawhide, baring the scar that ran from his chiseled jaw to his temple, earned in a fight to protect their village from Grigori invasion. Above it, his eyes gleamed silver in the sunlight, piercing through her defenses as they always did. She couldn't afford for him to look at her like that. Not now, when she had so much to hide.

What I must, she mouthed back, and looked away.

Putting the finishing touch on the rune's complicated angles, Baba stood. "It's because of the rise in Grigori attacks that I must do this," she said. "You know as well as I do that the two of you are Kalach's best defense. We need you here, not at the Kniaz's right hand, great as the honor may be. Perhaps if you didn't want to be summoned to the Trials, you would have endeavored to make yourself less appealing to the Kniaz the last time you delivered the tithe."

Her voice was mild, but Katerina bristled just the same. Held every other year, the Trials pitted a powerful Dimi and Shadow pairing from each of the Seven Villages against each other. Two victorious pairs would advance to the second round the following year, taking the interim twelve months to train. The winning pair would be selected to expand the Druzhina—Iriska's elite warriors and the Kniaz's personal guard against the demons who threatened their borders. And in so doing, leave their village behind.

She had tried so hard to be ordinary each time she and Niko went to Rivki. To avoid drawing undue attention. But the Kniaz had noticed her, anyway. And now here she was, about to submit to a barbaric rite, just because Baba and the Elders didn't believe she had the self-possession to suppress her magic under duress.

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Infuriated, Katerina called the wind to lift a spoon from Baba's wooden table, coaxing it to scoop up a bit of sugar and then delicately stir the cup of tea that sat, cooling, in its saucer. The porcelain cup rose, floating through the air until it prodded, insistent, at Baba's hand.

"Not a drop spilled," she said as Baba snatched the teacup from the air with a huff and stomped back to the table to set it down again. "I can more than control my magic. See?"

"That is not the point—" Baba began, but Katerina was out of patience. She called the wind again, this time to send the china in the cabinet rattling and the earth to ripple the floorboards beneath their feet. The flames leapt and churned, threatening to breach the hearth.

"Whether with precision or brute force, I can wield my power as I will. But I had no wish to impress a tyrant." The words were frigid as they left her mouth, ice-tipped. "I did nothing. Niko, tell her."

Her Shadow sighed, broad shoulders heaving beneath the fabric of his linen shirt. "We delivered the grain as promised. And Katerina acted only as a firewitch, nothing more."

Impatiently, Baba motioned for the two of them to step into the circle, atop the rune. "Well, it doesn't matter what he saw in you. He asked for you by name, Katerina. And by extension, your Shadow."

It was one thing for her and Niko to travel to Rivki with the tithe. It was quite another

for them to enter into battle, where Katerina's magic would be challenged and tested. Katerina understood the risks, especially now, when Kalach needed her more than ever. Her gifts were the village's best-kept secret; this was the worst possible time for the Kniaz to discover them, with demonic attacks on the rise, when Kalach was under its greatest threat. Not to mention, the consequences of having hidden something this extraordinary for so many years would no doubt be dire.

But that didn't mean she had to be forcibly bound. The idea sent horror curdling through her, as if anticipating a brutal amputation. No matter how many times Niko reminded her it was temporary, nothing more than a safeguard, she couldn't resign herself to it. She'd been lobbying against it for weeks, ever since Baba had come to her with the Elders' decision.

"Please," she said now, a last resort. Tears pricked her eyes, and she fought them back. Being at the mercy of those who wished to bind her magic, torn between her loyalty to Kalach and her autonomy, was bad enough; she'd be damned if she'd let Baba see her cry.

"I'm sorry." Finality marked Baba's voice. "Come, now. The Vila await their Shadows by the river, and the two of you must get on the road if you are to reach shelter before dark."

The kohannya ceremony was the very last thing Katerina wanted to think about right now. Her muscles tensed, and Niko's eyes met hers. He probably couldn't wait to get to the river, where his lovely Vila had crafted a paper boat just for him, sealed in red wax and inscribed with runes for romance and fertility, promises of a thousand kisses and caresses. The thought made Katerina want to vomit. And that, she definitely couldn't show.

Holding Niko's gaze, she strode to the center of the rune. A moment later, her Shadow followed. He stood facing her, close enough that his leathers brushed her

pants.

“Take her hands,” Baba instructed.

His eyes never leaving hers, Niko obeyed. His calloused fingers wove through Katerina’s, their touch achingly familiar. As vicious as he could be with a blade, he was gentle with her, as if he held something priceless. As if she were breakable.

Katerina squeezed his fingers hard enough to hurt, but Niko only smiled at her, his full lips rising. How could he smile at a time like this? She wanted to hit him, bite him, send her magic through him like a sharpened arrow—anything to break that perfect composure, meant to reassure her. She wanted to press her lips to his and devour him, and let the world burn.

But that was beyond forbidden. Even thinking about it was a betrayal. Acting on it would have horrific consequences.

It was fortunate Katerina was good at keeping secrets.

“Sant Antoniya, patron saint of Dimis, hear me,” Baba intoned. “Sant Andrei, patron saint of Shadows, be with your child now.”

Beneath their feet, the rune shuddered. The aftereffects rippled through Katerina’s body, and Niko gripped her hands harder, holding her steady. It will be all right, he mouthed.

Katerina pressed her lips together and shook her head. How could she allow this, no matter what Baba and the Elders had decreed? Panic gnawed at her bones. She had to leave this circle, she had to stop this?—

“Before you stands Katerina Ivanova, your loyal servant.” Baba’s voice resonated

throughout the room, echoing off walls and floor and ceiling. “You have gifted her with powers beyond reckoning, and we are grateful. But now, for the sake of the village she is sworn to protect, we ask your permission to bind all her gifts but one. We ask this in the name of the trifold Saints, as penitents to your grace.”

As if in response, Katerina’s magic surged. The fire shot upward in the hearth, the water in the kettle bubbling, the shutters rattling as the wind outside began to rage. Niko winced as the force of it hit him, his breath hissing between gritted teeth. Easy, he mouthed.

Did he think she was his stallion, Troitze, to be soothed with a command and the gift of an apple? Katerina bared her own teeth at him, dread coiling in her gut as Baba spoke again.

“With salt, we bind Dimi Ivanova’s waterwitch.” She pulled a pinch of white crystals from the pocket of her dress, scattering them on the rune at Katerina’s feet. “With vervain, we bind her windwitch.” The dried purple petals fell atop the salt, and a terrible choking sensation seized Katerina, as if a thousand zlydini spirits had hold of her lungs and were clenching their tiny, malevolent fists. She gagged, and Niko’s eyes widened in horror. He was speaking now, his voice low and urgent, but Katerina couldn’t make out a word. Her ears roared with the beat of her own blood, her mouth filled with the taste of saltwater. She spat, and spat again, but it made no difference. Air, she needed air, she needed?—

“With roots of cypress, we bind her earthwitch.” Baba’s voice was inside Katerina’s head somehow, inescapable, threading through bone and sinew. The lemon-spice scent of cypress shavings filled the air as Baba opened her hand and let them fall. “May all three rest, and wake no more until I free them.”

The rune flared with heat, the floorboards shuddering. Pain shot through the soles of Katerina’s feet and arrowed upward, sharper than anything she’d ever known: the

loss of her mother, the slice of a poisoned Grigori blade, the desperate, doomed desire she felt for her Shadow. She shrieked, unable to contain it, and the cypress shavings caught fire before they hit the ground. Somewhere inside the inferno, Niko was shouting: Stop and you're hurting her and then a fusillade of incomprehensible syllables that ended in her name. Through the falling embers, his face loomed up and then disappeared again, pupils blown wide so that only a rim of silver iris remained. The roar of his black dog filled the air, ripped from his human throat.

It was unthinkable for a Shadow to interfere with Baba Petrova's magic this way, to stand between her and the ceremony she and the Elders had deemed must be done. Baba was their leader, owed deference and respect. But Niko growled louder and louder, the vibration echoing through his body and into his hands where they still gripped Katerina's. His body flickered with the first hints of his Change, a moment before his hands fell away. And then he was moving her, pushing her off the rune and out of the consecrated circle. In the world beyond the agony that tore through every inch of Katerina, as if someone were trying to rip her magic out by the roots, porcelain clattered and smashed. Someone was screaming. She thought it might be her.

Her back hit the wall, knocking the remaining air out of her lungs. Niko pressed against her from head to toe, his body hot and insistent and trembling with a rage she could taste, copper-bright on her tongue. But she could taste something else, too: fear, tart and dark as the blackcurrants that grew by handfuls beside the village gates. Fear for her.

Niko was suffering. And no one hurt her Shadow and lived.

In the hollow of her throat, the silver amulet that held a drop of Niko's blood throbbed, reminding her of what mattered most. Her deepest fear was losing him. Failing him and watching him fall to the Dark. And yet here she stood, on the verge of surrendering the very gifts she relied upon to defend him.

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You are a Dimi, Katerina told herself grimly. Born into war. So, fight.

The pain was everywhere, woven into the very fabric of her being. It pierced her heart and throat and belly, as if her magic had shattered into shards of glass that wounded her from the inside out. But she could think past it. She must.

She shut her eyes and sank down, down into the depths of herself. Past the pain and the heat of the flaming cypress, past Niko's roars of fury and Baba Petrova's commands. In the quiet, she envisioned the roots of her magic, anchored deep in the soil of her soul: red for flame, brown for earth, blue for water, white for wind. In her mind's eye, she fell to her knees and dug her fingers into the soil. You are mine, she whispered to her power. Mine to keep. Mine to command. My gifts from the Saints, and I will not let you go.

The force that had hold of her magic pulled, insistent, fighting to rip the roots free. But Katerina held fast, with every ounce of strength she possessed. Inch by inch, bit by painful bit, she gained ground, until, with a bellow of fury at being deprived of its prize, the spell let go. The pain retreated with it, her magic anchoring firmly within her once more, until Katerina was alone in her skin again, shaken but whole.

Her eyes flickered open, and she peered over her Shadow's shoulder, blinking. The air still burned, shot through with flecks of fiery cypress. The table had been overturned. And Niko's body was pressed against hers, his back against her front, both of them crowded against the far wall. His arms spread wide, hands touching the plaster on either side of her in a clear gesture of protection. At their feet lay splintered china—Niko's doing, perhaps, in his haste to break the circle and get her away from the rune that fueled the spell.

He was still growling, one long, unbroken burr that would doubtless fill most people with terror. The sound comforted Katerina, as familiar and soothing as a lullaby.

“Let her go,” Baba was saying, with the exaggerated patience of someone who had been repeating themselves for quite some time. “This had to be done. And I mean her no harm.”

Her Shadow merely snarled, body shaking with the effort to hold his human shape.

Enough was enough. Katerina cleared her throat, which ached as if she’d swallowed ground glass. “I’m all right, Niko,” she said. “Stand down.”

The growl ebbed, and Niko spun, grabbing her by the shoulders. His eyes were wild, his black hair half-loose from its tie. “Thank the Saints. Are you hurt, Katerina? Are you?—”

“I’m all right,” she repeated, though she wasn’t sure if it was true. Her body still ached with the after-effects of the spell, a fine tremor running through every limb. But Niko didn’t need to know that, did he? Not when he was looking at her like she might go to pieces under his hands, crumbling to the floor in a heap of tears and ashes.

Her Shadow’s gray eyes narrowed, gaze sweeping over her from head to toe. “Are you,” he said again, a statement this time rather than a question.

Inside her, magic stirred: fire, earth, wind, and water, all there to call to her hand. Could he feel it, bound to her as he was?

If so, he didn’t say a word. Jaw set, he turned to face Baba. “Is it done?”

Baba gave a curt nod. “I am sorry,” she told them both, with a wry glance at the

wreckage. “It was never my intention to hurt you. The moment you come home, I will undo the binding. And even with only one of your gifts at your command, you are powerful, Katerina. Trust in that.”

Katerina would have to. She had no intention of abandoning her village by unleashing her other gifts in the Trials. But neither did she have any intention of telling Baba the truth: that the spell had failed. That she would ride out to Rivki in possession of her full powers.

There might be demons on the road, after all.

And a Trial of her own to conquer, here in Kalach, before she could ride to meet them.

2

KATERINA

Katerina had always thought the kohannya ceremony was sweet, if silly. For a Dimi like herself, who had the freedom to choose whoever she wished to marry, there was no need to cast a tiny boat into the river that bordered Kalach and wait to see who scooped it up downstream. But for Vila, raised to marry Shadows and perpetuate the Vila and Shadow lines, there was an undeniable romanticism to the tradition. Vila spent weeks crafting their miniature boats, sealing them with wax dyed from red madder, then hand-painting them with runes for love, loyalty to Sant Viktoriya, and steadfast hearts.

The whole village turned out for the annual ceremony, where the Vila launched their boats and waited with bated breath to see which Shadows would pluck them from the water. For while Baba Petrova and the Elders had final authority when it came to marriage pacts, Vila and Shadows’ wishes held considerable weight. Kohannya was a

time of crushes revealed, of discovering whether love was requited. It was, Katerina thought dryly as she strode down the path to the river, one hand knotted around her horse's reins, a Vila's dream come true.

And today, it was Katerina's nightmare.

"Are you all right?" Next to her, her best friend, Ana, poked Katerina in the side. Never one to sit still, Ana was always in motion—whether it be her hands, her body, or her magic. When the two of them were children, she was always getting in trouble for touching things she shouldn't. Today, apparently that thing was Katerina.

"Ouch!" Rubbing her side resentfully, Katerina tore her gaze from the gathering in the distance, just visible through the copse of trees. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Oh, I don't know." Ana rolled her eyes. "Let's pick a reason, shall we? Maybe because I've called your name at least three times. Maybe because you're staring straight ahead with a death glare on your face, as if you'd like to light the whole lot of them aflame." She gestured at the crowd clustered on the riverbank, the rays of the early-spring sun breaking through the canopy of evergreens to illuminate her olive skin and the blue-black highlights in her hair.

"Or maybe it's because you just endured a binding ceremony the likes of which hasn't been attempted in our lifetime," she went on, her tone deliberately innocent. "Maybe it's because we could hear your Shadow raising a commotion all the way in the village square. Maybe it's because you look like you're about to fall over, or because when Niko came to collect Alexei for the ceremony, he snapped at my Shadow like he was about to murder someone?—"

"Okay, okay." Katerina held up a quelling hand. "I get it. Enough."

Ana was a firewitch, and a powerful one at that. She held up her own hands, a small flame burning above each palm. “You don’t get to tellmewhat to do, Katerina Ivanova. And you can pretend to everyone else that you’re just fine, but you don’t have to put on an act with me.”

Sighing, Katerina guided her mare, Mika, around a log that had fallen across the path. The worst of it was, shedidhave to pretend with Ana. There was no way she was going to burden her friend with the knowledge that the spell hadn’t worked, and that she had no intention of letting Baba try again. If the truth came out somehow and Baba discovered Ana had known all along, it wouldn’t be pretty. “It was awful,” she admitted. That much, she could share. “I felt like I was dying. Like an essential part of me was being torn right out of my body. The pain—that’s why Niko got so angry. He couldn’t stand that it was hurting me.”

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Ana nodded in sympathy, stepping to the side to make way for a small group of Dimis and Shadows hustling down the path. “I’ve never heard anyone shout at Baba, much less threaten her like that,” she said when they passed, her voice hushed. “It was all we could do to restrain the other Shadows from going to his aid. Can you imagine? They would have ripped that cottage apart.”

“We did enough damage on our own.” Katerina knotted her hands in Mika’s reins, and the mare whickered, sensing her tension. “I suppose destroying Baba’s cottage and setting the entire pack of Shadows on a rampage would have been a poor beginning to kohannya.”

Her voice was light, but Ana’s gaze sharpened, nonetheless. “Is that what’s gotten you so out of sorts? This silly ceremony?”

They were on dangerous ground now. Katerina shrugged, as if the answer were simple, obvious. “It just seems so frivolous, knowing what’s out there. We’re ten days from the full Bone Moon. Every day until then, the veil between the living and the dead thins, and the demons find it easier to break through. And the increasing attacks that travelers between villages have reported—the raid on Povorino...” She snorted. “It’s like none of that matters to the Vila. Like none of it’s real. All they have to worry about is tending the children and looking pretty, while we...”

She let her voice trail off, afraid of saying too much. Sounding too bitter, because although everything she’d said held a grain of truth, the real reason that this particular kohannya ceremony made her stomach churn was something she could never, ever speak aloud. Not even to Ana. Not to anyone.

“While we fight on the front lines.” Ana finished her sentence. “It’s their role, Katerina. They take pride in it. Just as we take pride in protecting Iriska and the world beyond our borders. You can’t begrudge them that.”

Neither Katerina nor Ana had ever left Iriska. The realm was protected, hidden. Still, though she’d never set foot beyond Iriska’s wards, she knew well what lay beyond: a world filled with innocent humans, unaware of the demonic threat that lurked beneath their feet. As a Dimi, it was her job to make sure they never knew—to stop the Grigori from overrunning Iriska and spilling, hungry, into the world beyond, where no one had the tools to defend themselves.

It was a heavy burden, but one she was used to carrying. One the Vila would never have to bear. Though the latent gifts that simmered in their blood empowered them to bear Shadowchildren and Vila, they possessed no magic of their own. They were nurturers, not defenders.

“I suppose I can’t.” Katerina ducked to avoid an overhanging branch. “Maybe I’m just restless. The sooner we go, the sooner I can fail to impress the Kniaz at the Trials and the sooner we can come home.” She forced her voice to sound neutral, not to reveal the fact that she was dreading and looking forward to returning to Kalach in equal measure. Because when they returned, the night of the full Bone Moon, Niko would be betrothed to his Vila.

Chosen for him for her beauty and piety, Elena Lisova was everything Niko needed and deserved. She would be loyal to him, faithful.

She would break Katerina’s heart.

Romantic love between a Dimi and her Shadow was beyond forbidden. The prophecy in the Book of the Light said so, the one every Shadow, Dimi, and Vila learned from the cradle: if a Dimi and Shadow lay together, demon-infested Darkness would fall

upon Iriska and overtake the realm. Dictated by the three Saints to their scribes centuries before, the prophecy was sacred. Defying it was unthinkable.

So Niko could never be Katerina's, not in the way she sometimes dreamed, in the depths of her most secret heart. If he knew she looked at him with the slightest hint of desire, anything beyond the holy bond that tied a Dimi to her Shadow, he would be horrified. And if anyone suspected how Katerina felt about him, the punishment would be swift. She and Niko would be separated, their bond severed, or worse. It would destroy them both.

This was the real reason she was dreading this ceremony. Because today, her Shadow would stand downriver and wait for Elena's boat to sail into his outstretched hands. And the moment he rescued it from the waters and held it high, he'd be acknowledging that he wanted Elena just as much as she wanted him. That their bond wasn't simply dictated by Baba and the Elders, a match made for an alpha Shadow to perpetuate the strength of his bloodline—it was something Niko chose, a future he was proudly claiming as his own.

Katerina wanted him to be happy, more than anything. If marrying Elena and giving her Shadowchildren and little Vila was what he dreamed of, she should support him. But how could she, when the thought hurt more than having her magic nearly torn out of her body by the roots?

Her agony must have shown on her face, because Ana squeezed her free hand in solidarity. "You will come home," she said fiercely. "You will come home, and Baba will unbind your magic, and together we will stand against the Grigori, just like we always have. Whatever threat is rising, we will face it with our Shadows at our side."

Ana didn't voice the unthinkable—that Katerina and Niko would die in the arena. It happened, more often than the Kniaz acknowledged. The purpose of the Trials was to single out the strongest among them. If that meant crippling or even killing their

rivals, so be it. A Dimi and Shadow pairing that could not stand against their own, or against whatever horrors lurked in the arena to test them, was unworthy of defending Iriska.

Katerina was spared a response, because as Ana finished speaking, they stepped off the path and into the clearing that bordered the river. It buzzed with activity, crowded with Dimis, Vila, Shadows, and villagers alike. Clouds had gathered, heralding a coming storm, and the air was thick with brine, overlaid with the spicy scent of the rowan-fires that burned by Kalach's borders, to keep the demons away.

Elder Balandin gave an approving nod when she caught sight of Katerina, as if relieved that robbing her of her gifts hadn't reduced her to a sniveling heap. Baba had no doubt reported the havoc they had wreaked on her cottage, and if Ana spoke true, the Elders had heard Niko's vociferous objections for themselves. They had no reason to believe the spell had failed, and Katerina intended to keep it that way.

All of the Elders were looking at her now, their gazes heavy with expectation. Elder Mikhailova gazed up at her from his wheeled chair, hands clasped atop the blanket draped over his withered legs and eyes narrowed as if taking her measure. Offering him a small smile that she hoped conveyed both resignation and resilience, Katerina tied Mika up and gave them a carrot from the saddlebag to keep her happy. Then she and Ana crossed the clearing, joining their fellow Dimis. They stood some way back from the riverbank, in between the cluster of giggling, wide-eyed Vila and the leather-clad, blade-wielding Shadows. Instinctively, she scanned the clearing, looking for Niko, but didn't see him among his brethren.

As their alpha, it was unusual for him to be separated from his pack in a gathering like this. She opened her mouth to ask Ana where Niko had gone after he'd come to collect Alexei, his second in command—but the words died on her lips as her Shadow emerged from the trees, leading Troitze, his ornery, midnight-black stallion. Alexei strode by his alpha's side, head tilted as he took in Niko's last-minute

instructions to hold the village in his absence.

Ana had been right: Niko's jaw was tight, his muscles tensed, as if he were striding into battle rather than about to collect a love token made by his soon-to-be-betrothed. Her friend elbowed her, perilously close to the same spot where she'd poked Katerina earlier. "What did I tell you?" she muttered. "Braced for murder."

It was true that, unlike the Shadows who stood downriver, loose-limbed and smiling, Niko looked far less at ease. His gaze roved over the crowd, settling first on his pack, who straightened and came to attention under his scrutiny. It flicked over Katerina, lingering long enough to make sure that she was, indeed, unharmed. Guilt flashed through her at not telling Niko the spell hadn't held—that she was whole. But how could she make him complicit in her deception? Why should they both be punished for her refusal to surrender?

She already kept one secret from her Shadow, after all. What was another?

A hum of excitement arose from the cluster of Vila, and Niko's eyes left her, seeking its source. Elena stood in their midst, her buttercup-yellow gown and matching tresses gleaming, as if the sunbeams that broke through the clouds had done so for her benefit alone. She separated from her sisters and walked toward Niko, her face lit with joy.

Katerina forced herself to watch as her Shadow handed Troitze's reins to Alexei and met Elena in the middle of the clearing. The Vila was as lovely as a storybook princess, with her long, flaxen hair and eyes as blue as the hyacinths that bloomed, defying the lingering touch of winter, on the riverbank at their feet. The perfect disciple of Sant Viktoriya, she was everything Katerina wasn't: demure, soft, willing to bend to please others. Coming to a halt in front of Niko, she lifted her gaze, dimpling prettily, and held her ornate, gold-painted boat up for his inspection. The wind ruffled the loose tendrils of hair around her face, and she brushed it back,

twining the strands around one finger before letting them go.

Niko said something to her, but Katerina couldn't make it out. Was he telling the Vila how beautiful she looked? How he'd miss her dearly when he was gone? Maybe, Katerina thought, throat tight with misery, he was confessing how he couldn't wait to be the one to cradle the golden boat in his hands at the end of its maiden voyage—the same hands that had clung to Katerina as if she were something precious in Baba's cottage not two hours before.

Suppressing the jealousy that clawed at her, Katerina looked away. Her gaze swept over the assembled Vila, Shadows, and Dimis, then shifted right, toward the villagers crowded behind the ribbons Baba's acolytes had strung up between the trees.

The kohannya ceremony was much-anticipated throughout Kalach; for weeks, children had traded bets on which Shadows would pluck each Vila's boat from the waters. The little ones jostled for position, clutching boats of their own making: crude hunks of wood that were as likely to sink as swim, painted brightly with the pigments of crushed flowers. Behind them stood tradespeople and teachers, seamstresses and blacksmiths, all of whom it was Katerina's job to protect. Farther down the riverbank stood the small Shadows, Vila, and Dimis, watched over by the married Vila whose kohannya days were behind them.

This was what she was fighting for. These people, who trusted her.

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She fought for them, and for the Light. For her sacred mission, handed down to her by the Saints: to guard the borders of her village and the realm from demonic incursion. To be a force against the Darkness, with her Shadow's aid.

She had faced demons many times, since childhood, and though she had faith in her ability to vanquish them, they never failed to strike a chord of terror in her heart. She had seen too much for it to be otherwise. What did it say about her, then, that, more than the threat of dying beneath the blades or teeth of the Grigori, she feared watching her Shadow take another as his wife?

A distraction, that was what she needed. Something that would take her mind off the kohannya ceremony and keep her from betraying the traitorous contents of her heart.

Crossing to where Mika grazed amongst the trees, Katerina made a show of sorting through the contents of her saddlebags. Antivenin, bandages, and salves, in case she and Niko encountered a demon on the road. Smoked sausages, cold vareniki dumplings. Bits of cheese. A full flask of water. A sheathed knife, though fighting with a blade was more Niko's province than hers. She hardly needed an edged weapon to do damage.

Unfortunately, this position put her closer to the very people she was trying to ignore. Elena held up the boat, chattering about how much time she'd put into it, then hiding it playfully behind her back when Niko tried to examine it more closely. "You'll see it when you brave the river to catch it," she said, trilling a silvery laugh. "You must earn your prize, my Shadow." She batted her lashes at him, the implication clear: the true prize in this scenario was her.

“As you wish,” Niko said, stepping backward with his palms raised, and Elena beamed.

“Don’t worry, my Shadow,” she said, sidling up to him once more. “You don’t have long to wait.”

My Shadow. Was that all he was to Elena—a possession, proof that her maniacal dedication to Sant Viktoriya had paid off? For Katerina, he was so much more: her best friend, her conscience, the other half of her soul. How could he be someone else’s Shadow, when all her life, even before the blood vow that bound them, he had only belonged to her?

She ducked her head, terrified that the white-hot misery that scorched every inch of her being would show on her face. Inside her, power stirred, desperate for an outlet. The river was right there, the Vila clustered on the bank in their rune-embroidered gowns, cradling their wax-coated paper boats as if cupping treasure in their hands. One gust was all it would take to send them flapping over the river like a flock of beautiful, shocked birds, their boats scattered to the four winds. One thought, and the river would crest its banks and swallow all of them whole, sucking Katerina and her humiliation into its depths.

She’d assured Baba that she had control of her magic. She had trained for years to channel it with the same focused precision with which Niko wielded his blades. Wasn’t her ability to resist Baba’s spell proof of her strength? She refused to be undone here, now, when to do so would mean exposure as a liar, not to mention the surety that Baba and the Elders would insist on performing the spell all over again. The thought of undergoing that agony a second time chilled her to her soul.

How could it be a bad thing to be in possession of all her powers, just a few short moonrises away from the full Bone Moon, with Grigori attacks increasing by the day? She couldn’t travel all the way to and from Rivki weakened, a fraction of her

true self. She wouldn't.

But she couldn't stay here another moment, either. Not like this. Every instant she lingered meant risking discovery—and devastation.

Maybe she was a coward, not to be able to watch her Shadow claim Elena's boat—and, by extension, the Vila—for his own. Or maybe she was only looking out for the village she'd dedicated herself to protecting since her mother fell at the demons' feet, throat torn open, a broken and bloodied doll.

Maybe both.

An idea came to Katerina then—a wonderful, terrible idea, destruction and deliverance in equal measure.

To reach Rivki, she and Niko would have to cross a bridge that spanned the river a half-mile to the north. A spring storm two weeks ago had left it in less-than-ideal shape. Katerina had seen the state of it, when she'd ridden upriver to gather medicinal herbs for their journey: the railing was loose and some of the spokes and slats were gone, leaving gaps like missing teeth. She and Niko had debated taking a different, longer route, concerned the bridge wouldn't hold their horses, but Gabiska, Kalach's head carpenter, had tested it and declared it fit for one last crossing. If it fell, though...

They would have to ride farther upriver, into the rolling hills that licked the base of the mountains, then through one of the lower passes. The trip would add hours to their journey. Time they couldn't afford to waste, if they wanted to arrive on schedule for the feast that preceded the Trials and pay the Kniaz the respect he believed was his due.

A storm was on its way, telegraphed in the low-hanging clouds that darkened the

horizon and the humid air, sparking with latent electricity. Half a mile upriver, who could say whether it had already begun to rain?

One hand on Mika's back, she pictured the bridge: flaking, white-painted slats; struts rising from the riverbanks on either side of rushing water. Oaks and rowans curved overhead, their leaves stirring in alarm, speckled with the first drops that fell from a blackening sky.

Careful not to disturb the surface of the soil, she sent her magic out, snaking beneath the riverbank. It curled around the voles that crept through their tunnels. Wove between the knobbly roots of the great oaks. Tasted the thorny sweetness of guelder roses, slumbering until the warmer temperatures beckoned them to bloom.

The earth washers. Hers to embrace, to protect, to command.

She reached farther, carving her way, until her magic tasted something solid, rich with river-silt. Sending out another tendril, she found its companion, anchored deep within the earth: the clay footers of the bridge.

No one was looking at her, beneath the trees with Mika, pretending to forage through the saddlebags. The weather was poor; the bridge was in disrepair, a half-mile away; Katerina's earth-magic was bound. If she went through with this, no one would suspect.

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against her mare's warm flank. Mika stood steady, her slow, even breath centering Katerina as she wrapped her magic around the footers: tight and tighter, until they creaked beneath the strain.

Yield to me, she commanded silently.

The earth heaved, struggling against her. The footers had stood for fifty years, since a

storm had washed that section of riverbank away and Kalach had had to rebuild. The ground didn't want to give them up. Its grip on the clay was strong, but Katerina's was stronger.

Yield, she demanded again, drawing harder on her magic. Now.

Perhaps Sant Antoniya was with her, because though she had not called on her water-magic, the river stirred, its gentle lap-lap-lap against the shore becoming louder, more demanding. The sky opened, drops of cold rain spattering Katerina's shoulders. Above her, the leaves of the low-hanging oaks whispered, disturbed from their rest. And upriver, two of the bridge's footers broke loose at last, sending the dilapidated structure plunging into the water with a deafening roar and an impact that shook the forest.

Katerina opened her eyes to chaos.

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KATERINA

The good news was, no one was paying any attention to Katerina whatsoever. The bad news was, she had created mayhem: a frothing river, a flood of debris, a shrieking crowd, who feared an attack of Grigori until Baba and the Elders assured them otherwise.

Though the kohannya gathering was downstream from the collapse, the river's banks were wide. No one was hurt; the waterwitches had made sure of it, fighting together to tame the flow, even as the earthwitches, led by Baba, shored up the soil on either side. Gabiska and his crew had ridden upriver through the hard-driving rain to confirm the bridge's demise, though the chunks of wood that the current carried past them were evidence enough. The carpenter had shaken his head on his return, saying it had only been a matter of time—and how fortunate they were that Dimi Ivanova and her Shadow hadn't been crossing the structure when it fell.

Katerina had held her breath, scrutinizing Baba for any hint of suspicion, but found none. The elder Dimi had focused first on ensuring everyone's safety, then on determining the extent of the damage. Bits of wood littered the riverbanks on both sides, tangling in the reeds that flanked the shore, and despite the earthwitches' best efforts, the surging debris had gouged chunks of clay from the banks. It would be hours before the site was fit for kohannya—hours that Katerina and Niko didn't have, if they were to make it to Rivki on time.

The storm had passed as quickly as it came, the heavy rain slowing to a trickle that fell, improbably, from a sun-streaked sky. Now, in the still-sodden clearing, Baba clapped her hands, and the riverbank fell silent. All eyes sought the elder Dimi in her

cobalt robes, her salt-white braids coiled atop her head. Even the children ceased clamoring and stood still, bright-eyed and attentive as hawks.

“Today, a great disaster was averted,” Baba announced. “The Saints are truly with us, for had Dimi Ivanova and Shadow Alekhin been atop the bridge when it crumbled, Kalach would have lost their greatest champions.”

Katerina spared a glance for Niko, standing once again by Elena’s side. The Vila clung to his arm, eyes wide with the terror of what could have been, but he wasn’t looking down at her. He was staring straight ahead, his eyes locked on Katerina’s face.

“Thanks to the efforts of our own, the collapse of the bridge caused us no lasting harm.” Baba’s thin lips pressed together. “In gratitude to the protection of Sant Andrei and Sant Viktoriya, the kohannya ceremony will go on, though later than we planned.” She gestured at the river, where the water still foamed, agitated by the bridge’s collapse and the passing storm.

A cheer arose from the crowd, the children lifting their makeshift boats high, and Baba lifted a hand to quell it. “Alas,” she said, her gaze roving between Katerina and Niko, “Dimi Ivanova and her Shadow cannot stay. For with the bridge down, they must take the long way to Rivki, and they cannot afford to tarry.”

Even across the clearing, Elena’s gasp of disappointment was audible. But Katerina was still looking at Niko, and in the depths of his gray eyes she saw the most peculiar of expressions, there and then gone so quickly she might have imagined it: relief.

“Worry not,” Baba said, bestowing a smile on Elena. “For Shadow Alekhin and his Vila, the ceremony is a mere formality, as their union has already been assured. You will still cast your boat upon the waters, Vila Lisova, so it may follow your Shadow on his journey and give him luck.”

Elena gave a small, trembling smile in return. “Of course, I will.”

Raindrops spangled Baba’s braids, darkening them, as she nodded in approval. “Now we must bid goodbye and good fortune to our champions,” she said. “May they do their duty at the Trials and return to us once more.”

Murmurs rose from the crowd, some of assent and some of disagreement. The whole village was sworn to secrecy about Katerina’s abilities, but they knew well what she could do. While the more strategic among them understood that excelling at the Trials might well mean losing her to Iriska in twelve months’ time, others were less sanguine. Becoming one of the chosen pairs to advance to the second round of the Trials was an honor; failing to do so, a mark of shame. She’d heard rumors in the taverns that some people thought binding her magic was blasphemy, a perversion of the gifts given to her by the Saints.

If they only knew... Would they revile her, for clinging to her gifts despite Baba and the Elders’ demands? Or praise her, for doing what she must to protect Kalach and her Shadow?

She held her head high until the murmurs died to silence once again, and Baba spoke. “They have their duty, and we have ours. Go with our blessing and the blessing of the Saints, Dimi Ivanova and Shadow Alekhin. May you walk always in the Light.”

There was a beat of silence. Then the crowd exploded with applause. As it quieted, the Vila drifted back to the riverbank—all except Elena, who stood by Niko’s side, her brow furrowed with worry.

“I know you need to go. But I wish you could stay for the ceremony.” She peered up at Niko, her eyes wide and blue and guileless. “It...it’s tradition.”

“I’m sorry, Elena.” Niko’s voice was a low rumble. “I know how much this means to

you.”

Elena tilted her head upward, her lower lip protruding in what could only be described as a pout. As Katerina watched, she extended her free hand toward Niko, doubtless expecting him to intertwine her fingers with his. But her Shadow didn’t move. His hands were shoved in the pockets of his leathers, his body leaned slightly back and away from the Vila. Her touch skirted the sleeve of his jacket, and then her hand fell back to her side once more.

Was it her imagination, or was her Shadow avoiding Elena’s touch?

Surely not. That would be absurd. It was coincidence, that was all, seeing what Katerina wanted to see. What she wished, in the depths of her wicked witch’s heart: that the Vila’s touch repulsed him. That he longed to share Katerina’s bed, and claim her heart as well as her soul.

Saints, how long was she meant to stand here, waiting, as her Shadow flirted with his betrothed? How much could her heart take?

“Niko!” she snapped, the word a whip. “Come.”

Her Shadow’s gaze flicked to hers. Was she imagining things once again, or was it relief that showed in its depths?

“Calling me like a dog now, I see,” he said, tone laced with faux annoyance.

Katerina forced a smirk onto her face. “If the shoe fits...”

He made a low, amused sound, then bent his head toward Elena’s. Saints, was she going to have to watch him kiss the Vila goodbye?

Katerina braced herself, unable to look away. To pay the penance of watching Niko's lips brush Elena's, if she must. But her Shadow was nodding to the Vila, stepping back. Obeying Katerina, as he was sworn to do. Joining her under the trees.

As she untied Mika, Niko did the same with Troitze, avoiding the testy stallion's bite as he tossed his head. "Katerina," her Shadow said, low-voiced. "The bridge. Did you?—"

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By the Saints. What had he seen? Had he felt it, when she wrenched the footers free?

“Of course not.” Her voice was sharp as she swung up into the saddle. “How could I? My earthwitch is bound, remember? Why would I, besides?”

Niko snorted, sounding for an instant like his stallion. “Whatever you say.”

He cast her a final suspicious glance as he mounted Troitze. Eager to escape his scrutiny, Katerina dug in her heels and Mika moved out, past Ana, who mouthed, See you soon with an imperious wink that suggested she’d accept nothing less. Troitze, never one to follow, pushed forward to take the lead.

Sunlight striped the banks and sparkled on the rippling water, the great oaks sighing overhead in a wind that was not of her making, as Katerina and her Shadow breached the edge of the forest, leaving Kalach behind.

4

KATERINA

It was a beautiful night to burn, and a ridiculous one to die.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her competitors in the pit beneath the Bone Trials arena, Katerina inhaled the mingled scents of sweat, damp earth, and rowan-fire, and pleaded with her magic not to betray her. Next to her, Niko rested his palm against the small of her back, offering comfort. The heat of his touch radiated even through her fighting leathers, and Katerina jerked away.

Her Shadow looked down at her, puzzlement warring with battle-eagerness on his face.

“All right?” he said, voice pitched low so the other Dimis and their Shadows wouldn’t hear.

“Never better,” Katerina bit out, straightening her spine. The roar of the crowd seeped through the bars, ebbing and flowing like the waves that lapped Rivki Island’s shores, and she swallowed, her throat thick with disgust.

The ride from Kalach had been uneventful, other than poor weather that had spooked the horses and forced them to arrive in Rivki looking like they’d been dragged backward through a blackberry hedge. They’d broken their ride in Drezna, as they usually did when delivering the tithe, then ridden hellbent through the rain to make it in time for the Trials’ opening feast. Now they were here, crammed into a space so small that Katerina’s skin crawled with the spillover of her fellow Dimis’ magic, about to turn against each other for the benefit of a dictator.

Six nights before the Bone Moon, when the veil between humanity and the Underworld grew thinnest, the Seven Villages’ most powerful Dimis and Shadows should be home, defending Iriska against soul-devouring Grigori demons. Not doing...this.

At least Katerina had been able to keep the retention of her abilities a secret. There had hardly been cause to use them on the road, what with the lashing wind and the downpour. The only one they’d needed was her fire, to dry out wood for kindling and set it aflame. She’d come so close to telling Niko the truth again and again—she hated lying to him, any more than she had to—but in the end, she’d decided against it. With luck, she wouldn’t need to call on her water, earth, or wind to defend them, and they’d be back in Kalach before anyone was the wiser.

A horn blew in the arena above, putting an end to her musings. Amplified by witchwind, it jarred small pebbles loose from the walls. They spattered against Katerina's leathers, and beside her, a fellow Dimi—Trina Samarin, of Povorino—gave a grunt of disgust as the pebbles struck the side of her face, drawing blood. Katerina could smell it, iron-rich in the damp air.

“Pleasant accommodations, no?” Katerina said, cocking her head at the confines of the pit. “You’d think they’d treat us better if we’re meant to be Iriska’s best hope of survival.”

Trina sneered at her, as if making idle conversation were tantamount to admitting weakness. The light filtering through the bars fell in stripes across the umber skin that marked her as hailing from Povorino, and her green eyes shone, bright with malice.

“There’s now about it,” she hissed, her voice surprisingly girlish to be filled with so much venom. “Think of me when you’re lying in the dirt of the arena, choking on dust.” She lifted a hand, summoning the wind to command the pebbles at her feet. They peppered Katerina’s leathers in a fusillade before falling to the stone floor once more.

Trina had been nasty to Katerina since they’d met at the previous night’s feast, as if sensing a threat to her victory in the arena. At first, Katerina had ignored her, which only seemed to spur the other woman on. By now, moments before they were about to fight for their lives, Katerina’s patience had worn thin.

“If one of us is about to be lying in the dirt,” she said sweetly, “I hardly think it’s me.” Fire flared in her palms and she let it rise, heat forming a wall between them. Trina took a startled step back. Beside her, her Shadow bared his teeth, but instead of responding in kind, Niko chuckled.

“Watch yourself, Fyodor,” he said. “My Dimi doesn’t make idle threats.” He

refrained from saying the rest of it: that if anyone here knew what Katerina was capable of, they'd think twice before pelting her with pebbles.

The horn blew once more, drowning out Fyodor's retort, as Katerina called her witchfire to heel. "Dimis and Shadows of Iriska. Citizens of Rivki." The Kniaz's voice boomed over the receding blare of the horn, echoing throughout the arena and into the chamber below. "We are gathered here today to determine the strongest among us, so that they may one day fight alongside my Druzhina." Through the bars, Katerina could make out the proprietary sweep of his hand, gesturing left and right at the entourage that flanked him.

The Druzhina Guard were the strongest Dimis and Shadows Iriska had to offer. Yet Kniaz Sergey spoke as if he owned them, as if their power were his to command, rather than their own. Who cared if he had inherited his throne, his bloodline anointed to rule Iriska by the Saints? His hubris infuriated Katerina.

Dimis—women—held the power of the elements in their hands. So why did Iriska cling so tightly to tradition, ceding its governance to an entitled, overindulged man?

"Tonight, we will see displays of strength that dazzle us," the Kniaz announced. "But we will also watch as the weaker among us fall, dishonoring the villages they call home."

The crowd howled in approbation. In the dimness of the pit, Katerina rolled her eyes.

"Only the two most powerful pairs will be chosen to advance to next year's Trials and compete for a chance to join the Druzhina." Kniaz Sergey's voice vibrated with satisfaction. "And if the Saints smile upon us, perhaps we will witness a third pair of such strength that at the Reaping, they will displace one of our own."

There was another roar, this one of protest. Every so often, Kniaz Sergey would

choose an additional pair of victors, ousting a bonded pair of the Druzhina. It was his way of culling the herd, keeping his Guard on their toes—and it worked. Whenever Katerina came to Rivki to deliver the tithe, she could sense their gazes on her and Niko, assessing the competition.

Everything about this was wrong. Dimis and Shadows fought together, on the side of the Light. They should be allies, not enemies. Yet here the Kniaz was, seeding dissent where there should be unity. She glanced around; other than Trina, whose eyes shone with excitement, her companions in the pit looked grim. Sofi, Drezna's Dimi champion, turned her back to speak to her Shadow; her hands carved the air in a series of intricate gestures, but with Sofi facing away, the words were unintelligible. Mute since birth, Sofi communicated primarily through sign; Katerina and Niko had both learned the language so they could converse with her whenever they visited Drezna. Whatever she had to say now must be both private and unnerving, because her Shadow shook his head, clapping a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

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Watching them, Dimi Roksana, who hailed from Satvala-by-the-Sea, lifted her chin. “Good luck,” she said. “May the best of us rise to defend Iriska.”

“Good luck,” they all echoed—except Trina and her Shadow, who smirked as if nothing would make them happier than to watch their fellows fall one by one, and trample on the remains. What was wrong with the two of them?

Kniaz Sergey’s voice broke through the howls of the crowd and the mutterings of the Dimis and Shadows in the pit. “Let the Bone Trials begin!”

Katerina turned toward the stairs that led up to the arena, Niko stalking beside her and leveling a menacing glare at anyone who attempted to push past them. At twenty-two, he was the youngest alpha Shadow in Iriska. He couldn’t afford to show weakness by letting anyone else take the lead. Not for the first time, he reminded her of Troitze—an observation she wisely kept to herself.

“This will be over soon,” he muttered as they climbed the narrow steps, the crowd’s roars growing louder the closer they got to the surface. “On your weakest day, you’re stronger than the rest of them, no matter what Baba did to you.”

“Shhh,” Katerina demanded, cutting her eyes at him in warning, but her heart clenched. Neither of them had families left to protect. Still, the thought of Iriska’s so-called nobleman finding out that an entire village had been keeping her secret and punishing Kalach’s vulnerable citizens in her name sent bile surging up her throat.

Niko inhaled, his nostrils flaring in disgust at the dank scent of the moldering stairway. His voice dropped, skirting the edge of the black dog that lived inside him.

“I know I told you this was for the best. But now—maybe I was wrong, Katerina. Maybe I should have fought harder for you when you protested the binding. And maybe in the arena...you shouldn’t have to hide what you’re capable of, and damn the consequences.”

Katerina’s heart twisted. The two of them were joined; her inability to show her true strength was a reflection on him, as well. Above and beyond his pride, Niko had good reason to seek victory in the Trials. Every day, her Shadow fought to reclaim his family’s good name, and nothing could bring him more honor than being chosen to fight in the Druzhina. She hated to let him down. But how could she do otherwise?

“Niko,” she said, low-voiced.

He arched a dark eyebrow at her. “Hmmm?”

She couldn’t tell him what was in her heart—how she thought of him in a way a Dimi was forbidden to regard her Shadow, how she crumbled inside every time she thought about what awaited them when they got back to Kalach. How things would change for the two of them, forever. But before they set foot in the arena, she could tell him the truth about the binding ceremony, so he didn’t stride into battle believing he’d failed her.

If it hadn’t been for him, who knew if she would have found the strength to resist the spell? She could be splintered now, a fraction of herself.

As usual, she owed him everything.

“I—” She paused mid-step, and a huff of annoyance split the air behind her.

“Having second thoughts, Dimi Ivanova?” Trina said, her tone mocking.

Niko's shoulders tensed beneath his black leathers as he turned, fixing his storm-gray eyes on the Shadow and Dimi who stood on the steps below them. A growl rumbled in his chest, and Fyodor growled back, the sound dripping with menace.

Katerina's desire to confide in her Shadow fled, replaced by irritation. "I flee from no one," she said, lifting her chin. "Can you say the same, Dimi Samarin? I heard the last time Grigori attacked a group of travelers outside Povorino, witchwind failed to drive them back. A firewitch had to step in to save them." She opened her hand, a small flame licking above her palm. "Tell me, was it weakness that almost killed those people? Pure cowardice? Or both?"

Her lips rose in a smirk, and the flame rose with it, illuminating the other Dimi's furious expression. Katerina didn't wait to hear what she had to say. She turned away, clenching her fist to extinguish the flame, letting her fury spur her onward.

Three more steps to the top. Two. One.

Trina's witchwind shoved at Katerina's back, sending her stumbling across the uneven stone threshold and onto the sand of the arena. She gritted her teeth as her own power rose in response, itching beneath her skin, eager to be used.

Today, you are a firewitch, she told herself fiercely. Nothing more. If you need to set this whole damned arena alight to save yourself and your Shadow, so be it. But you will keep tight hold of the rest of your gifts, or pay the price.

Her fellow Dimis and their Shadows spilled from the doorway behind her as Katerina blinked, her eyes adjusting to the moonlight. The Trials were always held at night, simulating the conditions of a Grigori attack as closely as possible, though the exact nature of the threat varied from year to year, a closely-kept secret. She'd half-expected to be set on the moment she crossed the threshold, but the floor of the arena was empty. Tiered seating rose all around it, so high it nearly obscured the gilded

domes of the Kniaz's palace atop the tallest peak on the island. In the distance, she could see the gleam of the lake that surrounded Rivki, filled with Vodyanoy water-spirits to keep the demons away.

The seats were packed; the Trials were the most notorious event in Iriska, with tickets at a premium and a lucrative betting ring on the winners. But it was impossible to miss the Kniaz. He sat front and center, three rows from the pit, surrounded on all sides by the Druzhina. Next to him reclined a dark-haired woman draped in blue velvet—Dimi Zakharova, his consort. She glared at Katerina, which made no sense at all. The very last thing Katerina wanted was to take her place.

Ah, well. Katerina wasn't here to make friends. If no one in Rivki could stand her, so much the better.

She turned her head, inspecting the arena. But there was nothing to see, save for the rowan-fires that burned to the left and right of a small door, carved into the opposite side. Smoke curled into the air, silhouetted against the star-speckled sky and the harsh, cratered face of the waxing Bone Moon. The stormy weather that had dogged them all the way to Rivki had passed; the night was still. Even the crowd had gone quiet.

Katerina regarded the fires, her mind churning. Rowan-smoke was toxic to Grigori. The trees' fire granted the demons a true death, as did Shadows' blessed blades and their bite, in the form of the black dogs they could take at will. But there could be no demons here, not inside the most powerfully warded spot in all of Iriska. Rivki was protected by the Druzhina and surrounded by a moat where the Vodyanoy lurked, poised to devour any Grigori foolish enough to try to cross the bridge. So why the fire? Was it merely a symbol, or did it portend something more?

The arena was too silent, too empty. If a threat lurked here, it was invisible. How was she meant to defend herself against something she couldn't see?

The other six Dimi and Shadow pairings spread out, giving themselves room to fight. Katerina kept a careful eye on Trina and Fyodor, thirty feet away. On their right stood Sofi and Damien, her Shadow. As Katerina's gaze swept over them, Sofi gave her a small, tense smile. Outside the arena, the two were her friends, sworn to fight beside her and Niko. But now, the Kniaz had made adversaries out of them. For while they wouldn't be fighting each other hand-to-hand, there was plenty of room for subversive tactics and sabotage.

Katerina wished she could tell Sofi the truth about what she could do. She wished she could explain that she'd rather be eaten by the Vodyanoy than serve in the Druzhina. But instead she just smiled back, her gaze narrowing as the door on the other side of the arena creaked open.

Sand crunched beneath Niko's boots as he shifted his weight, his right hand falling to the blade he favored. "There's something unnatural inside there," he whispered. "Not human, not demon. Katerina, I don't know?—"

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His voice disappeared beneath the roar of the crowd as the door eased the rest of the way open and a man strolled through, hands open at his sides. His dark hair was cropped short, his face clean-shaven. He wore a forest-green tunic and slim black pants, the picture of a fashionable gentleman. Katerina had seen many just like him in Rivki's Perun District, dining at establishments far fancier than any to be found in Kalach.

The direction of the wind changed, blowing the sharp-edged, resinous fumes of the rowan-fires toward the man. He coughed, the sound carrying across the arena, and Katerina stiffened. On either side of her, the other Dimis and Shadows did the same.

"Demon," she said, watching in horror as the doorway behind him filled with more and more of his kind—twenty men and women clad in richly dyed fabric. Grigori were shapeshifters, able to take on the forms of whoever they chose; it was part of what made them so lethal. But if they'd penetrated the capital, surely the Druzhina wouldn't just let them loose in the arena for the sake of the Trials. Would they?

Her power rose, buzzing in her fingertips, as the demons fanned out behind their leader, with him as the tip of their arrow. "Niko," she said, her voice urgent.

Her Shadow drew a deep breath as the wind changed again, sampling the creatures' scents. "Not true demons," he said grimly. "Illusions of some kind. But," he finished as all twenty of the false Grigori drew blades, "dangerous nonetheless."

There was no time for Katerina to wonder what sort of strange magic this was, or whether the blades the illusions carried had been bathed with the Grigori venom that was fatal to a Shadow in human form. Because as the crowd bellowed in anticipation,

the demons' leader raised a hand, beckoning, and all of the creatures charged.

5

KATERINA

The familiar coldness of battle settled over Katerina, the world coming to her in fragments: A yellow-haired illusion-demon barreling toward her, teeth bared and blade clenched. The rumbling growl of her Shadow as he braced himself in front of her, palming two of his knives. The sizzle of her magic beneath her skin, begging to be used.

She could see the colored threads that connected her to each of her gifts so clearly. It would be easy for her to collapse the ground as the illusion-woman arrowed toward her Shadow, to summon the wind and send her hurtling backward. But no. You are a firewitch, she thought grimly, and prepared herself to burn.

The woman neared and Niko pinched one of his blades by the tip, arm poised to hurl it. Another step and he let it fly, the silver gleaming in the light of the Bone Moon as it winnowed straight for her. But the moment before it struck, a gust blasted from the left, where Trina stood. It sent Niko's blade tumbling end over end, embedding uselessly in the sand. Never breaking her stride, the illusion-woman snatched it up, lips rising in a mirthless smile. And behind her came five more of her kind, eyes lit with a sick avidity.

By the Saints, how had Rivki's Dimis done this? They were all taught basic charms from the cradle: how to summon shadow to conceal themselves, how to make a small light bloom and cup it in their hands. But this magic—conjuring illusion-demons—was unlike anything Katerina had ever seen. It must have taken the scholars at the Magiya Library months to discover the trick behind such a thing.

A howl rose from Katerina's right, where Roksana Gaidar and her Shadow battled two of the creatures at once. Dimi Gaidar was a waterwitch, a skill that did her little good in this arena filled with sand and rowan-fire. She would have to rely on her Shadow to fight, and he was falling, two of the illusion-creatures wrestling him to the ground. His body shimmered as he struggled to shift into the form of his black dog, but it was too late: One of them drew back its lips and sank its teeth into his neck, just as the other plunged a blade into his side. He let out a roar that shook the arena's walls, and Roksana shrieked, the sound so full of fear and rage that it momentarily froze the illusions charging at Niko and Katerina. As one, they turned their heads toward the melee, just in time to see the fallen Shadow cough up a horrifying amount of foamy blood. His eyes glazed over, staring sightless up at the moon-bleached sky.

Venom, Katerina sent to Niko along their bond, horror clear in her mind-voice, the way they were only able to communicate in battle. Its teeth—the blade?—

I know. He pinched another knife by the tip. We will not die in this arena, Katerina. Firewitch or no, we will not die tonight.

The conviction in his voice galvanized Katerina. She moved to his side and raised her hands, concentrating on the center of the horde that had unfrozen and was sprinting toward them at inhuman speed. If they bite and stab like Grigori, then they candle like them, she told Niko, and let her witchfire free. It might not be able to kill them, but it should wound them long enough for Katerina to get her hands on a limb from one of the rowan-fires. Saints, how she wished she could harness the wind right now.

Her witchfire streaked from her palms in a focused stream, hitting the yellow-haired illusion at the tip of the horde just as Niko's blade found its home in the heart of the one behind her. A ululating cry ripped from Katerina's throat as she concentrated on splitting the stream, turning each strand into a flame-tipped missile. The illusions bellowed in agony as they caught fire, their forms flickering within the blaze until, with a crack that shook the ground, they exploded, sparks scattering in all directions.

A complex rune shone where they had been, as if burnt into the very air of the night. Then it, too, vanished. Their blades clattered to the ground, and Niko dove for them, holstering them before another one of the illusions could use them against a Shadow. Not entirely like Grigori, then, he said.

The six that had come after her and Niko were dead. But a few feet away, Roksana was sobbing, kneeling in the sand next to her fallen Shadow, her palm pressed to the Mark on his upper arm as she begged him over and over to come back to her. Sunk in grief, she didn't so much as lift her head as two of the four creatures that Sofi and Damien were battling broke away from them and scuttled straight for Roksana, each gripping a venom-soaked blade.

Katerina spared a glance for Niko, but he had spun to battle another one of the illusions. If she wanted to save her fellow Dimi, she was on her own. And so she did the only thing she could think of: she screamed.

“Hey!” Waving her hands above her head, she made herself as large of a target as possible, desperate to focus the illusions' attention on her rather than Roksana. “I'm right here. Don't you want me?”

She let a hint of flame seep from her fingertips, tracing a thin stream of fire along the sand—a path guiding them straight to where she stood. “Imagine how much more there is where this came from,” she taunted, just as she would if they were fighting a true demon horde. “Think how much you'll enjoy absorbing all of this power, how much stronger you'll be. How delicious I'll taste. Wouldn't you rather feed on my fire than her fear?”

She wasn't sure if the illusions were sentient enough to understand her, but sure enough, their heads cocked an instant before they changed trajectory, skirting Roksana and coming straight towards Katerina. She gathered her power, feeling it pulse in her palms. It took more effort than she liked to separate the strand that

controlled her witchfire from the rest, but she managed it. Not yet, she told herself. Wait for it... wait...

Behind her, she heard a grunt and then a tearing sound as a blade sank deep into flesh. Her heart sped in terror. But when she dared to test her bond with Niko, she felt not pain, thank the Saints, but satisfaction at his kill, colored with anger that she'd put herself in harm's way. This is not a rescue mission, he snarled at her.

Trust me, she sent along their bond, but didn't pause to hear his reply. The two illusion-demons charged, and she waited until they were a foot away before igniting them, close enough that a hint of her own witchfire caressed her skin. The demons howled as they burned, fragmenting just as their counterparts had, the same rune burnt into the fabric of the night.

But as they dissipated, yet another one of the damnable illusions charged for Roksana. The other Dimi was on her feet now, yanking one of her Shadow's blades out of its holster. Unlike in Kalach, where Dimis trained hand-to-hand alongside their Shadows, in Satvala they had no such practice. Roksana's blade went wide, thunking into the sand far to the left of its mark. The illusion-demon came for her, and before Katerina could stop it, the creature let its own blade fly.

A venom-soaked blade was not inherently fatal to a Dimi, the way it was to a Shadow in human form. But when plunged into a Dimi's heart, it could kill just the same. Roksana's eyes flared wide, her mouth a soundless o of agony. Katerina watched in horror as the other Dimi's lifeless body toppled, landing across her Shadow's so that he broke her fall, even in death. The illusion wrenched its blade free with as much indifference as if it had stabbed a hunk of beef and then came for Katerina, laughing.

One instant, the two of them faced each other, fire sparking from Katerina's fingertips. The next, a massive black dog hurtled between them, sharp canines bared. Clamping his powerful jaws on his prey's neck, Niko shook the illusion-demon,

muscles rippling beneath his glossy fur. The creature shrieked, writhing, as the scent of demon blood filled the air—then evaporated. Niko's razor-sharp canines grazed the tip of the rune that had powered the illusion a moment before it, too, vanished. He howled in victory, turning his head to make sure Katerina was unharmed even though she knew he could feel as much through their bond.

She shot him a reassuring glance, then shoved her sweat-matted hair back from her forehead and surveyed the arena. She and Niko had slain half of the illusion-demons. Sofi and Damien were battling two more. Halfway across the arena, Fyodor lunged in front of Trina and sank his black dog's teeth into the belly of one of the illusions. Blood and flesh sprayed onto the sand, and the creature shrieked, the awful rending of metal on metal.

Four of their fellow warriors had fallen. The Dimis and Shadows of Liski, Voronezh, and Bobrov were on their feet butfighting for their lives, the Shadows engaged in close combat with all six of the remaining illusion-demons as the Dimis' magic flared, gusts of wind driving the rowan-fires skyward, tongues of flame licking at the illusions' skin.

Dimi Nevolin of Bobrov was an earthwitch—for the love of the Saints, why did she not open a pit in the arena and dump these forsaken creatures in? Maybe the woman was frightened. Maybe she just wasn't used to fighting without her fellow Dimis and their Shadows by her side. Either way, Katerina's heart sank as Nevolin toppled beneath one of the illusions' blades, her Shadow leaping for her in time only to have three of the creatures fall upon him. The crowd caterwauled, and money changed hands, as if this were no more than a horse race. Bastards.

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Niko prowled to her side, leaving bloody pawprints on the sand, as Trina raised her hands and sent witchwind hurtling at four of the illusions. They stumbled backward, snarling—and then sailed across the arena, skidding to a halt mere feet from Katerina. Across the expanse of sand, Trina met her eyes and smirked. She carved a hand through the air, evoking a second blast of wind that sent Niko flying.

The illusion-demons found their feet and crouched, assessing Katerina. She stared back at them, power brewing within her, a gathering storm. Niko roared with rage, struggling against Trina's witchwind as he fought to get to her, but the other Dimi held him back, gale-force winds whipping the sand into a maelstrom that obscured Katerina's vision. She scrubbed at her stinging eyes, forcing them open enough to see the illusions advancing, venom-soaked blades gripped in their hands. They surrounded her, a circle of knives and teeth and vitriol.

I'll kill her. Niko's mind-voice came, ice-cold with wrath. Her corpse will lie at your feet.

Promises, promises, Katerina told him. And then she struck.

Drawing on the well of her power, she hauled the strand of fire up, up, up, pouring her energy into it until it curled around the charging illusion-demons, forging flaming vines that wrapped ever-closer, binding them. The yells of the crowd grew louder, competing with the crackle of the conflagration she'd ignited, but Katerina had no time to listen. All her attention was fixed on the flame-vines tightening around the illusions, choking the life out of them.

Beyond the burning demons and the swirling sand, she could just make out Trina's

face. The other Dimi's eyes widened with disbelief an instant before they narrowed in calculation. And then her mouth lifted in a smile so malicious, it could only mean one thing.

Its outline visible through the haze of sand and flame, a black-clad form streaked straight for Niko, clutching a blade in each hand. These were the demons' knives, the hilts a dull, uniform maroon rather than the rune-engraved onyx that topped Shadows' blades. And yet, Katerina realized as bone-deep rage broke over her, it was a Shadow who wielded them.

Fyodor, in human form once more.

Trina had not only separated Katerina from her Shadow to weaken her. She had done it to isolate Niko while the other illusion-demons sought their quarry. Sofi and Damien couldn't break free to help him, and the pairings from Liski and Voronezh were too far away to help, even if they would. The two remaining illusions had seized upon them as the weakest of the survivors, crowding them against the wall of the arena even as the Dimis and Shadows, half in human form and half in the form of their black dogs, sought to bring them down.

Don't shift, she cried out to Niko. He has their knives?—

But it was too late. Her Shadow had already shifted back into human form, the better to fight from a distance. He'd managed to reclaim his blades—and his leathers, minimizing his exposed skin—but if Fyodor so much as nicked him, here in the arena without antivenin...

By the Saints. Trina could do what she liked to Katerina, but she would never touch Niko, with her Shadow's hands or her own. Katerina would see her dead first.

She drew one burning breath, then another. The world slowed to a series of images

once more: The illusions screaming as they burned. Damien snapping his prey's neck and running to Niko's aid, all four of his midnight-black paws pounding the ground, sand skidding in his wake and blood spraying from his jaws. The crowd on their feet, stomping and hollering. Trina laughing, Saints damn her, head thrown back and dark hair flying in the wake of her witchwind. Her own power, gathering inexorably in her chest and forking through every vein like lightning.

This wasn't just her witchfire. It was everything: her four gifts offering themselves up, desperate to be channeled in the service of saving her Shadow. To use them would mean putting herself on display, stepping into the full strength of her power in front of the Kniaz, the Druzhina, and all of Rivki. If she were caught, everyone who'd known what she was capable of and kept her secret would be accused of committing treason against the realm. It was wrong, and rash, and dangerous.

But Katerina would do far worse, if it meant Niko lived.

She inhaled. Exhaled. And set her power free.

Her gifts snaked beneath the earth, seeking Fyodor, spreading fire as they went. Imbued by her power, the sand heated degree by degree, as incandescent as her fury. She fed her rage into the earth and the earth answered, rising and shaking and shimmering and fusing as Katerina's witchfire transformed it at last to glass. It shattered beneath the illusion-demons, leaving them writhing aflame in midair, then splintered under Fyodor's feet.

He tried to leap away, to dodge, but she wrapped her witchwind around him and propelled him toward her, straight through the flame-broiling demons. They winked out of existence, leaving fire-edged runes behind, just as he slid to a stop at her feet, bleeding and burning, his venom-laced blades still clutched in his hands and a look of incredulous hatred on his face.

“Surprise,” Katerina said sweetly, and bent down to pluck the blades free.

Abject misery warred with dizzying relief as she and Niko sought their place in line with the surviving Shadows and Dimis.

This was exactly what Baba had feared. With Niko’s life on the line, Katerina had done what she’d sworn she wouldn’t: lose control. Her love for him had already made a liar out of her; now it had made her break her word and betray her home into the bargain.

She wasn’t sorry. And yet, she shouldn’t have done it.

True, the burning demons had formed a wall of flame between Fyodor and the Kniaz, hopefully blocking the nobleman’s view. And with luck, Fyodor’s burns could be attributed to the wrath of a firewitch whose Shadow was in mortal danger. The cracking earth could be blamed on heat alone, the wind on Trina Samarin. But in the moment, Katerina had been thinking of none of that. All that had mattered was that she save her Shadow, Kalach and her vow to Baba Petrova be damned.

Regret forged a lump in her throat. “Niko,” she whispered, “I’m sorry. I should have told you. I shouldn’t have?—”

He tilted his head to look down at her, his gaze impenetrable. Try as she might, she couldn’t make out what was going on behind his slate-gray eyes. “Not now, Katerina.”

She wanted to demand to know what he was thinking. To have the same access to his thoughts as she did when they fought side by side. But all she could do was nod in tacit agreement as they strode across the bloodied sand of the arena, sidestepping the bodies of the fallen Dimis and Shadows. It was better that they both lived, was it not, no matter the price? They could fight later. At least they would be alive to argue.

The crowd was eerily silent as Dimi Novikova, head of the Druzhina, stood from her place at the Kniaz's right hand. "Ten survive," she declared, her witchwind carrying her voice across the arena. "Four have fallen. We commend their souls to the Saints and pray for their deliverance to the Light."

A murmur of acceptance rose from the crowd, quieting as Dimi Novikova spoke again. "Come forward, Dimis and Shadows of Iriska's villages. Stand before us and face your verdict."

Terror flashed through Katerina's body, as potent and lethal as her magic. There was no coming back from this. One by one, Dimi Novikova would call their names. And then, when they all stood in front of the Kniaz, he would make his choice.

She glanced left and right, at the other Shadows and Dimis. Their bodies were taut with anticipation, their gazes fixed on Dimi Novikova. All of them would do anything, sacrifice anything, to be chosen today. And Katerina would do anything to be passed over.

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Her hands shook, and she balled them into fists to hide their trembling. She had made her decision, the moment she prioritized saving Niko above all else. Now she would have to live with the consequences, no matter how grave they might be.

Dimi Novikova pointed at the furrowed stretch of sand in front of the cordoned-off area where the Kniaz and the Druzhina sat. “First, I call Dimi Oglievich of Drezna and her Shadow.”

Head held high, Sofi limped forward, Damien at her side, in human form. The left leg of her fighting leathers was dark with blood, but her expression revealed no pain.

“I call Dimi Samarin of Povorino and her Shadow!” Novikova pointed at the spot to Damien’s right, and Trina marched forward, her despicable excuse for a Shadow at her side.

“I call Dimi Ivanova of Kalach and her Shadow!”

Katerina followed the line of Dimi Novikova’s finger. She was pointing at the spot right next to Fyodor, because...of course she was. Was this a further test, to see if Katerina could stand at his right without either getting stabbed or burning him to ashes?

Either way, she had no choice. Niko at her side, she walked forward, taking her place. Fyodor stared straight ahead, not sparing her a glance, burns marking every visible inch of his bronze skin. Good: let him suffer. He lived, which was more than he’d intended for her Shadow.

“Dimi Fenenko of Liski and her Shadow!” Novikova called. “Dimi Essen and her Shadow, of Voronezh!”

When they all stood for inspection, some in worse shape than others, the Kniaz rose to his feet, smiling. “Citizens of Rivki!” He raised both hands to the sky, as if embracing the waxing Bone Moon. “Tonight, we have indeed witnessed marvelous things. Yes, some have fallen, but better now than when Iriska’s existence depends on it. And those who have risen to the occasion have done so with great aplomb.”

He paused, and Katerina suppressed a shudder. Surely it was her imagination that his gaze lingered on her...unless, of course, he’d seen the truth of what she’d done. A tremor ran through her, and she steeled her spine, refusing to show fear.

“It is my great pleasure to announce the victors of this year’s Bone Trials!” the Kniaz bellowed, and the crowd erupted, stomping their feet and rattling the shell-shakers they’d bought from the street-vendors outside the arena’s walls.

“Silence!” Dimi Novikova’s voice boomed, amplified by her witchwind. The arena fell quiet, and Katerina held her breath, praying as she had never prayed before.

“The first victors of this year’s Bone Trials, bound to return for next year’s competition and a chance to join the ranks of the Druzhina, are”—the Kniaz paused for effect—“Dimi Oglovich and Shadow Tikhomirov, of Drezna!”

Sofi’s face paled, going white as the face of the moon with excitement, before she seized Damien’s hand. She stepped forward, lifting their joined hands high in triumph, and the crowd roared. As Sofi and Damien stepped back into line, Katerina shot them a small smile. It felt false, dredged from the depths of her being, but—this was what Sofi wanted. They’d talked about it often enough, when Katerina and Niko stopped in Drezna to break their ride to and from Kalach.

Besides, the Trials only called for two victors. Maybe three, if the Kniaz felt taken enough with a third pairing, but that was rare. Sofi's triumph was Katerina's, as well.

The Kniaz cleared his throat. "I am proud to announce the second victors of this year's Bone Trials. May I present to you"—he swept his hand wide—"Dimi Samarin and Shadow Makarov, of Povorino!"

Trina stepped forward, gripping Fyodor's hand, her Shadow flinching as her fingers closed around his burned flesh. It was a small gesture, squelched as quickly as it appeared, but Katerina saw it nonetheless, and hid her smile.

That was two, she thought as Trina and Fyodor stepped back into line. The other Dimi aimed a gloating look at Katerina, but she was too dizzy with relief to care. Maybe the burning demons had been enough of a distraction from the way the earth had buckled and the wind had shifted, sending Fyodor hurtling into the flames. Maybe she had pulled it off, just another Dimi from a border village who was strong enough to survive but not good enough to warrant anything more.

She waited for the Kniaz to dismiss the rest of them, for the crowd to boo and hiss as they filed out of the arena. It would be an insult to her pride and Niko's, but there were worse things. Her Shadow could yell at her all he wanted later, for keeping secrets and compromising their village to save his life. All that mattered was that they go home, returning only to deliver the tithe.

Iriska's ruler regarded the line of Dimis and Shadows, his dark brows lowered and his expression grave. One by one, his gaze lingered on each of them. And then he spoke.

"As the third victors of this year's Bone Trials, I name Dimi Ivanova and Shadow Alekhin, of Kalach."

KATERINA

The blood drained from Katerina's face. Next to her, Niko gave a low growl, so quiet that if Katerina hadn't felt its vibration, she might not have noticed it at all. It was his warning growl, meant to herald impending danger.

Every eye on the crowd was on her, including the Kniaz's and the Druzhina's. This was supposed to be an honor, not a nightmare. She had to act like it.

She straightened her spine, letting a small smile lift her lips, as if this were no more than her due. On her left, Trina gave an angry, disbelieving snort, and Katerina cut her eyes at the other Dimi. "So much for choking on your dust," she said, just loud enough for Trina to hear.

The look Trina leveled her with was murderous, but Katerina ignored it, fixing her gaze firmly on the Kniaz. Trina Samarin was the least of her problems.

She had let Baba Petrova down. Regardless of whether the Kniaz had seen the extent of what she'd done, she had performed too well. She'd lied, failed to be the mediocre Dimi she'd promised to be, and with it, she'd endangered Kalach. Who knew how bad the growing Grigori threat might be a year from now, by the time of the second round of Trials and the Reaping? Katerina and her Shadow were Kalach's best hope of protection, and now her carelessness might have doomed them all.

Shame flushed her face, and Niko growled again, this time responding to the upward tick of her heartbeat. His hand closed around hers, the fingertips rough from years of bladework, and he pulled her forward, raising their joined hands in a gesture of triumph.

The crowd rose to their feet, roaring in approval, but the Druzhina didn't cheer. Flanking the Kniaz, they regarded Niko and Katerina with identical grim expressions.

Katerina couldn't blame them: if she and Niko succeeded at the Trials next year, they would be Reaped, unseating one of the Druzhina pairings. Katerina was just making enemies left and right today.

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Niko lowered their joined hands, tugging Katerina back into line. He relinquished his grip, and she missed his touch. He grounded her, and she needed that right now, badly.

If anyone had seen through to the truth of what she'd done, it would be the Druzhina. And now, she had to face them. What would they do to her? Reap her and Niko on the spot? Haul them both away? Send riders to Kalach to punish Baba and the rest?

Nausea swept Katerina at the thought, and she had to fight to keep a poker face as the two pairings who had failed the Trials were dismissed. They filed out of the arena, heads lowered. The hunch of their shoulders and the slant of their backs broadcasted shame, and a part of Katerina was grateful not to be among their ranks, even though she mourned the loss of control that had led her here. How could she regret it, though, if it meant Niko lived?

How could she not?

The crowd began to filter down through the amphitheater, streaming toward the doors carved into the stone. The victors would have to wait until the arena had emptied, then pay their respects to the Druzhina and the Kniaz. Baba Petrova had drilled the protocol into Katerina, just in case. She knew the names of each of the Guard and their abilities, who saw eye contact as an insult and who demanded to be the first to initiate a handshake. She knew that she had to curtsy to the Kniaz, whereas Niko had to bow. What she didn't know was how to reconcile her failure with Kalach's survival. What would she do if the Druzhina saw right through her?

Katerina stood, her stomach churning, as she watched the crowd file out. The Kniaz

rose, making his way down onto the floor of the arena with his consort, and the Druzhina followed. They formed a receiving line, each of the fifty Shadow and Dimi pairs facing each other. Trina and Fyodor turned, the closest and thus the first to make their way toward the waiting Guard, and Katerina and Niko followed, Sofi and Damien on their heels.

When it was their turn, Katerina stepped forward to greet the head of the Druzhina, holding her breath. “Dimi Novikova,” she said, inclining her head in a gesture of respect.

After a long, tense moment, the older Dimi nodded back at her, the slightest brush of her witchwind brushing Katerina’s hand in greeting. Katerina let a hint of her witchfire rise in response, the other Dimi’s wind feeding it. Then she closed her hand around the flame, extinguishing it as Baba had taught her.

Dimi Novikova didn’t smile at Katerina, or welcome her to Rivki. But she didn’t demand to know why Katerina possessed the ability to buckle the earth or call the wind, either. Katerina’s chest expanded with a deep, relieved breath. Had she gotten away with it, after all?

Turning from the older Dimi, she moved through the receiving line, Niko behind her. None of them spoke to her beyond what politeness required, but to her chagrin, Shadow Berezin began interrogating Niko about a particular bit of clever bladework. She had no choice but to leave him and move forward, fearing exposure with each step and craving the security of having her Shadow at her back, until at last she cleared the gauntlet and felt her pulse slow.

But her relief was short-lived as she came face-to-face with Kniaz Sergey, eyeing her like he’d like to undress her right here on the sand; and his consort, glaring as if she’d take great pleasure in stabbing Katerina through the heart.

KATERINA

“Your Grace,” Katerina said, sinking low into a curtsy, just as Baba had instructed her. “Dimi Zakharova.”

She’d seen the Kniaz many times before, of course, when she’d taken her turn delivering the tithe. But then, he’d always been seated on his throne, giving her no more than an imperious nod as she and Niko knelt and placed a ceremonial bushel of wheat at his feet. Katerina hated that the nobleman demanded such a thing from them, just as he did from the other six villages in Iriska: oil from one, firewood from another, potatoes from a third. She hated him.

Now here he was, right in front of her, close enough to incinerate with a thought. And instead, she had to act as if he’d just bestowed the greatest honor imaginable upon her.

She fixed her eyes on his silver-buckled shoes, engraved with runes of safety and protection, waiting for permission to stand. As much as it galled her to bend to him, it was a thousand times better than being hauled away for treason to the realm.

“Rise, Dimi Ivanova.” The Kniaz’s voice was as imperious as always, laced with Rivki’s distinctive accent: clipped vowels, a slight roll to the letter ‘r.’

Katerina obeyed, taking him in: white stockings, woven with silver runes; black breeches; a fine, brocade cobalt coat; jeweled rings winking from every finger. She met his eyes at last, onyx, deep-set orbs that contrasted with the pale skin of his face, like ink spilled on bone china. They sparkled in the light of the Bone Moon, bright with cunning.

“You know my esteemed consort by name, I see,” Kniaz Sergey said, waving an indolent hand at Dimi Zakharova. “But have you two had the pleasure of meeting?”

“We have not,” Katerina said, glancing sideways at the woman who stood by the Kniaz’s side. She was an earthwitch, everyone knew that. It was beyond Katerina why she would allow the Kniaz to leash her, to dress her in blue velvet to match his waistcoat and parade her about like a pet. But the last thing she wished to do was offend either of them, not when she had so much to lose. “It is my pleasure.”

“Is it?” Dimi Zakharova said, her nostrils flaring as if she smelled something foul. Perhaps she did, come to think of it; Katerina probably stank of ashes and sweat. Well, that was nothing to be ashamed of. She squared her shoulders and met the other Dimi’s gaze head-on.

“You tell me,” she said, giving her most innocuous smile. “I certainly hope so.”

The Kniaz waved his bejeweled hand again, dispelling the rising tension between them. “Now, now. The battle is over, and it’s time for more enjoyable things. I must say, you performed admirably today, Dimi Ivanova. Should you do the same at the second round of the Trials next year, I’ll look forward to the moment when you call our fair city home.” He tilted his head, a sparrow eyeing the first juicy worm of spring. “Tell me, will you be bringing an entourage, or will it merely be you and your Shadow?”

“I beg your pardon? Your Grace,” she added hurriedly as Dimi Zakharova frowned.

“Are you...attached?” His gaze flickered over her, lingering on hips and waist and breasts, and Katerina swallowed back the retort that rose to her lips.

“If you mean, am I promised to another, Your Grace, then the answer is no.” Unlike a Shadow, she had the right to choose her own mate: a strong man who would share her

bed, get her with child, and continue the Dimi line. Konstantin, maybe. Or Maksim. Both citizens of Kalach were tall and handsome, with land to their name. Though she didn't love them—had barely spoken to either of them—the time was coming when she'd have to decide.

Katerina had no interest in Konstantin or Maxim. Her heart belonged to another. But right now, she'd rather be wed to either of them than endure the insolent way the Kniaz's gaze slid over her, as if he were touching her with his hands rather than his eyes. Next to him, Dimi Zakharova stiffened, the hostility in her expression intensifying.

"Excellent, excellent." Kniaz Sergey rubbed his palms together with glee. "And your Shadow?" He nodded at Niko, who had freed himself from Shadow Berezin but was still paying his respects to the remaining Druzhina in turn. "Does he have a lovely Vila back home? For if not, the selection in Rivki is grand indeed. He'd have his pick of the litter." He gestured to the second level of the amphitheater, where a group of women fluttered like butterflies, adorned with jewels and arrayed in brightly colored, ornate gowns.

Katerina had no particular affinity for Vila in general, and Elena in particular. Beyond her obsession with Niko, Elena's fanaticism about following the will of the Saints to the letter drove Katerina mad. Still, her chest tightened at the indifferent way the Kniaz spoke of the Vila, as if they were chattel rather than individuals with thoughts and opinions of their own. She didn't trust herself to speak, but luckily, he mistook her indignant silence for awe.

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“They may be mere broodmares, but they’re lovely to look at, are they not?” he said. “They’ll be lining up for a handsome, powerful Shadow like yours. Unless he has another?”

The only thing she wanted to think less about than being the Kniaz’s plaything was this. It was bad enough that Niko was to marry Elena. But watching her bear his children? That might actually kill Katerina.

“My Shadow will be betrothed to his Vila when the Bone Moon is full, three nights hence,” she said, raising her chin. “Alas, the Vila of Rivki Island will be safe from his advances, long may they weep.”

Kniaz Sergey stared at her for a long moment, as if he’d never seen anything quite like her. Then he began to laugh. He chuckled until his eyes ran with water and he had to wipe them with his brocade sleeve. The harder he guffawed, the more Dimi Zakharova’s glare intensified, and Katerina shot her a hard look. What was her Saints-damned problem?

“I like you, Dimi Ivanova,” he said at last. “You surprise me, which is a rare thing. As for your talented Shadow, here he comes now.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Katerina muttered under her breath, a smile plastered on her face as Niko bowed to the last of the Druzhina and strode toward her.

He came to a halt by her side, flashing her a quizzical look before he bowed to the Kniaz and his consort in turn. “Your Grace,” he said with impeccable politeness. “Dimi Zakharova.”

As they exchanged pleasantries, Katerina caught the other Dimi's gaze, flicking back and forth between her and Niko. Under other circumstances, she'd demand that the woman speak. But here and now, she was afraid she didn't want to hear what Dimi Zakharova had to say. Fear gripped her heart, its tendrils wrapping ever-tighter. What had the woman seen?

There were secrets, and then there were secrets. And some were never meant to be told.

Next to her, Niko cleared his throat, and she forced herself to focus. Sofi and Damien had come to the end of the receiving line and were waiting for their audience with the Kniaz. The other Dimi signed to her Shadow, hands flying as she communicated whatever she wanted to say, in case Kniaz Sergey or Dimi Zakharova couldn't understand. Katerina stood at the wrong angle to catch every word, but she could see grateful and proud to fight for Iriska clearly enough.

Katerina was the grateful one. Because thank the Saints, with Sofi and Damien right there, it was time for her and Niko to go.

"I look forward to seeing your performance in next year's Trials," Kniaz Sergey said, clapping Niko on the back as if they were old friends. "In the meantime, make the most of our hospitality, won't you? You're not betrothed yet, after all." He winked at Niko, letting his gaze wander to the flock of twittering Vila.

To his credit, Niko managed to keep his expression stoic—although for all Katerina knew, he was planning to end the evening with a Vila-themed bacchanalia. After a battle, Shadows were well known to seek release in a bed or a bottle...not that she and Niko ever discussed such things.

And we won't start now, she told herself sternly. What he does when he's not fighting by your side is none of your business, Katerina. Pull yourself together.

That would be a lot easier if adrenaline weren't still whipping through her body, demanding release. Back in Kalach, she'd seek peace in her favorite elderflower clearing or else light something on fire. But here, no such option was open to her. Maybeshe wasthe one who should find solace in someone's bed tonight. If only she could stomach the thought.

Niko was her Shadow, sworn to stand by her side, the other half of her soul. But in private, she'd always called him her Lightbringer—her best friend, the boy who knew her better than anyone else, who could always make her laugh and lead her out of her own personal darkness. It was a lethal combination, and she couldn't imagine anyone would ever measure up.

She stole a sideways glance at him as they walked from the arena, but he was looking straight ahead, his expression impassive. They stepped onto the path that cut beneath the seating area, paved with red stones forged in Povorino's lava fields and shipped to Rivki at great expense, and still he said not a word. Stubbornly, neither did she.

The path widened, connecting with Maripol Avenue. The street was abuzz: vendors hawking their wares, children waving orange streamers meant to simulate witchfire, gamblers' money changing hands. Katerina drew a deep breath, taking in the welcoming scent of vareniki dumplings, her favorite. She didn't have any coins on her, but perhaps she could charm one of the people who'd bet on her into buying her some. Tilting her head, she scanned the crowd.

"There will be plenty to eat at the feast," Niko said, breaking his silence at last.

Her gaze snapped to his, vareniki forgotten. "Oh, so now you can talk?"

"What do you want me to say, Katerina?" His voice was laced with a weariness that tore at her heart. "WhatcanI say, that's not going to start a fight?"

“How about what you’re thinking? That would be a start!” She kept her voice low, so as not to be overheard despite the chaos of the crowd. “Tell me you’re angry with me. That I might have ruined everything. That I lost control of my magic. That you’re ashamed of me?—”

He took hold of her upper arms, spinning her to face him. “Never say that again. I am not, nor will I ever be, ashamed of you, my Dimi. I am honored to fight at your side.”

She peered up at him, biting her lip. “Then?—”

His head lowered, the words a whisper against the shell of her ear. The heat of his breath sent a shiver through her entire body. “You didn’t lose control. You fought for me, as your instincts demanded. But...” He drew back to look at her face. “You kept the truth from me, Katerina. Baba never bound your magic at all, did she? What happened with the bridge at kohannya—that was you.”

Katerina drew a deep, shaky breath. Then, she nodded.

Her Shadow’s eyes widened, the moonlight falling full on his face. He ran an absent-minded fingertip over his scar, the way he did when truly troubled. “But...why?”

This close to him, with his black dog able to pick up every shift in her scent and fluctuation in her heartbeat, she couldn’t lie. So instead, she settled for a partial truth. “The longer we stayed, the more scared I was that Baba would figure out the spell hadn’t worked. When she tried to bind me...” She shuddered all over at the memory. “It was like I was being torn apart. I couldn’t go through that again.”

His eyes scanned her face, as if trying to figure out what she’d left unsaid. She couldn’t help it; her pulse sped in response, imagining what he would say if she shared the rest: It was breaking me to watch you with Elena. A minute longer, and I would’ve shattered.

“I understand that part,” he said at last. “Watching you suffer—I couldn’t do that twice, either. But Katerina...after we left, why did you not tell me?”

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The hurt in his voice pierced her. “I wanted to, Niko. I did. But I didn’t want to ask you to keep that kind of secret.” Her voice broke. “And if something went wrong—like it did tonight—I wanted you to be able to say you didn’t know.”

Niko’s hands slid up to her shoulders, gripping them like he had in Baba’s cottage. This time, though, he shook her, hard enough that her head came up and she glared at him. “I trust you with my life, Katerina. You trust me with yours. But you don’t think I’m worthy of being trusted with the truth?”

A sarcastic retort bubbled up, but she bit it back when she saw the pain in his eyes. “You’re right,” she said, making an effort to sound humble. “I’m sorry.”

His gaze softened. “I know what you were doing. Trying to protect me, like you always do. Like you did in the arena. But we’re meant to be partners, Katerina. And of the two of us, I’m the one who vowed to stand between you and the Darkness, to lay my life at your feet.”

Katerina swallowed hard. “I tried to keep my powers leashed,” she said, her voice a whisper. “If Fyodor hadn’t come for you, I could have done it, Niko. I swear I could have. I didn’t mean to be thoughtless, or to endanger Kalach?—”

“Hush.” His grip on her shoulders loosened. “What Baba tried to force on you was unnatural. Your magic is as much a part of you as your hair”—his fingers ghosted over her red waves, freed from their braid and matted with dust—“or your incorrigible attitude. Binding ceremony aside, it’s no surprise it broke free when you thought my life was threatened.”

“So you’re not mad,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

He tucked a rogue curl behind her ear, shaking his head in exasperation when it sprang free again. “Not in the way you mean. What I care about is you, do you understand? You thought you had to bear this secret alone. Now you’ve added your guilt for what happened in the arena to the bargain. And that’s what I can’t stand.”

Katerina’s eyes burned, and she sought some way—any way—to lighten the mood, before he saw too much. “Really,” she said, struggling to keep her voice light. “That’s all?”

His lips rose in the half-teasing smile she’d always loved. “Well, that, and the idea that you thought that you needed to intervene on my behalf. Seriously, Katerina. You don’t think I could’ve taken that joke of a Shadow on my own? In this form or the form of my black dog, he’s nothing more than an inconvenient snack.” He snapped his teeth near her ear, and she smiled, as she knew he’d intended her to do.

“There,” he said softly, taking a step back. “That’s more like it. Now, let’s go get changed for the feast, my Dimi. You can eat vareniki to your heart’s content. Maybe even hurl some at the Kniaz’s head, if he says something that tests the limits of your patience.”

“As if I would do such a thing,” Katerina said, but she was still smiling.

He took her by the shoulders again, turning her and then carving a path for both of them through the crowd, which parted for him like butter before a knife. They fell silent once again as they made their way to the grandiose inn where the visiting Shadows and Dimis were staying, but this time it was companionable rather than strained.

Inside the high-ceilinged hallway of the inn’s foyer, Niko paused at the foot of the

winding staircase. His room was on the first floor, whereas Katerina's was on the second. At home, he slept on a quilt in front of the hearth of their shared cottage. She wasn't used to having him so far away, but perhaps this was good practice. Three months from now, when Niko and Elena were married, he would no longer sleep in front of her fire.

And here she was, thinking about Elena again. The warmth that her conversation with Niko had kindled in her chest faded to ashes, and she fought not to let her misery show on her face. If Niko was happy about his betrothal, she should be, too—and he had given her no indication that he objected. Besides, other than Shadows whose preference was for men, it was expected of them to marry a Vila. Otherwise, the Shadow and Vila lines would die out. This was the way it needed to be, so why could she not resign herself to it?

The foyer was quiet, most of the others doubtless still among the revelers. Katerina heard only the sound of her own breath and Niko's as he scanned her face, his head tilted. She braced for him to ask what was troubling her. But all he said was, "Do try not to incinerate anyone in the few minutes you'll be out of my sight, won't you? It might put a damper on the festivities."

"I make no promises," Katerina said, her tone deliberately haughty. His low laugh echoed as she climbed the stairs, the polished wooden railing smooth and cold beneath her palm.

It was a good thing she hadn't given him her word. Because when she pushed open the double doors that led to her bedchamber's hallway, she found an unexpected—and unwelcome—guest waiting for her.

“Dimi Zakharova,” Katerina said in wary greeting.

By all the Saints and demons, how had the woman gotten here so quickly? And why?

As the Kniaz’s consort, she traveled with a retinue. Yet here she was, a glass of kvass in each hand, clad in her dusky blue velvet gown, her hair spangled with tiny diamonds. Next to her, wearing blood-and-dirt-spattered battle leathers, Katerina felt nasty to the nth degree.

“Why are you here?” It came out less than polite, but she’d used up the last of her good manners when she’d refrained from ripping off Fyodor’s head and sending it flying at his murderous bitch of a Dimi. Not to mention playing nice with the Kniaz.

“Perhaps I’m just here to offer you a drink,” the other woman said, her voice saccharine as she extended one of the tumblers of kvass to Katerina. “You must be thirsty, after...extending yourself in the arena tonight.”

There was the slightest pause before ‘extending,’ but it was enough to tell Katerina all she needed to know. The woman had seen, damn her. The question was, how much?

She gathered her magic, feeling it tingle in her fingertips and sizzle beneath her skin. “I’m fine, thank you,” she said curtly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get changed for the feast.” She took a step forward, but Dimi Zakharova didn’t retreat.

“I know what you’re doing,” the woman hissed, her gaze raking over Katerina. “You intend to worm your way into the Druzhina, and then to take my place.”

Katerina snorted. “Is that what this is about? Believe me when I tell you that’s the last thing I want.” On every count. “Now, step aside. I won’t ask again.”

“Believe you?” The marble statue of Sant Antoniya in the alcove by Katerina’s door tipped, then righted itself, as Dimi Zakharova’s earth-magic rose. “Because you’re so truthful, Katerina Ivanova. The Magiya’s records say you’re a firewitch, like your mother before you. But you’re not, are you?” She took a step closer, until the skirts of her gown brushed Katerina’s legs. “Who has lied for you, Dimi Ivanova? If the truth came out, what price would they pay?”

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The woman had sent for copies of Katerina's genealogy and bonding ceremony from Iriska's largest repository of knowledge, halfway across the realm from Rivki. Did that mean she'd suspected Katerina long before the incident in the arena today?

Maybe it meant nothing. Perhaps this type of surveillance was done on all of the candidates for the Trials. Still, fear iced the blood in Katerina's veins.

Steady, she told herself. Hold the line.

"I am a firewitch," she said, each word dropping like a stone into the still air of the hallway. "If you've troubled yourself to look that deeply into my origins, you know every woman in my mother's line since the Saints conferred their blessings on Iriska has been a firewielder. What else would I be?"

She let her lips rise in a mirthless smile, the one that usually preceded stabbing a demon through the heart and sending it hurtling into the Void. "I'm sorry to waste your time. But I am flattered you've concerned yourself with me, Dimi Zakharova. Why, I don't know the slightest thing about you, save that you're happy to warm the bed of a tyrant and a fool."

The other woman's eyes narrowed, rage heating their depths. A muscle in her jaw twitched, and the ground beneath Katerina's feet shook, forcing her to fight to keep her balance. "You dare to speak so of the Kniaz? Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you truly don't want to share his bed." Her voice lowered to a hiss, laden with suspicion. "I saw the way you looked at your Shadow, when you thought he couldn't see. Is that where your heart lies, Dimi Ivanova? For if so, you're a threat of an entirely different kind."

Katerina's pulse kicked up, pounding so hard, she swore she could taste it. A quarter-hour in the arena and five minutes in a hallway, and Dimi Zakharova had seen deeper into her heart than anyone ever had. It was insufferable...and dangerous.

"How dare you suggest such a thing?" she said, her voice ice-cold. "My Shadow will be betrothed to his Vila before all of Kalach the night of the Bone Moon. He is a man of honor."

"One can be betrothed, and even marry, and still betray one's vows." The other woman was so close, her breath brushed Katerina's cheek. "So many lies, Dimi Ivanova. So many lives you hold in your hand. For surely everyone in your village knows you are not merely a firewitch. Keeping a secret that could mean so much to the realm...the price for such a thing would be steep beyond measure."

By all the Saints and demons, she refused to make twenty-one years of sacrifice and silence be for nothing. "What is wrong with you?" she snapped. Better to put the other woman on the defensive than to be constantly caught wrong-footed like this. "Are you so desperate to keep your place in that bastard's bed that you're willing to betray a fellow Dimi to have what you want, inventing threats where none exist?"

She dropped her voice, letting a full measure of viciousness fill it. "Or is that he's grown tired of you, Dimi Zakharova? Does he not reach for you as often; do you sense his gaze roving, as he seeks a wife to give him heirs? I feel sorry for you. Such petty insecurity is beneath a Dimi. The world bends to our will, not the other way around."

The woman sucked in a sharp breath. She stepped back, scanning every inch of Katerina, her lip curling in scorn. "I don't know what you are, little Dimi," she said. "But I intend to find out. Because you might not wish to be the Kniaz's consort, but he covets pretty things. He covets power. The choice might not be yours. And I have no intention of being displaced at all, much less by a liar and a traitor."

The marble floor beneath them cracked with the force of her outrage, the movement jostling the glasses in her hands. As liquid sloshed over the rims, Katerina smelled what she hadn't before: bitter cascara, a potent laxative.

If she'd accepted the kvass, she wouldn't have died, no. But she would have spent a very uncomfortable evening, away from the covetous gaze of the Kniaz, just like Dimi Zakharova wanted. And next time, her drink might be laced with something worse.

Her gaze flicked to Zakharova's face. The other woman was watching her, dark eyes glittering with malice. A satisfied smile lifted her painted lips.

For the love of the Saints. This was what happened when a greedy tyrant pinned a beautiful, powerful woman under his thumb: insecurity and jealousy. In another world, Katerina and Dimi Zakharova would be allies. Katerina might even look to her as a mentor; the woman was politically savvy, able to navigate the treacherous waters of this despicable place without so much as turning a hair. But instead, the other Dimi hated and feared Katerina, not because of her power but because she inspired the Kniaz's unholy lust.

It was just one more reason to despise the man. But right now, he wasn't the threat. Dimi Zakharova was, and though Katerina would never have started this fight, there was no way to turn from it now.

She couldn't light a fire inside the Kniaz's palace. Nor could she use her other magic, without confirming Dimi Zakharova's suspicions and endangering everyone in Kalach. She was trapped, Saints curse it. Hatred burned inside her, desperate for an outlet, as she bared her teeth. "Count yourself lucky I don't yet call Rivki home. You may not know what I am, but trust me when I say I am powerful enough to end you. For your insinuation that something improper exists between myself and my Shadow alone, I should make you pay."

The other woman lifted one shoulder in an elegant, disdainful shrug. “Watch what you eat and drink tonight, Dimi Ivanova. For I have taken on far more worthy opponents than you. And the Kniaz can’t Reap you if you’re dead.”

Giving Katerina one last, weighted look, she turned and strode through the carved wooden doors at the opposite end of the hallway, the earth trembling in her wake.

9

KATERINA

Katerina knocked so hard on the door to Niko’s room, it threatened to bruise her knuckles. She wanted to pound on it, but that would draw attention. Already, the other Dimis and Shadows were streaming in, some of them obviously the worse for drink, with Sofi and Damien bringing up the rear.

Sofi slid Katerina a grin, which Katerina did her best to return. She was pretty sure she did a terrible job, because the other Dimi rolled her eyes in response. She didn’t stop to question Katerina, though, thank the Saints, just signed, “Later,” and headed up the stairs. Behind her, Damien raised his tumbler of kvass to Katerina in salute, then padded down the hallway toward his room, leaving a trail of bloodied sand in his wake.

By all the Saints and demons, what could be keeping her Shadow? She knocked again, more insistently still. “Niko, I don’t care if you have a bevy of Vila beauties in your bed,” she snapped, though it was a blatant lie. “Open the door this instant, or?—”

The words died on her lips as the door swung inward, the firelight within illuminating the form of her Shadow. He was bare from the waist up, clad only in his leather fighting pants. On the bicep of his left arm gleamed Katerina’s Mark: three

interlocking circles, the black pigment of the dye mixed with her blood. He'd taken the rawhide tie out of his dark hair, and it fell loose to his shoulders. The tips dripped water onto his muscled chest, crisscrossed by scars that she knew as well as the lines of her own palm: A thin, long-healed souvenir from his first sparring match. The silvered track of another Shadow's teeth, which would never heal completely. An etched, jagged line from a blade soaked in Grigori venom.

As if taunting her, the firelight flickered over the white streak in his dark hair that had come after Baba Petrova inked Katerina's Mark on his skin. Every Shadow had a distinguishing feature, something besides their Mark that showed how they'd been changed by the bond. It was just Katerina's luck that Niko's was so visible. Each time she looked at it, she was reminded how he was hers and yet not, all at the same time.

Why did he have to be so Saints-damned beautiful? Speechless, she tried to stop staring but only succeeded in glancing downward, to the V of muscles that disappeared beneath the waistband of his fighting leathers, which didn't help. At all.

"You called?" Niko said, his voice wry. "For someone who wanted my attention, Katya, you don't seem to have a lot to say."

Her childhood nickname, the one only he was allowed to use, did the trick. Lifting her head, Katerina found his eyes locked on hers, glittering with amusement and an emotion she couldn't quite decipher. She opened her mouth, shut it again, then mastered herself with an effort. "Sorry to pull you away from whatever orgy kept you from answering the door, but we have a situation."

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At the word ‘orgy,’ Niko snorted, swinging the door wide. His room was empty, the bed neatly made, his clothes for the evening’s feast laid out across the foot. “I can’t decide whetherto be gratified that you think I’m capable of satisfying a host of women after the night we’ve just had, or insulted that you think I’d betray Elena that way,” he said, motioning for her to enter. “I was getting dressed, Katerina. And attempting to bathe. I see you had no such concerns.”

Elena’s name was like a bucket of cold water dashed right into Katerina’s face. She stalked into his room and stood in the middle of his hearth rug, letting the fire warm her. He followed, shutting the door and then leaning back against it, regarding her with that same indecipherable look. “What’s the matter, Katya?” he said, his voice soft.

The gentleness in it almost broke her. But she couldn’t afford to break, not now. She had to be strong. “We need to leave,” she said, her tone clipped. “For the love of the Saints, dry your hair and put on a shirt, would you? You’re dripping everywhere.”

Niko arched a quizzical eyebrow but obeyed, turning away from her to grab a towel from the armoire. “Please tell me there wasn’t an assassin waiting in your bedchamber.” His voice was light, but with a distinct edge.

“Replace ‘assassin’ with ‘woman who wanted me to have the shits all night’ and ‘bedchamber’ with ‘hallway,’ and you’ll be right on the nose,” she said, doing her best to ignore the way the muscles in his back shifted as he straightened.

Niko spun, using the preternatural speed he usually only reserved for battle. “Explain yourself,” he said, his tone clipped, all amusement drained away.

So Katerina did, leaving out only Dimi Zakharova's insinuation that an inappropriate relationship existed between her and Niko. She wasn't going there, not now. Not ever.

With each word she spoke, Niko's gray eyes darkened. He ran a hand through his damp hair as she finished, ending with, "We need to go now, Niko. Tonight. If she tells the Kniaz what she suspects... We need to get back to Kalach. To warn Baba."

He paced in front of her, the firelight playing over his face. Thank the Saints, he'd put on a shirt—not the ruffled one that lay at the foot of his bed, but the fitted one he normally wore beneath his fighting leathers. "Do you want me to kill her?"

She peered at him, trying to ascertain if he was serious. He stared back at her, giving her nothing, and she threw up her hands in exasperation. "No, Niko, I don't. If I wanted her dead, I would've done it myself. You don't think murdering the Kniaz's pet would draw even more unwanted attention to us, if anyone connected the dots?"

Niko sank down onto the edge of the bed, his shoulders heaving in a sigh. "You're right. But we can't just leave, Katerina."

"Why not?" she challenged.

He shot her an incredulous look. "For one thing, we're expected at the feast tonight. If two of the six victors don't show up, you don't think that will draw unwanted attention? For another, what with the increased attacks, riding through the night, this close to the full Bone Moon, is tempting fate. I vote we keep an eye on her and leave first thing in the morning."

Now Katerina was the one pacing. "Saints only knows what harm she could do in a single evening. We have to go. We can make our excuses to the Kniaz, tell him we're needed at home."

He snorted. “We’re needed at home so badly that we can’t spend a night eating food the likes of which we’ll never see in Kalach, being honored before Iriska’s royalty, then drinking until we can’t stand up? No one leaves before the feast, Katya. Even the Shadows and Dimis who failed today will stay until the morning. We’ll be hard-pressed to explain this away.”

Desperate, she drew her trump card. Niko was sworn to protect her. Maybe this would work, if nothing else did. “As despicable as I find Dimi Zakharova, she was right about one thing. Kniaz Sergey doesn’t just crave my power. He wants me.”

Niko stared up at her, his jaw working. He didn’t say a word.

“Mybody,” she clarified, in case he didn’t understand.

“How do you know this?” The words were a growl.

“He all but came out and said it.” Power prickled at her fingertips at the memory, and Niko shifted his weight as the spillover pulsed through their bond.

“Did he touch you?” Her Shadow’s fists clenched the coverlet so tightly the fabric protested, the seams giving way under his grip.

“He did not.” She came to a stop in front of Niko, endeavoring to pry his fingers loose. “Quit destroying the bedclothes, would you, or we’ll have yet another crime to answer for.”

He turned his furious gaze on hers. “Did you want him to, Katya?”

Katerina stopped trying to rescue the coverlet from Niko and stared at him instead. “Now I’m the one who can’t decide whether to be insulted or... No, I’m just insulted,” she said, each word a cube of ice. “Did I want a man I can’t stand, who

uses his power to manipulate those who have no choice but to obey, to put his hands all over me? I can't believe I have to dignify this with a response, but no, Niko, I did not. I'd break his fingers first and sell his Saints-cursed rings to feed all of Kalach."

Her Shadow dropped his head, staring at the rug beneath his feet. His shoulders were rigid beneath the thin material of his shirt, but when he spoke, his voice was laced with a plea. "I apologize for the insinuation. Forgive me, Katya."

She took a deep breath, inhaling his familiar scent: leather and blood, sweat and mint. No matter where she was, he was home.

But the two of them didn't belong here, and the sooner they left, the better. "On one condition," she said. "We ride for Kalach tonight."

Niko's head came up, his eyes dark with fury, his jaw granite-hard with resolve. He unhinged the latter long enough to utter a single syllable.

"Done," he said.

KATERINA

The trees edged close on either side, hemming them in, as Katerina and her Shadow rode hard through the darkening woods.

“Maybe we should have waited until morning to leave Rivki, after all,” Niko said as they rounded a bend in the path and were forced to slow, his shoulders tensing beneath his black leather gear. Above, the waxing Bone Moon hung low, glinting against the star-pocked vault of the sky, and Niko gave it an uneasy glance. “Kniaz or no Kniaz, this doesn’t bode well.”

They’d made their excuses to Kniaz Sergey, claiming Niko was needed at home to prepare for his betrothal. It was a poor explanation, but the Kniaz had accepted it reluctantly, saying only that he regretted seeing them go and extracting a promise that they’d come to deliver the tithe next month. Next to him, Dimi Zakharova had given a small, self-satisfied smile, which Katerina had wanted to smack right off her face. Instead, they’d packed, retrieved their horses, and ridden over the bridge that separated the island from the mainland. Now here they were, picking their way along a moonlit path that cut through Cherkasy Forest, with Niko insisting he could sense Grigori lurking in the woods.

“Enough,” Katerina snapped. “We’ll make it to Drezna tonight, and tomorrow we’ll go home.”

But she wasn’t so sure. Maybe it was just Niko’s nagging, but she could swear she felt the weight of the demons’ eyes peering at her from the treeline, forming a cold spot between her shoulder blades.

Damn her Shadow. And damn her overactive imagination. They were going home; she willed it to be true. They would reach it in one piece, make their confession to Baba Petrova, and deal with the consequences. Anything was better than staying in Rivki for one more second.

Niko sighed, glancing over his shoulder back the way they'd come. "I'd defend your virtue, my Dimi. The Kniaz would never lay a finger on you unwanted, nor would that bitch of a Dimi speak a word. You have it on my honor. It's not too late to go back."

"Yes, it is." They'd been riding for hours. What was the point of turning around now?

"It's not." The blades at his waist clinked, and he put a hand down to settle them in their holster. "Better to face the devil we know than to be alone in the woods with Saints knows what, still miles from Drezna."

Katerina made a low sound of disagreement, but Niko didn't give up. "Blini with caviar," he coaxed, his voice honey-smooth. "Borscht with sour cream, all you can eat."

She coaxed her mare, Mika, next to his stallion as the path widened. "Naming my favorite foods won't help. We have to get back to warn Baba. And whatever might be in these woods, together the two of us are more dangerous than it could dream of being."

"There is something in the woods," Niko said, raising his face to the wind. He breathed deep, tasting the air. There was a wildness to the gesture, and for a moment Katerina saw not the man who had been her friend since childhood, before he'd taken a blood vow to stand by her side, but the black dog that lived inside him. "I know you feel it."

Indeed, Katerina could. The air trembled, heavy with the portent of things to come.

An edge of hunger rode the breeze, sentient and waiting.

Beneath her, Mika whickered uneasily, and Katerina gripped the reins, peering ahead. They were picking their way carefully now, the light of the moon all that illuminated their path. “Whatever’s here,” she said, raising her voice, “it will not dare cross us. The spirits of the forest should take heed, for they seek to wound us at their peril.” Bracing herself, she sent her gift out through the earth and into the trees, seeking, but found nothing in return.

Next to her, Niko shivered as a tendril of her magic ran through him. “Katya,” he said quietly. “I see that look on your face. But be reasonable. We can go back to the island, wait until morning.”

Katerina wasn’t trotting back to Rivki with her tail between her legs, especially if Dimi Zakharova had opened her big mouth. Edging her horse closer to Niko’s, she grinned up at him—her razor-sharp grin, the one she wore before crumbling a demon to dust—and leveraged the one subject she was sure would distract him, no matter how little she herself cared for it.

“Surely you’re eager to get back to Elena,” she said, batting her lashes. “Wouldn’t you rather be with her than penned up on an island with me, a water spirit, and a tyrant? We’ll reach Drezna, and you’ll be that much closer to having her in your arms.”

He shot her an aggravated look out of the corner of his eye. “Leave Elena out of this.”

“How can I?” Katerina said, her voice as insouciant as she could make it. “She’s soon to be your betrothed, my Shadow. To bear your children. That’s something to look forward to, is it not?” She winked at him, as if the answer didn’t have the potential to break her heart.

Niko growled, a low sound more at home in the throat of the black dog than the man. “I’m looking forward to a warm bed without the evil that roams this forest breathing down my neck, Katerina. At this rate, I won’t live long enough to have a Shadowchild with Elena. I’m telling you, something’s not right.”

As if it had heard him speak, the darkness deepened; the trees loomed taller. The silence that fell was absolute, even the small creatures of the forest growing quiet.

Katerina ignored the roiling sensation inside her, her magic rising to the call of whatever lurked in the woods, that told her he was likely right. Instead, she kicked her mare up to a canter, heedless of the darkness and the narrow path.

“I am not going to ride back over that bridge,” she told him over her shoulder. “I’m not going to hide and cower. If there is a threat out here, we should face it, before it poses harm to the people of Drezna.”

“Certainly,” Niko said from behind her, his voice dry. “It has nothing to do with the fact that you’ll bow for no one. Saints forbid you ask for help, or that you show caution?—”

“Caution is for people who are weaker than we, Niko Alekhin. We are the ones that the creatures of the Dark should fear.”

Katerina never heard his reply, if he made one at all. Because that was when a deafening crack split the air, her Shadow was ripped from her side, and the world was swallowed by an unrelenting black.

Her mare reared, letting out an unearthly cry. She struggled to hold on to the reins, but it was no use. Mika bolted from beneath her, fleeing, and Katerina fell to the ground with a thud that rattled her bones.

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Her Shadow. Where was Niko?

She couldn't hear him. She couldn't see him. In fact, she couldn't see anything. This wasn't normal darkness, but rather Darkness—the sense that all Light had gone from the world. It was the pitch-black of the abyss.

She reached for her bond with her Shadow, and felt...nothing. There was a gaping hole where Niko should be. A bolt of horror ripped through her, and she fought to gain her feet. “Niko!” she howled. “To me!”

He didn't answer her.

She opened her mouth to call for him again, but agonizing pain doubled her over, searing through every nerve ending. It was like being stabbed with a million blades, spiked with lightning...except the lightning was ice-cold.

Katerina clutched her chest. Had someone—something—severed their bond? Such a thing shouldn't be possible, unless...

Was he dead? Had someone killed her Shadow, before she'd ever had the chance to tell him what was in her heart?

Her agony retreated into numbness. A sense of utter terror and hopelessness consumed her, weighing her down. Nothing was right, nothing would ever be right again...

Once, when Katerina was very small, she'd fallen into a snowbank. The snow had

closed over her head, surrounding her. When she'd opened her mouth to scream, it had found its way inside, taking the place of her words. It had pressed her down, squeezing her lungs, stealing her breath, freezing her magic. Her Dimi mother had found her less than a minute later, melting the snow and setting Katerina free, but Katerina had never forgotten what it had been like to be trapped that way, inside an icy fortress that wanted only to keep her for its own.

This was like that: an ice-cold weight, pinning her to the ground, invading every part of her. She couldn't see. Couldn't move. Couldn't think. When she reached for her magic, there was only...emptiness.

For an instant, an eternity, she lay crumpled on the path in the dark. And then a gleam appeared in the gloom—a tiny light, growing stronger the longer she looked.

The amulet at her neck that held Niko's blood seared red-hot, scorching her. Her Shadow bond sparked to life just as a blaze illuminated the darkened woods.

Niko stood on the path, burning like the Lightbringer she'd always teasingly called him. A glow encased him, emanating from the blessed blade he held in his hand. She had never seen him look like that—a living embodiment of the Light to which he and Katerina were consecrated. For years, she'd thought of him as bringing her out of the metaphorical darkness that had lurked inside her ever since her mother's death, but in this moment, she wondered if her assessment had been more accurate than she'd ever realized. The illumination spread from him in ever-increasing circles, until at last it touched the place where Katerina lay.

That awful sensation of being encased in ice retreated, taking the unbearable hopelessness with it. She ran for Niko, claiming her place by his side, as his Light chased the last of the unnatural gloom away and then faded, her Shadow assuming his normal form once more.

The world was as it had been before the Darkness had descended upon them: road and moon and forest. But both of their horses had fled. And emerging from the woods on all sides, surrounding Niko and Katerina, was the biggest horde of Grigori demons she had ever seen. Normally, they wandered as rogues or attacked in packs, commanded by one of their filthy brethren, but this was no pack. This was an army.

They looked like people; they always did. Only their characteristic rosemary-and-clove scent, meant to entice humans to them, gave them away—and with them en masse like this, it poured off them, permeating the air. Next to her, Niko choked on it.

In human form, her Shadow could meet his death at the hands of a blade bathed in Grigori venom or from a demon's venom-coated bite. And there were so many of them here, encroaching nearer, closing the circle. Clad all in black, poisoned blades and bared teeth glinting under the light of the waxing moon.

Niko was right: they should have turned back. Damn her stupid pride, her insistence that they press onward. They were alone here, without the aid of a rowan-fire or the fellow Shadows and Dimis who always fought alongside them. It was just the two of them, and a host of demons determined to see them die.

There was no time to wonder why the Grigori were here in such force, on a lonely road far from Drezna. Whether she and Niko were their deliberate prey, or whether encountering the two of them was coincidence, en route to whatever the Grigori were really after. There was nothing to do but fight. To defeat the demons, or die trying.

Katerina prayed to Sant Antoniya, Sant Andrei, and Sant Viktoriya for strength. She called her magic, feeling it rise from the earth, filling her like she were a vessel and it a thick, syrupy liquid. “Stand by my side, my Shadow,” she said.

“Always,” he answered her.

And then the demons were on them.

Niko stood his ground, blessed blades in hand, spinning like a whirl of light, slicing through one Grigori after another before they could reach her. The Grigori howled as they fell, the sickly-sweet scent of their blood scorching her lungs and soaking the air. But there were always more.

Desperately, Katerina sent her sixth sense out, searching the woods. Her magic curled around one rowan after another, uprooting them and sending them hurtling into the fray, piercing the demons' hearts. A thought, and she set the trees aflame. The fires consumed the Grigori's corpses, and as others charged toward her, their flesh and clothing caught as well. They melted before her eyes, and their voices filled her mind, fraught with agony: Vengeance upon you, cursed Dimi. May Gadreel seek his revenge on your body and your soul.

Gadreel. The Fallen Angel of War himself, a king among Grigori and one of the first of the Fallen Watchers. The demon who had schooled humankind in the art of weaponry and killing blows. Helper of God, before he and the rest of the Grigori had fallen to the Dark.

Katerina had no time to consider why Gadreel's army was loose upon this road, nor what it might mean to be the target of his vengeance. She stood, feet planted, hands outstretched, and called the wind. It rose to her bidding, driving the Grigori back. But there were so many of them, and they bent themselves against it and just kept coming. One of them broke ranks and charged Niko, a blade in each hand. They flashed in the moonlight as the demon raised an arm high, meaning to take him through the heart.

She screamed, a howl so loud it scraped her throat. Magic exploded from her, harnessing the wind and blasting the demon backward. It flew through the air and tumbled into the flames. But there were five more right behind it.

They came for her, ignoring Niko this time. She pulled on the earth itself, tearing it up in front of them, tree roots catching at their legs, entangling them. One fell. Two. But the rest?—

Beside her, Niko's body shimmered. A moment later, his blades clattered to the ground and a growl shook the forest. In the form of his black dog, he leapt, knocking the demons away from her. Snarling, he ripped out the throat of the closest one, coughing in disgust as blood poured from his mouth and drenched the ground.

You will never touch her. His voice echoed inside her head, the way it always did when he was in the shape of his black dog. She belongs to the Light, Grigori filth.

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Another demon fell beneath his teeth and claws. Blood splattered Katerina as she ripped tree after tree from the ground, impaling the Grigori and lighting them aflame. She spun in a circle, igniting the rowans at the treeline, burning the demons who snarled in pain as they fought to get through. She incinerated them where they stood, but there were still more and more?—

And then one of them was on her, slicing at her with its blades. She twisted, fighting to escape, but it was no use. A knife sank deep into her thigh, and the demon howled in triumph. Its fellows echoed it, and Niko raised his head, eyes catching hers in horror.

He ran for her, dropping the demon in his jaws to the ground like a ragdoll, but there were more of them now, descending on her, and she could barely see him?—

No, his mind-voice said, tight with terror. No! Katerina, fight!

She thrashed and struggled, heating her body with witchfire from within as the demons tore at her clothes. They wailed in pain as it scorched them, but didn't let go. The Darkness sucked at her, as eager to devour her soul as the demons were to pierce her body, to claim her for their own. They were servants of the Dark, and the Dark was hungry.

Katerina rolled left, then right, dragging the demons with her. She couldn't light them aflame, not when they were on top of her. But if she could drive them backward, into the fire...

Bit by painful bit, she pulled herself toward the flames. Out of the corner of her eye,

she could see Niko battling two Grigori, still in the form of his dog. He tore the entrails from one of them, but the other sliced at him, and no matter how he dodged and weaved, he couldn't get free.

Katerina!

The fear in Niko's voice almost undid her. Not for himself, she knew. For her.

She refused to die here. Not like this, and have him believe he'd failed her.

Katerina reached deep, deep into the well of her magic. She had never reached so far before, didn't know what cost she would pay. But whatever it was, she would pay it, and gladly.

Sant Antoniya, help me now, she prayed. Give me your strength, lend me your Light.

Power burst from her, buckling the very earth. A flash of illumination turned the road and forest bright as day as the wind rose still higher, driving every Grigori back, ripping those who had hold of her away. The demons shrieked, an ear-splitting sound that made the air quake.

And then, every single one of them burst into flame.

Katerina propped herself on her elbows, panting, as the demons burned, taking the forest with them. Her leg ached where the Grigori had stabbed her. Their venom wouldn't affect her as it did Niko—just as a Shadow's bite could take down a Grigori, so a demon's venom could fell a Shadow—but even still, it hurt like hell. She pressed her palm against the wound, staunching the flow of blood, as Niko knelt by her side, half-clad and in human form once more.

Dirt and blood streaked his face. His eyes were wide with shock and...something

else. Wonder, maybe. “Katya,” he said, his voice hoarse. Taking his shirt from the ground where it had fallen when he shifted, he tore a piece of fabric from the bottom and set to binding her wound. She grunted as he pulled the tourniquet tight. “Talk to me. Is this the only place—are you hurt?—”

He fumbled at her shirt, trying to lift it, and she shoved his hands away. “I’m all right. But Niko, did they stab you?”

She didn’t know what she would do if he said yes. They were alone here, stranded between Rivki and Drezna, and Grigori venom was fast-acting. Katerina was trained in the art of healing, as all Dimis were, but the antivenin was in her saddlebag, and the horses had run off?—

But he shook his head. “Grazes while I was in the form of my dog, nothing more. See.” He raised his arms, showing her the defensive wounds there, doubtless acquired as he fought to protect his muzzle. “But you...Katerina, what did you do...?”

Together, they regarded the destruction she’d wrought. The road was buckled and broken, littered with the corpses of charred Grigori and burning tree limbs. Though they sat, untouched, in Katerina’s circle, all around them, the woods burned.

“Protected you,” she said, simply. “Saved myself.”

That look of wonder was still there in his eyes, and something else, too. Fear, perhaps. “You’ve never done anything like this before, against so many. I didn’t know you could.”

The idea that Niko might fear her sent a spike of dismay through Katerina’s heart. It made her voice tight as she said, struggling to sit all the way up, “Says the one who blazed with more Light than I’ve ever seen. Desperate times, my Shadow. Would you rather we died here, on a lonely road, at the hands of demons?”

He regarded her, his expression cross. “Of course not. And quit that, you’ll make it worse. Here, lean on me.” He pulled her back against his chest, his long legs encircling hers, careful not to touch the wounded one. “I just—what if you hadn’t been able to do that, Katya? I couldn’t reach you, I couldn’t get to you...”

The pain in his voice pierced her. She twisted, looking up at him. His eyes were haunted as he gazed at the ruins of the path to Drezna. “You didn’t have to. You shoulder too much, Niko.”

His arms wrapped around her, holding her close. She knew it was the simple protective instinct that a Shadow held for his Dimi, especially given the terrible danger they’d just faced. It was her fault, her flaw that she couldn’t help but wish for more.

Niko had wanted them to turn around. He’d warned her, again and again, and she’d been too stubborn and headstrong to listen. Too convinced that she could handle whatever came.

Because of Katerina’s arrogance, her Shadow could have been killed.

Guilt festering inside her, she peeled his arms away. “Help me up. Enough wallowing. They’re dead, but who knows if there are more? I’m not waiting on this cursed road like a sitting duck for them to find me.”

Without comment, Niko lifted her, setting her upright. He inspected her, assessing the wince she couldn’t suppress when her injured leg took her weight.

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“You need a healer,” he said. “Don’t try to argue. And don’t try to walk. Maybe you can ride home like that, Katya, but you’re not stumbling on that leg all the way to Drezna. I can’t believe I let the bastards close enough to touch you. Grigori scum,” he growled, and spat on the body that lay at their feet.

Katerina forced a smile. “What’s the alternative? Our horses are gone. And I don’t intend to camp on the road amongst the corpses of our enemies.”

Niko didn’t smile back. He glared at her, scanning every inch of her body, and she fought not to quail beneath the uncharacteristic wrath in his gaze. “I don’t intend for that to happen either, Katya. I’m going to pick you up. Tell me if I hurt you.”

“I’m fine,” Katerina insisted, gritting her teeth against the pain in her leg. “Really, Niko, I’m okay. There’s no need for?—”

Ignoring her protests, he swept her up and carried her down the path toward Drezna, his arms tight around her. Despite her discomfort, Katerina couldn’t help but notice how warm his body was, how right it felt to have him hold her this way. Surrendering, she rested her head against his shoulder. She breathed in his familiar scent of mint and the oil he used to feed his blades, blended now with the sickly-sweet aroma of Grigori blood. It was better than the reek of the rowan-fires and the nasty stench of roasting demon.

An overpowering sense of dread at what they might find when they arrived on Drezna’s doorstep simmered inside her. What if the demons had somehow penetrated its defenses? What if they’d hurt the people who called the village home?

She had never seen anything like this army of demons, three nights before the Bone Moon grew full. Why had the Fallen Angel of War, more of a myth than a true threat, set his sights on Drezna? Could Katerina's feelings for her Shadow have set the prophecy in motion? Could this somehow be her fault?

Niko's expression was grim, his jaw tight as he strode down the road. His heart thumped against her, as steady as his footfalls on the packed dirt. Closing her eyes, she imagined arriving in Drezna: the warm welcome they'd receive from Baba Volkova, the comforting knowledge that their friends were safe—especially Tanya and Alexandr, who they often spent time with on the way home from delivering the tithe. Soon the apple trees would be blooming in Kalach; farther to the west, Drezna's trees bloomed even sooner. She imagined wandering in the village orchard as she and Niko had done in Kalach when they were children, picking the red-blushed fruit to make the cinnamon-apple pies that were her Shadow's favorite.

A decade ago, Katerina had brought Niko a basket of those pies as he sat by his mother's grave, and kept him company as he ate them one by one, mechanically, as if they were made of sawdust. When he finished, he lay down with his head in her lap, watching the sun set over the stones of Kalach's small cemetery. "I wish I'd been enough," he'd said, as she'd run her fingers through his hair. "Enough to make her stay."

Katerina had lost her mother and father years before, in a demon raid. She knew, better than most, what it was like to feel alone and adrift. The idea of Niko feeling that way had broken her heart.

"You are enough," she'd told him fiercely. "You will always be enough for me."

He was enough, still. He had saved them both, tonight. That awful moment when she thought she'd lost him forever...her first thought had not been worry for herself, or fear of what might come boiling out of the woods to attack her in the Dark. But terror

of losing him—not because he was her Shadow, but because of all he meant to her.

In almost every memory she had, Niko was by her side. It was a wondrous and terrible thing.

“Katerina,” her Shadow said, breaking the silence. “Look.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and opened her eyes. And then she sucked in her breath.

So close to the spring solstice, they wouldn’t see another frost until the coming year. Yet the earth was blanched. The tender shoots of grass that grew along the path and the leaves of the evergreens that flanked it were lined with crystals of ice. It shone in the glow of the moon, reflecting the light with an eerie, unnatural glint.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. As far as they could see, the bodies of deer and wolves and squirrels were strewn across the road toward Drezna. Blood seeped from them, frozen into icy pools.

Katerina had seen a lot of things in her twenty-one years. But she’d never seen anything like this.

She looked for their horses among the fallen—Mika, who’d carried her uncomplainingly for miles, and Troitze, as fierce and wild as Niko himself. She didn’t see them, thank the Saints. They had escaped whatever scourge came this way.

But the corpses were fresh, not even stiffening.

A chill ran through Katerina, and she looked back the way they’d come. In one direction, the fallen Grigori lined the road. In the other, these beasts lay dead.

The frost, on this part of the road only. The road that led to Drezna.

The dead animals.

The demons, more powerful and numerous than any she'd seen before, emerging from the woods.

A sudden, awful thought struck her. "Niko," she said, "I don't smell the fires." Normally, at this distance, the scent of the omnipresent rowan-fires that burned at the perimeter of every village would fill the air. But there was nothing here other than the lingering scent of Grigori venom and the faint hint of animal blood.

He raised his face, inhaling. "Nor do I. But I smell Grigori, Katerina."

"That's us," she said, trying to strike a desperate bargain with the Fates. "We were just surrounded by a horde of them."

"No." Niko's nostrils flared as he breathed deeply once again, making sure there could be no mistake. "This is airborne scent, not the scent we carry. They were here before us. They came this way."

His words echoed her worst fears. "Then?—"

"We didn't outpace the demons," he said, horror clear in each syllable. "We're retracing their steps."

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Then he was running, Katerina clutched tight in his arms, leaping over the bodies of the fallen beasts as only a trained Shadow could. The path widened, the way it always did when they arrived in Drezna. But the warmth of the fires didn't burn to greet them, nor did a Shadow stand sentinel at the gates. Here, all was quiet and dark.

"Niko," Katerina said, her voice breaking.

"I know." He shifted her weight, lifting a hand to smooth her hair back from her face. "Something bad happened here, Katya."

Dizziness swept Katerina as they followed the road that led to the heart of the village. The gardens that hugged it were bled by that same frost, their nascent plants lying limp and dead. She caught sight of the apple orchard, the tree limbs blackened and peeling beneath a layer of ice. Nothing moved on the path or in the fields.

"Hello?" she called out. "Is anyone here?"

But no one answered her call. Not so much as a dog came trotting out to meet them.

A village would never leave itself unprotected this way. Shadows rotated on constant patrol each night, especially so close to the Bone Moon. No one could simply walk into Drezna, not in these times.

They passed Baba Volkova's cottage. The door hung open, a gaping maw. When Niko peered inside, the place was empty. But in the hearth, a fire still blazed.

A chill ran through Katerina again. With him holding her like this, they were

vulnerable. “Put me down,” she said. “I may not be able to fight, but I can still use my magic.”

Without a word, he set her on her feet and put an arm around her, supporting her. She limped by his side as they made their way toward the heart of Drezna, where the marketplace and the artisans’ shops hugged the town square. At night, they’d be locked up tight, but most merchants slept above their places of business. Surely someone would come out if Niko and Katerina called.

“They must be hiding,” she said, unable to conceal the note of hope in her voice. “Maybe they’re afraid. They’ll see we’re here to help them, and they’ll?”

Her Shadow had never lied to her. He didn’t start now. Instead, he took more of her weight as they walked the last few steps, emerging from the path that wound past the field where children had played the last time they visited, chasing each other in an age-old game of catch-the-demon. Now, it was deserted and sheathed in ice, the blades of grass shriveled and the stems of the yellow-wreathed preteska snapped.

Clouds scudded over the face of the moon as they left the field behind and stepped onto the cobblestones. She took one step, two. And then Niko jerked her back with such force that she almost tumbled to the ground. A growl rumbled from his throat, low and threatening.

“What—” she began indignantly. But then she saw for herself what his keener Shadow vision had noticed at once.

The two of them stood at the verge of a precipice. Another step, and Katerina would have tumbled into it. Where the bustling village center used to be, there was nothing but a crater—as if everything that once stood there had been sucked into the earth.

It was impossible. It was also true.

The village of Drezna was gone.

12

KATERINA

In shock, she and Niko walked the length and breadth of Drezna, unable to believe it had vanished. They stared into the depths of the crater, and the Darkness stared back at them. It whispered to Katerina, hissing her name.

For all she knew, she was staring into the Void, the vacuum from which the Darkness originated. A shard of it lived within each of the Grigori, its evil powering them. She had never seen it like this before: ink-black smoke, swirling free, a residue of demonic assault.

By the time they were done, Katerina's leg ached so badly she could hardly stand. They had found no survivors. It was as if that awful crater had swallowed the village whole.

"The portal to the demon realms lies outside the village limits," Katerina said at last, as they stood again at the precipice. "But somehow, the Grigori must have come out of the earth here. That sound we heard before they attacked us...I'm sure it was the destruction of Drezna. What other explanation can there be?"

Niko shrugged. It was an odd, uncomfortable movement, as if his shirt had suddenly become too tight. "I don't know," he said. "I'll tell you what I do know, though." He raised a hand, ticking off his points one by one. "You're injured. Night is falling. We're alone, without our horses. Trouble is here, and in our road. We need shelter. And to heal you as best we can."

Katerina nodded, the movement jerky. "But not here, Niko. I don't care if Baba

Volkova's house is still standing. I can't...I can't stay here."

"Agreed." His mouth set in a grim line, and his jaw clenched as he gazed down into the pit. "The healers' cottage may be gone, but Baba will have medicinals. We'll patch you up and take what we need, and then we'll leave this place."

Predictably, Niko wouldn't let her enter Baba Volkova's cottage until he'd gone over every inch of it for threats. She waited, leaning against the wooden siding to take the weight off her leg, her eyes roving over the silvered runes painted on the eaves, the trim around the windows and doors. They were meant to be a defensive layer against demonic invasion, and they had held; Baba's house stood, when so many had been lost. But Baba herself was nowhere to be found. She must have run for the center of the conflict, despite her advanced age. She'd fought for Drezna, and died defending it.

At least Sofi and Damien had survived, safe in Rivki—though 'safe' was a relative term. Katerina had never been grateful for the existence of the Bone Trials before—but because of them, her friends lived, when so many others had fallen. Their home was destroyed, though, their families gone. What if she and Niko returned to Kalach, only to find it had met the same fate? Pressing her hand against the strength rune that twined around the doorframe, Katerina suppressed a shudder.

At last, Niko loomed up in the doorway. "No Grigori have been inside," he said, his dark brows knitted. "I found Baba's medicines and some food to replace what we lost in the saddlebags. Come in, Katerina, and let's be done with this."

Katerina followed him inside and instructed him as to what she needed. Then she lit a taper and sat on one of Baba's high-backed chairs, trying to hold back the wave of sadness that threatened to swamp her. "Niko," she said as he set willowbark to brewing on the stove and mashed garlic, ginger, and echinacea into a paste under her direction, "so many of our friends. Tanya, Alexandr, Sasha, Leonid...gone. How can

this be?"

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“I don’t know.” His face was white to the lips as he knelt in front of her and undid the tourniquet, taking the candle from the table so he could get a better look at the wound. “A clean gash,” he said, and she could tell he was fighting to keep his voice dispassionate. “It doesn’t smell of infection, Katya. And the bleeding’s stopped. Tell me what I need to do.”

A quarter-hour later, she was freshly bandaged and full of willowbark tea, to fortify her against the pain. She’d insisted on spreading the healing herbs along the cuts on Niko’s arms, too, and though he’d argued with her that it was unnecessary, he allowed it. Katerina thought he could see that she needed desperately to find some way—any way—to be of use.

Biting her lip, she limped to Baba Volkova’s bedroom and lifted an armband bearing the elder Dimi’s sigil from the dresser. “For Baba Petrova,” she said to Niko, who was leaning against the doorframe, arms folded and one dark eyebrow quirked. “For remembrance. And for proof.”

“You think we’re going to need to prove what happened?” There was a quiet fury in his voice as he put an arm around her and guided her to the door. “I think the giant crater with Darkness swirling at the bottom of it, along with the trail of animal and demon corpses, speak for themselves.”

I want proof that my feelings for you didn’t cause this, Katerina wanted to say. Proof that something—anything—else is to blame. But voicing such a thought would be unthinkable, and so she made no reply.

They camped that night in a grove of rowan trees, as far from Drezna as Niko deemed

Katerina fit to walk. She wanted to protest, but it was pointless: she'd refused to let him carry her again, knowing that compromised their defenses, and each step sent a bolt of pain shooting through her leg. By the time she sank onto the bed of ferns that Niko had hacked from the plants that grew at the base of the rowan trees, she was trembling all over.

He regarded her with concern. "Should I cut some of these limbs for the fires, Katya? Or can you?—"

Katerina drew herself up, trying to summon her usual confidence. Seeing her compromised like this was troubling her Shadow, and that simply wouldn't do. "I'm injured, not broken," she said, her tone haughty. "Stand by me, out of the way."

He came to her side as she said a brief prayer to the spirits of the trees: For your life, that we may live, we are thankful. Then she closed her eyes and called the wind. It rose to her hand, and the limbs of the rowans splintered and fell. Niko gathered them, stacking them in piles that formed a wide circle with Katerina at its epicenter. Then he stood back and she set them aflame.

Niko dug in the leather satchel he'd brought from Baba Volkova's cottage, coming up with the potatoes he'd found in her pantry. Once he'd gotten them roasting, he dug a silver flask out of the satchel and extended it to Katerina. "Drink."

"What is it?" she said, eyeing the flask suspiciously. She wouldn't put it past him to have crumbled some sleeping herbs into it; he could recognize those easily enough, and she knew he wanted her to rest.

"Kvass," he said. "You need it."

Her leg throbbed, and her body trembled with exhaustion. "Fine," she said, snatching the flask from him and taking a gulp. The liquor scorched her throat and settled,

warm, in her belly. Tossing back her hair, she took another sip. Then a third.

She might've drained the whole thing, had Niko not wrested it from her hands. "Don't be greedy, Katya," he said, tilting the flask back to his own lips. "I've had a hard day."

By the flickering light of the fires, she could see the long line of his throat move as he swallowed. It was a thing of beauty, and she had to look away so he wouldn't catch her staring.

He thrust the flask into her hand, and they took turns drinking until he pulled the potatoes out of the fire. Katerina stifled a giggle as he bit into one and let out a stifled cry of pain. "My tongue," he muttered, glaring at the potato like it had done something to offend him. "Those are hot, Katya. Watch out."

"Duly noted," she said, amused that his need to protect her extended even to potatoes. "Here." She sent a small wind out, blowing over the surface of the root vegetables, cooling them. "Try it now."

Niko obliged, and let out a small sound of appreciation. "Much better. Don't let Baba Petrova know your talents extend to the culinary, Dimi mine. She'll have you in the kitchen before you know what's happened to you. I can hear her now: Develop stronger discipline for the things you believe are beneath you, Katerina."

Katerina smiled, as he'd clearly meant her to do. But she couldn't help but think of what they would tell Baba Petrova when they finally made it back to Kalach. Unless riders passed them on the road, she and Niko would likely be the first to bring the news of what had happened to Drezna. Unless they should?—

She fidgeted, and Niko, who'd finished eating and was leaning back on his hands, glanced over at her. "Are you all right?"

“I just—you don’t think we should go back to Rivki, do you? And tell the Kniaz what’s happened? Not to mention poor Sofi and Damien?”

Niko considered this, tilting his head to gaze up at the moon. Finally he said, “No. I want to go home. Besides, the Kniaz will find out soon enough. And you know what they say about shooting the messenger.” He ran a hand through his hair, his brow furrowing. “As for Sofi and Damien, there’s nothing they can do. Let them have a few final moments of peace, before they have to reckon with the loss of everything and everyone they love.”

Relief permeated every fiber of Katerina’s body. “Agreed,” she said.

“Good.”

Silence fell between them, broken only by the crackle of the fires’ blaze. Katerina forced herself to eat, stuffing bits of potato into her mouth. She’d rarely felt less hungry, but she’d used a lot of her magic today and needed to replenish her energy stores. If she didn’t, she’d risk draining Niko too. Her body would pull energy from his to sustain itself, and he would give it, until there was nothing left.

She gulped down the final bite, and he busied himself with pulling a blanket out of the satchel and setting their small campsite to rights. “Niko,” she said to his back, “what in the name of all the Saints do you think happened? There were so many of them. And the Darkness—it was like it had gotten loose from inside the Grigori somehow. As if it had taken on a life of its own.”

The night was mild, with just a slight bite to it, but still she wrapped her arms around herself, remembering her hopelessness when she’d been lying there, before Niko had blazed up with Light and saved them both. “I felt so cold,” she said. “As if I would never be warm again. As if I’d lost you forever.”

He was poking up one of the rowan-fires, but at this, he turned and made his way back to her. He knelt beside her, crushing the ferns. Their sharp green scent drifted up to her as he held her eyes with his own.

“You could never lose me, Katya. Do you understand? I’m yours. Always.”

She struggled to contain the shiver that rolled through her. “The cold...the Darkness... Did you feel it too?”

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Slowly, as if it cost him to make the admission, he nodded. “Our bond—it was like it had been cut in half. I’ve never felt pain like that. I feared you were dead. I couldn’t see you, Katya. I couldn’t see anything. And then the Light burst from me. I thought for an instant it was your fire, that you’d called it, but it didn’t taste of your magic. I think...I think it was because there were so many of them. I stood there and I burned and then—they came.”

This time, when the shiver took her, she didn’t fight it, and Niko’s eyes narrowed. “Are you cold?”

“No,” she said automatically, but he was already picking up the blanket and tucking it around her. When she shuddered again, he lay down next to her, curving his body around hers. Cocooning her.

“Let it go, Katya,” he said into her hair. “Let it out.”

All her fear, all her rage, rolled through her body, shaking her from head to toe. He simply held her, murmuring into her hair that he had her, that she was safe, that for now at least, it was over.

Niko had never held her like this. She had dreamed of it for so long, imagined how all of his coiled strength, his focused intensity, would translate in a touch, a kiss. She longed to feel what it would be like for him to lose all of his control in her arms, to send her witchfire licking along his skin until he came apart.

But that...that might be the end of everything.

She shook harder, and Niko's arms tightened around her. "I have you, Katya." His voice was gravelly, rough. "I will protect you to my last breath."

Speaking of breath, she could feel his on the nape of her neck, a warm, tickling sensation that sent a hot flush trickling through her. Her heartbeat quickened, her body quaking along the length of his, and behind her, Niko went stock-still. He shifted, creating a small space between their bodies, and Katerina was glad he couldn't see the blush that heated her cheeks. Surely he would be horrified if he knew what she was thinking right now, when his only intention was to keep her safe. If he knew that just maybe, her feelings for him were responsible for what had happened in Drezna.

"I know you will," she managed. There was nothing she could do about how husky her voice sounded; with luck, he would attribute that to the smoke from the fires.

"You fought with honor today, Katya. You fought with valor." His fingers touched her hair, brushing it away from her face. They trembled, and Katerina worried that he was more undone by what had happened than he was letting on. She tried to turn to face him, but he held her still. "You have leaves and twigs here. If I may...?"

Wordless, she nodded, and his fingers combed through her tangled waves, his touch deft despite the slight tremor. To her shame, the sensation was relaxing and sensual all at once. She couldn't suppress the purr that moved through her, and Niko froze, startled. His fingers paused in her hair. "Do...do you want me to stop?" he said, his voice a hint unsteady.

Surely it was Katerina's imagination that his words seemed heavier than they should be, weighted with meaning. As if he felt the same desire she did, and feared they walked a razor's edge.

That was ridiculous. All he was doing was keeping her warm. Removing bark and

dirt from her hair.

“No,” she said, struggling to keep her voice level. “Not unless you want to, that is. Don’t feel...obligated.”

Niko made a sound that hovered somewhere between a growl and a bitter laugh. He muttered something, but even close as they were, she couldn’t make it out. Just as she was about to sit up, to put an end to whatever this was, his fingers took up their slow, tortuous sifting through her hair once again.

Her shaking stilled, but Niko didn’t let go. He lay behind her, a bulwark against the night. After a bit, he rolled onto his back, doubtless so he could have a better view of their surroundings, but kept his free arm wrapped tight around her, pulling her with him, careful not to jar her wounded leg.

Katerina should move—Saints, she knew she should—but instead she lay with her head on Niko’s chest, listening to the steady, comforting thump of his heart. He’d removed all the debris from her hair, but he was still stroking it, calm and easy now, the way he petted Troitze when the stallion, who was high-strung, threatened to spook.

The way he had petted Troitze, anyway. Where were their horses? Were they dead, somewhere in the woods? She thought of Mika, who always took carrots from her hand and then nudged Katerina’s shoulder in thanks. Such a sweet horse. She didn’t deserve what had happened to her today. And now she was lost.

Tears filled her eyes, and her breath thickened. Niko pulled her closer. His lips ghosted over her hair when he spoke. “Shhh. We’re together. It will be all right.”

She wanted to ask him what he thought had happened to Mika and Troitze. If they would ever see the horses again. How they would get home, with her leg like this.

What they would do if they encountered another horde on the road. How the Darkness had boiled out of the Void and devoured a village whole, then threatened to consume their souls before the Grigori attacked. But she knew he had no answers, and she was afraid that if she started talking, the magic of the moment would shatter. That she might blurt out the truth: when he held her this way, all she could think about was the feel of his body against hers. That what had happened to their friends, to their horses, to Niko himself, might be all her fault.

So she said nothing, just lay still, trying not to cry as she thought of all they had lost in the destruction of Drezna. Hoping the villagers hadn't suffered. That it had been quick.

She wished, more than anything, that she could have saved them.

Niko was quiet, and she was sure he was wishing the same. He had been especially close with Alexandr and Leonid. Together with Damien, they'd often drunk kvass around the fire when she and Niko were the ones to deliver the tithe, and Niko had joined them on patrol. All Shadows were brothers, packs that fought together. She knew he must be mourning them, though he hadn't said a word about it. Nor would he; a Shadow's job was to protect, not to grieve for what had been lost. Maybe that was what was troubling him: he had no outlet for his sorrow.

She cried for them both, silent tears running down her face, until she had none left to shed. Around them, the fires blazed high, the wind stirring the branches of the trees. Overhead, the stars shone brightly, as if nothing terrible had happened at all. Katerina's chest tightened at the sight of the Firebird constellation, beak dipping low to drink in the night and wings spread wide above the disk of the moon.

Her father had called her mother his Firebird, because of the color of her hair and the flavor of her magic. When Katerina was born, he'd called her Little Firebird, well before they knew she could call not just flame, but earth, wind, and water to her hand.

Even now, fifteen years after her parents had been taken from her, whenever Katerina saw the Firebird in the night sky, she couldn't help but think of them.

Katerina had been there when the demon ripped out her mother's throat. She'd called her magic, meaning to incinerate the Grigori filth where he stood. But she'd only been six then, and her gifts, though powerful, were unpredictable. The demon had laughed while her mother bled to death, and Katerina's Vila minder had fled, with Katerina howling in her arms.

Katerina would never forget the look of determination on her mother's face when she flung herself between Katerina and the demon, nor the helplessness when her own magic failed to rise. Her mother had died saving Katerina's life, and Katerina had dedicated herself to never feeling that helpless again. She'd vowed never again to fail those she cared for, let alone those she was sworn to protect. Now, not only had she put Kalach in danger with her stunt at the Trials, but an entire village had fallen to the Dark on her watch. Guilt and regret swirled in her stomach, a bitter brew.

She forced herself to stop thinking of such terrible things. Surely she was not responsible for what had happened tonight, for the attacks that were rising all over Iriska. It didn't matter what she felt, after all. It only mattered what she did. And she had done nothing before the demons attacked, other than being too contrary and over-confident to turn back.

She hadn't lost Niko, no matter her mistakes. He was still here, still hers.

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Closing her eyes, she tried to memorize him: his hard chest, the carved muscle of his upper arm as it encircled her, the silken brush of his hair against her cheek. His familiar mint-and-blade-oil scent, undergirded with the garlic-and-ginger paste she'd dabbed on the scratches from the Grigori blades. He smelled, she thought, like a meal that might arise and stab you through the heart if you looked at it the wrong way. A smile lifted her lips at the thought.

Beneath her, her vicious meal of a Shadow shifted his weight. His muscles tensed, ready to spring into action, but his fingers in her hair were gentle, his touch soothing. Despite the worries that plagued her mind and the desire that heated her body, she drifted off to sleep at last, safe in her Shadow's arms.

13

KATERINA

When Katerina woke up, the sun had crested the trees and Niko was no longer beside her. The rowan-fires were still burning, though lower now, and Niko stood next to one of them, talking in soothing tones to?—

“Mika!” She leapt up, wincing as her injured leg took her weight. Hobbling over to the mare, she threw her arms around her horse's neck. “Niko, where did you find her?”

She could hear the smile in her Shadow's voice. “She found us. I dozed off for a bit before sunrise and woke to her nosing at my face. I suppose she thought I wasn't doing my duty.”

Katerina drew back, still hugging Mika, and shot him a glare. “Did you sleep at all?”

He waved a dirt-smudged hand. “I slept enough. Don’t worry about me. Worry about your horse. She looks...” His voice trailed off, but the concern in it had gotten Katerina’s attention. Reluctantly, she stepped away from Mika, giving her mare the once-over.

Mika’s mane was singed, her sides heaving. There were shallow gouges along her flanks, as if she’d shoved her waythrough branches and undergrowth. Her eyes were wide, the whites showing all around the irises. But she stood steady under Katerina’s touch, and when Niko offered her some dried apples from Baba’s satchel, she took them eagerly enough.

“Troitze?” Katerina said, hardly daring to look at Niko.

He shook his head, his shoulders slumping. Katerina knew how much he loved the big, stubborn stallion. “No sign of him. Which is too bad, because he could’ve carried us both. But Mika will carry you, and I’ll walk beside her. It’s better than what I’d expected.”

“She can carry us both for a short way,” Katerina argued. “I know her. She’s strong.”

“Maybe,” Niko said, sounding doubtful.

“Where do you expect she’s been all night?”

He looked the mare up and down and then sighed. “Nowhere good. Come on, Katya. It’s time to leave.”

The tripback to Kalach felt as if it took a thousand years. True to Katerina’s word, Mika was able to carry them both for some time, but Niko didn’t want to risk tiring

her, and so he walked next to the mare for a good deal of the way, his hand on her reins.

Katerina feared another Grigori attack, especially with the Bone Moon getting ever closer, but none befell them. There were no villages between Drezna and Kalach, just the road that wound through the woods and mountain passes. It was a wary journey, and Katerina's decimation of the bridge required them to take the long way home. When at last they smelled the rowan-fires that signaled the approach to Kalach, a weight slid off her shoulders.

Their village still stood. Whatever plague had been loosed upon Iriska, it hadn't reached Kalach...at least, not yet.

It was late afternoon, the day before the Bone Moon was set to rise, and Oriel and Galdrich were patrolling, one on either side of the iron gates that marked the main entrance to the village. The two Shadows came to attention as Katerina and Niko approached, her on the mare's back, him holding Mika's bridle. They dipped their heads in recognition of their alpha's return, then lifted them again in greeting. Dismay dawned on their faces as they noted Troitze's absence and Katerina's wounded leg. But when they asked about the Trials, Niko shook his head. "You'll hear soon enough," he said. "Katerina and I need to speak with Baba."

Katerina led Mika to the stables and gave the horse an apple and a grateful pat before turning to Niko. "There isn't time to clean up, is there?" she said, her tone rueful.

He wiped a smudge of dirt from her cheek. "I wish there were. But no. Come on."

They made their way past the farrier's and the blacksmith shop, then onto the cobblestone path that took them past the orchard and toward the small cottage where Baba Petrova lived. Without discussion, they'd chosen the most out-of-the-way route, the better to avoid questions about their battered appearance, Katerina's limp,

and the results of the Trials. But luck wasn't with them today, because children played alongside the path, tended by Vila—including Elena. Even from a distance, the golden gleam of her hair was unmistakable, as was the joy that broke across her face when Niko and Katerina approached.

She hurried toward them, her green-and-white dress swishing against her legs. "You're back—both of you!" she said, skidding to a halt in front of them. "Oh, I've been so worried. You're strong, of course, but anything could happen at the Trials. I burned incense at my shrine, asking for your safe return. And my prayers were answered. Thank the Saints, you're here!"

She stepped forward to embrace Niko, and Katerina braced herself for the inevitable twist in her gut. But Niko caught Elena by the wrists and held her still. "I'm filthy," he said as puzzlement knitted her blond brows. "We've come straight from the road."

The Vila's smile dimmed, but she nodded in understanding as Niko let her go. "Of course." Her cornflower-blue gaze slid sideways, taking Katerina in for the first time. It darkened with concern, and Katerina felt like a terrible person. "Here I am, chattering away, and...are you injured? Could Rivki's healers not at least patch you up before you got on the road home, or did something happen on the way? Niko, are you hurt?"

Behind her, the children Elena was meant to be tending were staring at Niko and Katerina, eyes wide, no doubt imagining that the two had returned from a glorious mission. When Katerina was small, she'd envisioned Rivki as a place of incredible riches, with its gold-domed churches and noblefolk dressed in fine fabrics. Only later had she come to understand it was a prison for the likes of her.

She cleared her throat, not wanting to frighten them. "We're fine. But we need to see Baba, Elena. Something's happened, and she needs to know about it at once."

“But...” Elena said doubtfully, her gaze flicking between the two of them.
“Your leg, Katerina. And Niko... your arms...”

“Just defensive wounds.” He offered her a conciliatory smile. “I’m whole. Katerina’s right, though; we need to talk to Baba. And,” he said, gesturing behind her, “I think your charges are getting restless.”

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The Shadowchildren and young Vila and Dimis had come up behind Elena, peering shyly around her skirts. One little Dimi girl in particular, Esther, stared at Katerina with awe. She whispered to the young Vila next to her, whose face took on a similarly worshipful expression. Blind from birth, Halya negotiated Kalach with confidence using a cane that her Shadow father had carved for her from rowanwood. She and Esther were often together, and Katerina had overheard the Dimichild, a gifted artist, painting the world for Halya with words. Surely, she was doing the same thing for the Vila now, describing Katerina and Niko's glorious return.

Normally, this would have amused Katerina. But now, it terrified her. What if she couldn't keep Esther or Halya—keep any of them—safe?

As Elena stroked the braids of the children who clung to her, admonishing them to go back to playing in the garden, a chill ran through Katerina. She imagined all of Kalach vanishing into that awful crater, everyone she knew and loved gone. She'd been so worried about being Reaped, but this was far worse.

She swayed, and Niko touched her arm, steadying her. "Baba will feed us," he said, mistaking her unsteadiness for hunger. "We'll tell her everything. Then we can go home, wash, and rest."

Katerina forced a smile. "Okay," she said. "Let's get this over with."

She glanced back once as they walked away, Katerina favoring her injured leg. Elena stood on the path, watching them go, her gilded hair shining like sheaves of wheat in the bright sunlight, her expression troubled. A pang of guilt shot through Katerina. As Niko was meant to protect her, so she was meant to protect the Vila. She pushed her

uncharitable feelings down, down, down into the depths of her soul, and went to do what must be done.

The only positive thing to come out of the destruction of Drezna and the demon-battle on the road was that Katerina's misstep at the Trials paled in comparison. She and Niko had agreed to spin the truth, saying that when his life was in danger, Katerina's magic had somehow burst through the constraints of the binding. It had taken her by surprise, she said, so she hadn't been prepared to guard against it. She'd never meant for this to happen.

Baba Petrova's initial anger at her lack of control had faded into the background with each word Katerina spoke. By the time she and Niko finished, unspooling the whole ugly story, the Kniaz's decision to have the two of them advance to the next round of the Trials was the least of Baba's concerns.

"This bodes no good," she said, pacing the length of her parlor after they'd told her everything and handed over Baba Volkova's sigil. The old Dimi had been pacing for so long, it was a wonder she hadn't worn a hole straight through the floorboards.

Katerina couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't risk mentioning the prophecy; to do so would be to implicate herself, and Niko along with her. And he had done nothing, other than protect her as a Shadow should protect his Dimi. He was innocent in all of this. Not to mention, he'd worked so hard to reclaim his family's name. How could she drag him into the muck, based on her unforgivable one-sided feelings? But if there was a chance that something else was to blame, a force that could alleviate the awful weight on her chest that threatened to suffocate her, she had to know. "We've told you everything," she said, impatiently. "What can it mean?"

Baba Petrova's face was as shriveled as a wizened apple. Somehow, the lines in her cheeks managed to carve themselves even more deeply when she said, "I don't know, Katerina. First, the rise of your powers, in all their complexity and immensity. Now,

this. There must be balance in the world, you know that as well as I. You are a great force for the Light; but your power has called, and the Dark has answered.”

What if the ancient Dimi was right that Katerina was the cause of this madness...but for reasons that she would never dream of? Katerina wished desperately that she could talk with Baba in private, to confide in her, but that would be madness. Instead, she hid her horror, pulling sarcasm around her like a shield. “What are you saying? That perhaps I should have done us all a favor and died on that road?”

Baba stopped her pacing and took a gulp of the cooling tea from the porcelain cup on her kitchen table, as if for strength. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m only speaking what’s in front of all our faces. Besides, your ceasing to exist now would do no good at all. The damage has been done.”

Indignation flushed through Katerina’s body, heating her cheeks. Her magic stirred inside her, uneasy, and the air in the cottage stirred along with it, rustling the curtains, feeding the hearth’s flames. The silver samovar that hung from its ring above the fire rattled, the water inside sloshing, and Baba shot her a warning glance.

“I’m not the damage,” Katerina snapped, worry sharpening each syllable. “The damage is what we did to those Grigori scum who now line the road to Drezna. The damage is what they did to an entire village of innocents, not to mention our fellow Dimis and Shadows!”

“Yes,” Baba said, dismissing Katerina’s temper. “We must grieve for them properly. Mourn them. It’s a terrible blow. But we also need to know more, for our own safety and the safety of Iriska. I’d like you to share everything you’ve told me with the Elder Council; I’ll call a meeting. I’m sure they’ll recommend sending someone to the Magiya. But not the two of you,” she said, before Katerina could speak. “We need you here. And you’ve been through enough.”

Neither Niko nor Katerina had ever been to the Magiya. It was a week's travel on horseback, in the heart of Volshetska, a mountain fortress, surrounded by the strongest wards imaginable and run by elder Shadows and Dimis who had devoted their lives to scholarship. If the answers to what had happened lay anywhere, it was there.

"If not us, then who?" Niko said, dropping their empty borscht bowls into the washbasin with a clank. Katerina eyed him with surprise; it wasn't like him to be so argumentative, let alone so careless with Baba's china—the destruction that he'd wreaked the morning of the failed binding ceremony aside. But he wasn't looking at her. His gaze flitted between Baba's face and her front door, as if he suspected a threat might be lurking right outside.

"Nadia and Oriel, probably. It'll be up to the Council to decide. But the scholars at the Magiya need to know what's happening. Perhaps they can stop this evil before it spreads." Baba sank into a chair, downing the dregs of her tea. "And we need to inform the Kniaz. Doubtless he'll send someone to investigate; the road will have to be cleared for safe passage, and the crater consecrated and sealed. Rivki is on the way to the Magiya; if the Council approves, I'll have Nadia and Oriel take word. But not tonight, and not tomorrow, either." She cast her gaze outside, toward the darkening sky. "The dead won't rest easy in their graves until the Bone Moon passes, and even as we speak, the barrier to the Underworld grows thin."

Fear seized Katerina at the thought of Nadia and Oriel on that road, alone. "What if something happens to them?"

"We can't spare anyone else. My hope is that the Kniaz will send them to the Magiya with reinforcements, once he hears what they have to say." Baba peered down at her sodden tea leaves, as if their pattern might reveal the future. "You did what you had to in the woods, Katerina. I don't begrudge it, and thank the Saints your magic was no longer bound. Make no mistake, though: People might have overlooked what

happened at the Trials. They see what they want to see. But after this, there will be no hiding what you're capable of."

"I shouldn't have to hide it," Katerina protested. "Niko's Light and my magic saved us. It saved anyone else that demon horde would have encountered. How can that be a bad thing?"

Sadness swam in the depths of Baba's faded eyes. "Because you've made yourself a target, Katerina, for Gadreel, no less. And with you, all of us. You must be cautious where you go now, what you do. For strange things are afoot. I know that without hearing back from the Magiya, and so do you."

"Wait for it..." Niko muttered, almost to himself.

Katerina glared at him, then lifted her chin. "I'm not afraid."

Niko sighed. "And there it is."

Baba Petrova regarded her with an expression that bore a suspicious resemblance to pity. "You should be, Katerina. You should be very frightened indeed. Because now, Gadreel knows that you exist. What you can do. And mark my words...he will come for you."

Exhaustion permeated every fiber of Katerina's body as she and Niko limped up to the front door of the cottage they shared. It was a blessedly familiar sight, the door painted a vibrant blue to ward off evil and the shingles freshly whitewashed, the trim that adorned the roof inscribed with protective runes: safety, strength, Light. Elderflowers bloomed in the planters flanking the doors, and the glass chime that hung from the rowan in the front yard sang softly in the breeze.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside. Everything was just as they had left it:

the small wooden table with its white porcelain pitcher; the red rag rug in the center of their living space, with two comfortable chairs weighing it down; the hearth, with its fire banked by one of Baba's young herbalist apprentices. The pallet where Niko slept was neatly rolled up in one corner, his blue quilt folded next to it. Through an arched doorway, Katerina could see her four-poster bed with its white quilt, a dried spray of lavender hanging above her headboard so nothing would trouble her dreams.

Niko had put it there, after she'd woken screaming from a nightmare of the demon's teeth sinking into her mother's throat. To protect you in your sleep, he'd said. Where I cannot.

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It had been the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for Katerina. But she'd seen the way her Shadow's gaze couldn't hold hers, the way he fiddled with his blades rather than meet her eyes, and knew he'd felt self-conscious. So she'd let it go...but every night, when she slid into bed, she knew he was watching over her.

"Home at last," he said, coming in behind her now. "And not a moment too soon."

It was the first thing he'd said since Baba had done her best to heal Katerina's leg, using a combination of herbs and charms, and they'd departed her cottage. The whole way down the winding streets that led through the village square and past the pastures where the horses grazed, he'd walked in silence, only grunting in response to Katerina's attempts to make conversation. His head swiveled, like he expected demons to come creeping out of the trees or between the small cottages the Vila shared, near the red-roofed, wood-sided building where they cared for small Dimi, Vila, and Shadowchildren. His eyes had lingered on the runes inscribed on the window trim and the shutters, as if to see if they'd been tampered with.

The silence was unlike him. Katerina was usually the one to brood, and he the one to jolly her out of it. But there was no jollying Niko out of anything. Whatever strange mood had settled upon him in the clearing last night had returned full-force. He'd glared at Elena's cottage as they passed it, the shadows beginning to slip from the trees to lick their way up the path that led to the Vila's door. He'd glared at the birds who had the audacity to cross their path. And he was glaring at their cottage now, stalking the length of the front room and then into Katerina's bedroom, where he peered under the bed as if checking for evil spirits or monsters.

She came up behind him, and he whirled, only relaxing a hair when he saw it was her.

“Kikimora usually live in the cellar or behind the stove, you know,” she told him, endeavoring to lighten the mood. “And we haven’t got a cellar. If there’s a house spirit behind the stove, perhaps I can persuade it to make us a cup of tea.”

“Everything is a joke to you, Katya,” he said, stomping past her as if he actually intended to inspect the stove for demonic invasion. But no; he grabbed the fireplace poker and thrust it into the chimney, looking satisfied when he skewered nothing but air. He made sure the door was locked, then pulled his spare blades from the rune-carved cabinet, undid the velvet cloth that held them, and began grimly sharpening them one by one.

When Katerina was upset, she usually set something on fire. Niko, on the other hand...well, he didn’t get upset, not like this. He faced whatever was bothering him head-on and then got over it; she supposed it was the only way he was able to deal with her volatility, to strike the balance that made them the perfect warrior pairing. She had no idea how to handle this new version of her Shadow, who glowered at his blades as if he would like to put them through the eye of the next creature that was unfortunate enough to cross his path.

Well, the only creature here was Katerina, and she had no intention of getting eye-skewered. She stayed out of his way, tidying their cottage—sweeping the floor, setting a pot full of sweet-smelling herbs on the wood-burning stove, boiling water for chamomile tea and then crumbling bits of lavender, valerian, and lemon balm into it. She set a cup next to Niko, hoping the soothing aroma would help, but he didn’t so much as acknowledge it. Instead, he finished sharpening his blades, lay two of them on the table as if he expected a demon to come calling, and then stalked to the cabinet and put the rest carefully away.

Katerina thought that now, surely, he would speak. But no: he paced to the windows, peered out, then grabbed his pallet and unrolled it in front of the hearth. His aura was a stormcloud, so dark that for a terrible instant, she wondered if holding off the

Grigori on the road had infected him somehow.

She couldn't take it anymore. "What is it? What's troubling you?"

"Nothing."

This was so obviously untrue, she didn't dignify entertaining it. "Is it because I insisted we stay on the road? Or do you miss Elena?" The Vila's name tore at Katerina's throat, and she forced a smile. "Maybe you wish to seek solace with her, after what we've been through. That's understandable; I wouldn't resent it if you wanted to abandon my hearth for hers."

Lie, a voice whispered inside her head. Lie, lie, lie.

"I don't want to go see Elena." His voice was gruff as he unfolded his quilt, set it to the side of the fireplace, checked the windows for intruders. Checked them again.

Relief flooded Katerina, and she fought to squelch it. "No? Then for the love of all the Saints, can you stop fidgeting and look at me?"

At that, Niko turned. The look on his face was like nothing she'd ever seen before: a cold black fury, turning his gray eyes to chips of mica and setting his face in lines of granite. She took an involuntary step backward as he stalked toward her.

"Are you that oblivious, Katerina? Do you really not see?"

"See what?" It was an effort to keep her voice level as he advanced on her. She stepped backward, once, then again, until he caged her against the wall by her bed. "What are you talking about?"

"Elena is fine." He spat the words, an inch from her face. Rage rolled off him, staining

his aura with a near-tangible red tint. “You, on the other hand... How do you think it made me feel to hear Baba say you are the cause of what happened on the road to Drezna?”

This close to him, it was hard for Katerina to breathe, let alone think. She stared up into those storm-dark eyes and gave it her best effort. “Angry with me?”

He growled, the sound rumbling up from his chest and shaking them both. His hands were braced on either side of her head, his body tense as if for battle. “You are impossible!”

Katerina had never seen him like this. Teeth bared and blade bloody in defense of her and of Kalach, sure. Filled with unspoken fury and grief at what had befallen the citizens of Drezna, without question. Irritated with the risks she took, definitely. But never had the slow-burning, controlled rage that simmered within him been directed at her. “I’m sorry,” she managed. “I should have listened to you. We never should have left the island?—”

“You think that’s what I’m upset about?” His voice was low, dangerous. “We’ve been over this. If we hadn’t been there, on that road, who knows where that horde would’ve gone next? We couldn’t save Drezna, but we saved others, Dimi mine. You were right to face the danger, rather than to run from it.”

Puzzlement creased Katerina’s brow. “But then what?—”

He slammed a fist into the plaster beside her head. Dust rose, sifting through the air. She flinched, and he swore, shaking his head so that his dark hair, loose from its tie, spilled into his eyes. “Saints, Katerina, don’t you see? This evil...the attacks across Iriska...it’s coming from too many places at once. None of those demons survived, true, but they were minions. Whoever sent them will have long since discovered what befell his soldiers, and will be on the hunt for the cause. You heard Baba: Gadreel

himself will want you. To take you, to destroy you, to use you. How am I supposed to protect you now?"

Pain lanced through Katerina, so sharp it made her gasp for breath. She looked up into her Shadow's furious eyes and realized, to her horror, that the pain wasn't her own. It was his.

She could bear anything but that.

"Niko." She brushed her fingertips across his face, rough with stubble. "Don't do this to yourself. This burden isn't yours to bear."

He stared down at her, his eyes darkening further still. And then his hand came up, wrapping around hers, their fingers intertwining. His eyes held hers, and Katerina's magic rose. It knew him. It wanted him.

Slowly, so slowly, his head lowered, his lips a breath from hers. He froze there, her claiming his breath for her own, him taking it back again. Katerina's heart pounded, her skin tingling. Her magic spiked, wanting out, and air hissed between Niko's teeth.

What was happening?

She forced herself to think of the men in the village who she might wed. Of Konstantin or Maksim. Katerina didn't have to love them. But they were the ones she should want to kiss. To bed. Not Niko.

It was no use. Despite herself, she pictured him pressing his lips to hers. Touching her. Tasting her. And what would become of them then? Already, the demon horde had destroyed Drezna. What if her love for her Shadow burned down their entire world?

"Katerina," Niko said, low-voiced. She could see him trembling.

A hint of witchfire escaped her—not enough to burn, just enough to caress. It curled around Niko, tendrils of heat slipping down the column of his neck, twining down his arm. Seeking his Mark, and finding it.

The moment her magic met her own blood, infused into the tattoo Baba had given him at their bonding ceremony, the spark became a flame. She felt the sear of his brand as if it marked her own skin a moment before he leapt back from her. She caught a glimpse of his face—pale and shocked, with blotches of high color staining his cheekbones. His eyes were wide and dark, the pupils blown wide, consuming the irises.

They stared at each other for a long moment. Niko's chest heaved, and he pressed his palm to his Mark, teeth bared. Around Katerina's neck, her amulet throbbed. She reached for him, but he took one shaky step back from her, then another.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Niko shook his head, turning away. Without another word, he lay down on his pallet by the fire and pulled the quilt over himself, leaving Katerina standing there, cold and alone, her back against the wall.

Shame coiled through her. What had she done?

Niko lay still and silent, eyes fixed on the flames. The six feet between them might as well have been a gaping crevasse. She didn't know how to cross it. Didn't know if she should.

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, Katerina straightened her spine. She wasn't some helpless girl, a Vila destined to vie for Niko's attention or a villager who dreamed of one day bedding a Shadow. She was a Dimi, and the world bent to her will, not the other way around. If he was going to ignore her, then Saints be damned. She wasn't going to beg him.

She made herself move, scrubbing her teeth with a willow twig, then walking down the path to the necessary. Back inside, she stepped behind the screen in her bedroom and changed into the thin white shift she wore for sleeping. She washed her face and brushed out her long red hair as she always did, sitting at the vanity by her bedside. A hundred strokes; she counted them, trying to time her breathing with each passage of the brush through her hair. It was no use: her heart pounded like a wild thing, and her breath came short, no matter how she tried to calm it. In the living room in front of the fire, Niko didn't move. Didn't joke with her, or greet her with a smile, or chastise her for walking to the necessary without him.

Had she broken things between them? Had she ruined everything?

For a moment, she could have sworn he wanted the same thing she did. But of course, he hadn't. What had she been thinking?

Grimly, she stood and went to her bed, slipping between the crisp white sheets, beneath the spray of lavender Niko had hung for her. She tried to tamp her magic down, but it roiled inside her. The wind picked up, sending a loose shutter banging against the cottage.

Katerina stared at the white plaster ceiling, watching the shadows of the rowan's branches play across it, listening to the thud of the shutter. Her stomach churned.

She'd touched him with her magic, when he hadn't asked for it. She'd let her witchfire twine around his body, committing an act that was intended only between a Dimi and her lover, and then, only in the marriage bed. How horrified by her he must be now. No wonder he wouldn't speak to her.

Then again, he'd slammed a fist into the wall next to her head. Perhaps they were even.

No, she told herself. They would never be even, not when she felt this way for him. And tomorrow night, he would be formally betrothed to Elena, in front of the entire village.

It was bad enough that she'd lied and betrayed Kalach, that the Kniaz had chosen the two of them to advance to the next round of the Trials, all because she couldn't stand to see Niko hurt. Now, she'd disgraced herself. She had compromised her bond with her Shadow, while hordes of Grigori were afoot. If she had indeed loosed the demons on the world because of her feelings for her Shadow, then surely she had just made things ten times worse. She had ruined everything with?—

“Niko,” she said, before she could stop herself.

Through the gap in the door, she saw him stir, though he didn't turn. “Go to sleep, Katya.”

“But—”

“Sleep,” he said again. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Katerina lay still. She closed her eyes, feigning unconsciousness. But sleep didn’t find her that night.

14

KATERINA

The Bone Moon rose, pitiless and all-seeing, the night Katerina Ivanova’s Shadow pledged his life to another.

It was a holy ceremony, the promise of a Vila to a Shadow. The entire village of Kalach had turned out for the occasion: the farmers and the artisans, the shopkeepers and the scholars. The other Vila, of course, to witness the moment Elena had dreamed of since she was a child. Niko’s fellow Shadows, to stand in solidarity with him. Katerina and her fellow Dimis. The five Elders, who governed Kalach. And Baba Petrova, who presided over it all.

Clad in their ceremonial blue robes, emblazoned with runes for wisdom, knowledge, and justice, the village Elders took their places behind Baba Petrova. They fanned out in a line, with Elder Mikhailova all the way on the right, to give him the best angle of sight from his chair.

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The five of them—Elders Dykstrova, Gamayun, Balandin, Dobrow, and Mikhailova—had governed Kalach for as long as Katerina could remember. With their lined faces, intricate, silver-white braids, and long beards, the three women and two men seemed both ancient and ageless.

Elders Gamayun and Balandin hailed from Povorino, far to the south, where volcanoes lurked within mountains and lava fell like rain. Their skin was darker than the others', a beautiful, burnished brown. Elders Dykstrova, Dobrow, and Mikhailova had been raised in Kalach, and their parents had governed the village before them. The Elder Council was the village's mind; Baba was its heart and soul. Together, they honored Kalach's traditions and kept the peace.

Moonlight filtered through the arched, stained glass windows of the chapel, illuminating the forms of Sant Andrei, Sant Antoniya, and Sant Viktoriya. Elena was resplendent in her mauve dress, its sleeves embroidered with vynohrad vines and fruit, signifying domestic happiness, and diamond-shaped rhombs, for fertility. Velvet-petaled guelder roses wove through her blond hair, their plump crimson berries representing the passion of the marriage bed.

Elena's eyes shone, her expression transported. All Vila were descended from Sant Viktoriya, but Katerina was hard-pressed to think of any who worshiped the ancient saint as ardently as she did. Since they were small, Elena had wanted nothing more than to follow in Sant Viktoriya's footsteps, to wed and give birth to Vila and Shadowchildren to defend the glory of Iriska. Sometimes, Katerina wondered if Elena truly loved Niko, or whether she loved what he represented. What he could offer her.

Her Shadow stood across from Elena, clad in gold. The lapels of his jacket were

embroidered with oak charms, their thick trunks and sprawling branches symbolizing strength and commitment. With his dark hair tamed into submission and his gray eyes gleaming like the silver surface of wishing-fountain coins, he was too much for Katerina to look at, altogether.

She was here to support his engagement to Elena. But every second she stood by his side and pretended this was anything but agony made a liar out of her.

She swallowed hard, averting her gaze to Baba's apprentices, who were lighting a circle of candles around Elena and Niko. Though the girls didn't possess magic, they'd been chosen for their gifts for healing and their dedication to the village's ways. They had lit the candles on Katerina's thirteenth Bone Moon, when she and Niko were sworn to each other as Shadow and Dimi. Niko had vowed that night to fight for her in his mortal form and in the form of his black dog, to protect her from supernatural forces and mortal threats alike. And she had vowed to stand with him, to bind her soul to his, to fight only for the Light.

The two of them had been so young then, battles with Grigori nothing but imagined glory, and the Kniaz's claim a far-off threat. Now, they had the deaths of innumerable demons to their names, and there was just a year until the second round of the Trials, when Kniaz Sergey might well Reap them and force them to leave everyone they loved.

Now, Niko was about to pledge himself to Elena.

The apprentices lit the last candle, blew out their matches, and stepped back, looking to Baba for approval. It was a foolish element of the ceremony, Katerina thought; she herself could have lit the candles with no more than a passing whim. But Baba was a believer in conserving magic, in only using it when the situation demanded. Every spell has its cost, she was fond of saying. If you don't pay it now, you'll pay later. Watch out, or you'll pay in blood.

Baba inclined her head at the apprentices, in their diaphanous white gowns, and then turned to face the villagers, Dimis, Shadows, and Vila, crowded into the wooden pews. She raised her gnarled hands, and the candles' flames flared higher. "People of Kalach," she said, her cracked voice resonant. "We are gathered here today to witness the pledging of alpha Niko Alekhin, the Shadow of Dimi Ivanova, and Elena Lisova, blessed among the Vila. In three months' time, the two will marry. And our covenant with the Saints will remain an unbreakable chain, binding us to them, protecting us from the Dark."

Katerina gritted her teeth and stiffened her spine. She was a powerful Dimi and spellcaster, the strongest in centuries. She could master this.

Niko had never been meant to be only hers, forever. She could find a way to let him go.

One of Baba's apprentices came forward, bearing a precious copy of the Book of the Light. Facing the congregation, the ancient Dimi took it and began to read.

"In the beginning, there was the Dark," she intoned. "It hungered. It waited. It wanted. But it was not alone."

Katerina had heard this story a hundred times—as a child at Baba's knee, during her training as a Dimi, at every marriage and bonding ceremony. Still, she forced herself to listen.

"From the heavens, the Grigori Watchers fell one by one, cast out for disobeying the will of the Light. The fallen angels descended into Darkness, and the Darkness welcomed their fall. It crept inside them, a pitch-black tendril that twined around their souls. It lived within them, and fueled them, and still it hungered for more. For the Darkness is never satisfied."

As one, the villagers shuddered. Across from Katerina, Elena shuddered, too, as if the words pained her. It was all Katerina could do not to roll her eyes.

“The Grigori carved out territory in the Underworld,” Baba said, turning the page. “But soon, they craved more human souls to fuel their empire and preyed on the world above ground, nearly claiming it for the Dark. All might have been lost, if not for those who would become Saints: Sant Antoniya, Sant Viktoriya, Sant Andrei.” She let her eyes linger on Katerina, Elena, and Niko, in turn. “Across the world they fled, hunted by the Grigori, until they reached the village of Kalach. When they could run no more, they built a chapel in the woods and prayed to the Light for strength. And the Light answered.”

She turned to Katerina, inclining her head in a gesture of respect. “To Sant Antoniya, it gave the holy gift of the Dimi: to command the wind and move the trunks of the trees; to call storms to her will and spur fire.” Her gaze shifted to Niko. “To Sant Andrei, it gave the gift of the Shadow: to transform into a guardian that would stand between humanity and evil, cleaving unto his Dimi, a Light to help her battle the Dark.” Her eyes settled, finally, on Elena. “And to Sant Viktoriya, it gave the gift of the Vila: to bear Shadowchildren and young Vila, to safeguard the Light that would vanquish the Darkness of this world and the next.”

The congregation murmured in approbation, then fell silent as Baba cleared her throat once more. “And so the Seven Villages of Iriska—Kalach, Drezna, Satvala, Liski, Povorino, Voronezh, Bobrov—became a realm within a realm, home of the portals to the Underworld, warded to protect the world beyond. The Saints founded a dynasty, and together, Shadows, Dimis, and Vila rose against the Grigori, keeping the covenant of the Light.”

Six villages now, Katerina thought. And who knew which would be the next to fall? But Baba’s face was calm, betraying no hint of what had befallen Drezna, when she spoke again. “The battle for our souls still rages, as it will while the Grigori demons

walk the path between this world and the next. Shadow or Dimi, Vila or villager, it is our responsibility to fight.” Her gaze fell now on the congregation, and her voice rose, deep and cracked. “It is our sacred duty to keep the Dark at bay and defend the Light.”

“It is our duty,” the villagers chorused. And, “It is our duty,” the assembled Dimis, Shadows, and Vila echoed in turn.

“May we honor the Saints,” Baba said, eyes rising to the stained glass windows. “May we pray for their protection; may we tread always on the side of the Light.”

Two of her apprentices broke ranks, materializing by Baba’s side. One took the Book of the Light with careful, reverent hands. The other handed Baba a ceremonial goblet of wine.

“In the words of our holy Saints,” Baba said, raising it high, “by the gleam of the Bone Moon, may we lift a glass in honor of those who have perished so we might live: One for the fire, two for the storm.”

She closed her eyes and drank, her wrinkled throat moving as she swallowed. When she finished, the apprentice reclaimed the goblet, then took up her place once more.

Baba’s dark eyes flickered open, arms raised, as if to welcome the arrival of the Light. “There is a rhythm to Kalach. As there is to all of Iriska.”

“Blessed be Iriska,” the villagers intoned, as one.

At Baba’s signal, the apprentices lifted their treshchotkas from the table next to the altar. They had carved these instruments for the occasion, sanding the boards, threading them carefully with a blessed string until they fanned out evenly. Their hands moved in a blur, flickering in the flames from the candles and the wall-

mounted sconces, as the boards of the treshchotkas clacked together, a hypnotic backdrop for Baba's words.

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“First we sow,” Baba said. “And then we reap. As it is meant to be.”

“As it has ever been,” the villagers echoed.

“Blessed be the union of this Shadow and his Vila, so that the spirits may look favorably upon our fields. Blessed be the Saints, by whose grace we live and thrive.”

“Blessed be the Saints.”

“Blessed be the Kniaz, the Saint-anointed protector of our realm. Blessed be the harvest, so that we may have enough grain to gift him our tithe.”

“Blessed be the Kniaz,” the villagers chanted.

Fighting to keep her expression blank, Katerina let her gaze drift over the faces of the crowd that filled the pews. There was Dmitri, the blacksmith, who forged the Shadows’ blades. Elyosha, who had crafted Katerina’s amulet, carving the sigil of the Dimi into the precious metal of its surface. And Trinika, who baked the cinnamon-spiced apple pies that were Niko’s favorite.

Behind them sat Konstantin and Maksim, a few seats apart. They looked like negative images of each other; Konstantin was dark-haired and dark-eyed, serious, whereas Maksim was yellow-haired and green-eyed, his lips always on the verge of a smile. Despite his lighthearted demeanor, Maksim was the more observant of the two. He caught Katerina’s eye and winked.

He was charming. Good-looking. Hard-working. There was nothing wrong with him

at all, except that he wasn't the one she wanted.

Embarrassed, she glanced away, her gaze falling on the children in the front row. Their lips formed the words of the response, their faces transported, lulled into complacency by the steady thud-thud-thud of the treshchotkas and the confidence in Baba's voice.

"We tithe, and in return, the Kniaz offers us protection," Baba said. "Should there be a war, he will defend us. Should there be a famine, he will share what we have given, to be sure we eat. For his line was chosen by the Saints to protect us."

Katerina didn't believe this for a second. The Kniaz took what he would, and cared not for Kalach or anywhere else. But to say so aloud was treason—not to mention blasphemy.

"Blessed be the Dimis and their Shadows." Baba turned, looking at Katerina and Niko, then at the Dimis that stood by the altar, flanked by their Shadows. "For they defend our souls from descent into the demon realms, where they would be used as fuel for the Grigori's fire."

The stronger the Dimi, the greater her ability to fend off demonic invasion, with her black dog at her side. But the stronger the Dimi, the more alluring she was to the Grigori, who sought to harness her power to fuel their own. It was the greatest of ironies: the better able to defend Kalach Katerina became, the more she drew the demons to its doors. And if Baba Petrova were to be believed, the very gift that had allowed Katerina to defeat the Grigori on the road to Drezna was tied to the reason the demons had been there at all.

Katerina didn't know which was worse: to believe that her very essence had caused the destruction of Drezna, or that her feelings for her Shadow had summoned the demons. Either way, she was to blame.

“In a year comes the Reaping.” Baba’s eyes were bright now, lit from within. A stranger might mistake this for fervor, but Katerina knew what it truly was: fury for what Kalach must lose, mixed with a healthy dose of fear. “It comes as no surprise that Dimi Ivanova and Shadow Alekhin shone at the first round of the Trials, despite the binding of their power. At the next Bone Moon, a year hence, they will compete again for the right to serve in the Druzhina. In so doing, they will serve the Saints, as well.”

Rage coursed through Katerina’s veins at the thought of leaving the village to fend for itself during these dark times, and she tamped it down with an effort. This was her own fault, after all. If her love for her Shadow hadn’t superseded her commitment to their village, she wouldn’t be in this position. But that didn’t mean she had to like it.

As if divining her thoughts, Baba gave Katerina a sad, acknowledging smile. “If and when they depart,” she said, “their brethren will remain behind, to defend us from the hungry, greedy Grigori. And where a Dimi and Shadow go, so shall the Shadow’s Vila.”

“Blessed be the Vila,” the villagers intoned. “For they continue the Shadow line.”

Elena’s ruby-stained lips lifted in a euphoric smile, as if she were picturing the moment such a thing would occur. Katerina fought the urge not to throw up.

“Niko Alekhin,” Baba said, and the treshchotkas stilled. “Shadow of Kalach. Black dog of Katerina Ivanova. Do you accept the Vila Elena Lisova as your betrothed?”

Silence hung in the air, and Katerina’s hopes hung with it. She didn’t know what she was hoping for, exactly—that Niko would tell Baba no? That he would refuse?

He couldn’t do such a thing. For one, this betrothal was a sacred covenant, owed to the Saints. For another, he of all people had to honor this union, after the way his

father had tainted the family name. What had almost happened last night—he was right to have turned from her, for so many reasons.

She knew he had to answer Baba. But still?—

Next to her, Niko drew one deep breath, then another. “I do,” he said.

“Do you vow to protect your Vila with the last drop of your blood after you are wed? To consummate your union, and be blessed with a new generation of Shadowchildren and Vila?”

Katerina fixed her gaze on the dust motes that drifted through the air. She inhaled, letting the musky scent of incense fill her lungs, and pretended Niko’s answer wouldn’t break her heart.

“I do,” he said.

“Elena Lisova of the Vila.” Baba’s voice was grave. “Do you accept the Shadow Niko Alekhin as your betrothed?”

Katerina forced herself to look at the woman she’d grown up playing hide-and-seek and hunt-the-demon with. Elena was glowing, her pale cheeks rosy and her blue eyes bright. “I do,” she said, and behind her, the other Vila let out a murmur of approval.

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“Do you vow to be a soft place for him after battle, to welcome him at your hearth and with your body, so that he may sire on you the next generation of Shadowchildren and Vila?”

“I do,” Elena said without hesitation. “I will.”

“Then take his hands,” Baba told her.

A beatific smile lighting her face, Elena reached for Niko. Her expression was one of elation and absolute trust, as if she never doubted he would receive her. But Niko wasn't looking at her. He had turned his head, and his gaze fell full on Katerina.

What did he want from her? Acceptance? Approval? Neither of those things were hers to give. She looked back at him, head held high, and fought not to light the chapel aflame.

Niko's gaze dropped from her face to the amulet around her neck, the one that marked him as hers. It throbbed against her collarbone once, twice. And then he turned back to Elena, squared his shoulders, and extended his hands to her.

The apprentices approached from the four corners of the chapel in their flowing white dresses. Each of them held a ribbon that represented one of the four elements: red for fire, blue for water, white for air, brown for earth. And then came a fifth, clad in black, weaving her way between the candles. Once. Twice. Seven times, for luck. She held another ribbon: yellow, for the light a Shadow brought to shatter the dark.

The fifth apprentice had been born with a deformed foot and one leg shorter than the

other; Pietyr, one of Kalach's cobblers, had crafted her an ingenious shoe that evened her gait. The wooden heel thumped, hollow, as Feya traced her path between the flames, clutching her yellow ribbon. The sound echoed throughout the chapel, an ominous thud-thud-thud that reflected the anxious beat of Katerina's heart.

Baba lifted her hands, and one by one the apprentices in the circle brought their ribbons to her, laying them across her palm. They gleamed in the torchlight, dyed with madder root and wild blueberries, with saffron and walnut hulls. And one by one, Baba took the ribbons and twined them around Elena and Niko's hands, binding them together.

"Blessed by the elements," she intoned. "Blessed by the Saints."

Katerina had always thought that when a Dimi's heart broke, it would be a sound as loud as the shattering of a thousand glasses. That it would have the power of a hundred Dimis, drowning entire villages in a tidal wave, lighting the world aflame.

But her heart broke in silence, and the only person who drowned in its aftermath was Katerina herself.

15

KATERINA

"Tell me what you're thinking," Niko whispered. "Please."

Katerina spared him a glance, even though it hurt her to look at him. He was stretched out in front of the fire atop his blue quilt, chin propped on his hands, dark eyes fixed on her face. She'd dyed and sewn the quilt herself, a Dimi's gift to her Shadow. In return, he'd given her the Mark that burned on his arm and the gift of his soul. Outdoing her, as usual.

He'd changed out of his finery, clad in the rough white linen he wore for sleep. His shirtsleeve was pushed up, and Katerina's Mark glowed in the firelight, blue-black and gleaming, as if lit from within.

Her heart ached to look at it. It ached worse when she thought of Elena running her hands through Niko's dark, unruly waves, even though she knew she herself had no right to touch him that way. He was hers, but not like that. Never like that.

"Katya," Niko said, pleading. His voice broke on her name.

"I'm not thinking," Katerina lied. "Just cleaning. See?" She straightened the ribbon at the neck of her shift, then tidied her bedclothes, pulling the quilt tight.

Niko's lips twitched. "Making your bed before you get into it? I see."

The Kniaz damn him. "I like a neat bed." I like a neat bed? What in the name of all the demons was wrong with her?

Her Shadow's gaze flickered. He took a sip of the ginger tea she'd brewed when they got back to their cottage: for purification, for healing, for strength. And then he met her eyes head-on. "I had to do it, Katya."

Katerina's pulse quickened. There was no point pretending she didn't know what he was talking about, so she didn't try. "Of course you did," she said, occupying herself with straightening the spray of lavender above her headboard. "Why are you saying this to me?"

"You know why." His voice was deeper now, skirting his black dog's growl. "Last night... You must know how I?—"

"No!" Katerina's fingers tightened on the flowers. They crumbled, bits of sweet-

smelling petals falling onto her pillows. Blue for melancholy and blue for the lost, Baba's voice echoed in her head, one of the elder Dimi's many proverbs. Blue for the protection of the storm-tossed.

"I have to say it, Katerina." Porcelain clinked as he set the cup down, and the air shifted as he rose. She didn't have to look to know he was standing now, moving toward her, his feet soundless on the cottage's floorboards. "Saints help me, but I do."

"You don't." Her heart beat in an uneven shudder as she turned her back to him. What was the point of confessing something he could never take back, something that only stood to ruin them both?

She felt him behind her now, through the thin material of her shift, his big body a line of heat that trickled along her spine. When they were fighting, his presence meant both safety and power. But now...now it terrified her.

"Turn around, Katya." The words were a demand, but the tone...it was a plea. "Turn around and look at me."

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She shook her head, but he just waited. One moment. Two. And then, as if his words had the power to compel her rather than the other way around, she turned.

The fire limned Niko's body, outlining him in crimson. "I see how you watch me," he said, each word dropping slow as honey. "I know, because I watch you the same way."

"I don't watch you!"

He stepped closer still. "Just once, Katerina," he said, his breath warm on her skin. "For just a minute, forget the prophecy and the vow I made today. Just once, let us see what it could be like between us."

She should say no. She should flee, never mind the prowling demons and the fact that she only wore her shift. She should remember Konstantin and Maksim. And Elena.

But instead, she lifted a trembling hand to touch Niko's face. His skin was warm, the plush of his stubble prickling her fingertips. He closed his eyes, breath hissing through his teeth, as if her touch caused him equal pleasure and pain. Desire bloomed inside her, as lush as the velvety petals of the flowers that unfurled from their tight buds only at night.

She opened her mouth, intending to tell him what he asked was impossible. That it was a terrible idea. The worst imaginable. But instead—"Just once, my Shadow," she said.

Niko's eyes opened, shock clear in their depths. "Just once," he promised, and then

his head bent and his mouth found hers.

He tasted of ginger tea and broken promises, of a hint of Katerina's magic and of the Light that could drive Grigori demons into the Dark. His calloused hands threaded into Katerina's hair and his tongue traced her lips, urging her to open for him. Against the hollow of her throat, the amulet that held his blood beat like a second heart. She gasped, and the flames in the hearth leapt higher, casting strange, dancing shadows on the wall.

Katerina knotted her fingers in the rough linen of his shirt, desperation searing through her body. If this kiss was all they would ever have, then she would make the most of it. She would show him how a Dimi and her Shadow could burn. Her hands roamed his body, igniting heat everywhere they touched, and her witchfire followed, caressing places her hands could not. Niko moaned as he felt it, gripping her tighter.

The wind picked up, mirroring the growing storm inside her, whipping the trees against the cottage. He cursed, a mumbled string of words that ended in her name. And then they were on the floor in front of the fire, her long red hair streaming down around him, and he was looking up at her, his lips parted, his eyes wide and dark and fixed on her like she was all he could see.

"You're the one I want, Katya." The words caught in his throat, but his gaze was steady on hers. "I will always belong to you."

Katerina felt him everywhere: the restraint of his hands, digging tight into her hips; the leashed strength of his warrior's body beneath hers; the pulse of their Shadow bond, deep in her witch's heart. She had to bite her tongue to keep from speaking: I want you, too. Saying it would make what was happening between them real, would give it shape and form. There would be no taking it back, then.

Outside, the wind rose from a murmur to a roar. The trees bent, their limbs lashing

the cottage harder than ever, twigs scraping glass and wood in a discordant complaint. And Katerina bent, too, pinning her Shadow's wrists above his head, her lips inches from his. She held him there like an offering. He could have had her on her back in an instant. But he held still, letting her do with him what she would.

Which was...what? What were they doing? How had it gotten so out of hand?

Niko gazed up at her, his eyes wide. The tips of her breasts brushed against his chest, sending electricity prickling through her body, and he drew a ragged breath, shifting beneath her. "God, Katya," he whispered. "Please."

She could feel how much he wanted her, and wanted him the same way. Not just his body, but his heart. But how could she tell him so? It would bring about their undoing. The undoing of everything and everyone they loved. Everything they fought to protect.

She let go of his wrists, struggling to catch her breath. "Niko, we can't."

He sat up, reaching for her, and Katerina drew back. If he touched her now, she wouldn't be able to resist. And then what would become of them?

But all he did was stroke her cheek, his expression filled with unutterable sadness. "I'm not sorry," he whispered. "Saints help me, Katerina, but I don't regret this. I never will."

The tenderness in his touch galvanized her. Katerina leapt to her feet, knocking over what remained of his tea. She snatched a shawl from the hook beside the door and fled into the storm that had arisen outside—her storm—dumping rain onto the cobblestones and sending the shutters banging against the windows.

Niko didn't follow.

KATERINA

Clad in her thin white shift and the scarlet shawl she'd dyed from madder root, Katerina fled through the deserted apple orchard, the sodden grass squelching beneath her feet. The farther she got from Niko, the more the storm died down, until finally the trees stilled and the wind fell to a murmur. The orchard was silent, lit by the all-seeing eye of the Bone Moon.

A branch cracked behind her and she spun, panicked—but there was no one there. Just the skeletal trees, reaching toward the vault of the sky. Still, a Dimi on her own could never be too cautious, especially in times like these.

“Noch,” she whispered, and the night detached itself from the edges of things, curling around her body like a satisfied cat, concealing her. She glanced behind her, but the orchard had fallen silent once more. Nothing moved in the dark.

Clutching the shawl at her throat, Katerina passed through the orchard and into the forest, relieved when the gnarled oaks and scrub pines hid her from view. Baba Petrova had warned her often enough that she was never to go into the forest at night on her own, much less this close to the slippage between worlds, when everything threatened to come undone. She was supposed to take Niko, to always have him at her side.

But tonight, he was the thing she was running from.

Katerina came to a halt in the elderflower clearing where she often foraged and shook her head with frustration, letting her long hair fall loose around her. She hadn't wanted Niko to follow her—had she? But then why did part of her wish he had? Gazing into the trees, she half-hoped, half-feared he'd materialize in their midst.

Maybe it was her imagination, but she could swear she felt his gaze resting on her.

Or maybe it was just her guilt.

Well, better Niko than packs of prowling Grigori who were hungry for her soul. Although at this point, perhaps her soul was compromised beyond repair.

Pushing her thoughts aside with an effort, she rummaged inside a hollowed-out tree for the straw basket and knife she'd stashed in the clearing. Kneeling in the grass, the basket beside her, she began gathering the small blue flowers, always more potent for healing when picked by starlight. As their roots came free of the soil, she whispered the same age-old prayer of gratitude she'd given the rowan trees near Drezna: For your life, that we may live, we are thankful.

Drezna...which might have fallen because of Katerina. She wondered where Sofi and Damien were right now, whether Nadia had gotten word to Rivki before Sofi had come home to find her village naught but ashes. Grief rose in her throat at the thought, threatening to choke her.

"That we may live," said a familiar voice from the treeline. "Well, one of us, anyway. Is my presence that distasteful, then, Dimi mine?"

Katerina startled, falling backward. She landed in the patch of flowers as Niko strode into the clearing, his dark hair rumpled and his spine rod-straight with offense.

So she hadn't been imagining his presence after all. But the fact that she hadn't heard him coming— Well, he was a Shadow, after all, trained to move like a piece of the night. And she had been more than a bit distracted.

She scrambled to her feet, gripping the knife and brushing crumpled flowers from her shift. Despite their circumstances, Niko's mouth twitched.

"If that's an invitation to leave, I'm not taking it," he said.

The moon bathed his face, accentuating the ridged scar that ran from temple to jaw. Her fingers ached to touch it, and she clenched her free hand into a fist. "Why did you follow me?"

He took a step toward her, hands shoved deep in his pockets. "Why did you run?" His words came dangerously close to a growl, all humor vanished. "The dark of night. The heart of the forest. And me, left behind. One might imagine you are seeking trouble."

"I seek nothing but healing remedies," she snapped, gesturing to the basket at her feet. "And the only trouble I seem to have found is you. Again."

He stepped closer still, his jaw set hard as granite. "Why did you run from me, Katerina, no matter what happened between us? What were you thinking?"

She clutched her knife tighter—as if it would do her any good against him. "I was thinking that I needed to pick elderflower," she said, fighting to keep the tremor from her voice. "The plant secretes its nectar late at night, when the moon is full. This is the time to harvest it."

"Right." Niko rolled his eyes. "And you couldn't be troubled to tell me that, before you fled into the forest, half-dressed? Or to take me with you?"

"You're not my keeper!"

"Am I not?" He was a foot from her now, his expression the inscrutable mask he

wore to hide strong feelings and his hair so tousled, it fell into his eyes. It was tousled like that because of her, she thought, and had to suppress a shiver. “Have I not sworn to stand between you and evil? Do I not wear your Mark on my arm—and do you not wear mine around your neck?”

“It’s an amulet, Niko,” she said, her voice steady, and for a moment felt the throb of his pulse where the necklace rested above her breasts. “Not a collar.”

He shoved his sleeve up, bearing his tattoo. “This is a brand, and well you know it. When you ran, I felt it burn. For all you know, there could be a horde of demons creeping closer by the moment. If something were to happen to you?—”

A wind woven from Katerina’s magic stirred the trees above them. It whispered through the grass and lifted the tendrils of her hair to brush her face, a light touch that was both promise and warning. “Is that all you care about, then? Your obligation to me? Your bloody pride? God forbid you should fail as your father did?—”

His voice came low and furious. “I told you what I care about, Katya. Run from it all you like. And I am not my father!”

Katerina had been ten when Niko’s father was exiled from the village for betraying his Dimi. During a demon attack, he’d chosen to save his Vila wife rather than stand by his Dimi’s side. In the eyes of the village, there was no greater crime. She would never forget the look on Niko’s face as he watched his father leave: shame and grief and fury, all warring for position. A year later, his mother died of heartbreak, and Niko was alone—until he became hers.

Six years after that, he’d risen above the legacy of scandal his father had left behind to become alpha of his Shadow pack. Baba had bestowed the honor after Niko had distinguished himself in battle, risking his life for his fellow Shadows, putting their well-being before his own. His pack respected him for his kill count despite his

youth, and the former alpha, who had grown old, had given his approval. Niko's pack was everything to him—the family he'd lost, the proof that he was worthy of his title and his role. Everything, that was, except Katerina.

Mirroring her mood, the wind picked up, bringing with it the scent of the rowan-fires from Kalach, where the flames burned all night to keep the demons away. Niko inhaled, shaking his head. "I'm not afraid of you, Katerina. I'm not afraid of this."

That made one of them. Katerina thought of the look on Elena's face when Niko had pledged to marry her, of how hurt Elena would be if she could see them now. Of how furious Baba Petrova and the Elders would be if they knew she and Niko had violated the natural order of things. Unto another each must cleave, Baba had said after their bond was forged. Strength will feed strength. Together you fight. Together you fall.

Well, she was falling now.

She looked away, scooping the basket from the ground. The wind slowed to a breeze, rifling through his hair and flattening the rough cotton of his shirt. He closed his eyes, as if feeling her touch on his skin.

"You are promised to another. And you are my Shadow, Niko. What can we ever be to each other but that?"

Niko's eyes flickered open, their gaze wary. "You tell me. Unless...is there someone else, Katya? Someone who you?—"

Katerina pictured Maksim and Konstantin's faces. She should say yes. But instead she swallowed hard and shook her head. "No. But what happened between us was a mistake. You know that as well as I."

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His jaw clenched. “It doesn’t have to be.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” Katerina said, ignoring the way her traitorous heart leapt at his words. “And for once, I’m sure Elena would agree with me.”

“Well,” Niko said, offering a rueful half-smile, “that would be a first.”

“Is it my fault I want more from life than to be a broodmare?”

Niko sighed. “You have an obligation to bear Dimichildren, too. And you know she doesn’t think of it that way. For her, it’s an honor.”

Katerina was silent, remembering what Elena had once said to her. The greatest strength of all runs through my veins—for without Vila, there would be no more of my kind and no Shadows, and without Shadows, evil would triumph. She might be a zealot, but she wasn’t wrong. And she had centuries of tradition on her side.

She’d never thought to find herself being jealous of a Vila, of all people, but at the thought of Niko abandoning her hearth for Elena’s bed, envy gnawed at her. It was humiliating.

Niko cleared his throat. “Katya, what I saw in your eyes today when Baba promised me to Elena—it slayed me. And tonight, when—when we... You cannot tell me you felt nothing.”

She swallowed hard, remembering how he had knotted his hands in her hair and kissed her until neither of them could breathe. How he’d groaned when her witchfire

had licked at his skin. She'd fled into the storm, hoping it would wash her clean of her desire for him. But it was her storm—a reflection of the turbulence inside her—and even though the wind had died down, the war inside Katerina still raged.

“The prophecy—” she said, but Niko didn't let her finish.

“Damn the prophecy. Old wives' tales and trickery. This is between us, not some words inscribed in a dusty book. I don't believe for a moment that that's what called up the demons on the road near Drezna. Because when they came—nothing had happened, Katya, other than the feelings I held for you in my heart.”

“Maybe,” she said, staring down at the severed elderflower stems, “that was enough.”

“If that's all it takes, then I'm already damned. When you told me that the Kniaz wanted you, it took every bit of my restraint not to hunt him down, nobleman or no. And that night, when we lay together in the rowan grove, it was all I could do to keep from...” His voice cracked. “You were so warm. So beautiful. I lay awake for hours, memorizing the way you felt in my arms. I never dreamed you felt the same way, until last night.”

Shock broke over Katerina. Niko's decision to leave Rivki, the way he'd held her in the woods...none of it had been for the reasons she'd thought. The whole time she'd been agonizing over her desire for him, he'd been doing the same.

It should have changed nothing. But yet?—

“Do you want me?” His voice was low, desperate. “Because if you do...then the prophecy be damned, Katerina. For the Grigori are already loose upon the world. And I already burn for you in the Light.”

Katerina dropped her head, teeth worrying at her lower lip. Maybe he was right, and

the prophecy was no more than superstition. Still—what about Elena? And what if they were discovered? Where could this possibly end?

She hadn't seen Niko move, but somehow he was in front of her, his big hands light on her upper arms. "Look at me," he said, his voice hoarse, "and tell me you don't want me. Tell me that, and I'll never speak of it again."

Slowly, Katerina lifted her head. His gray eyes filled her line of vision, the precise shade of the sky before a winter storm. She shook her head, unable to say the words. The wind spoke for her instead, lashing through the trees, bending the tender saplings to the ground.

His grip tightened, and the basket fell from her hand, spilling the delicate blue flowers. "Say it, Katya." The words were a growl, his form flickering as his other nature rose perilously close to the surface. As a Shadow, he was taught exquisite control. Katerina had never seen him look like this—the black dog barely leashed, threatening to break his hold. "Say it and set us both free. Or don't, and I'll do as you wish. In all things, as I always have. As I am sworn to do."

The wind was a gale of her own making, the leaves and needles whipping around their feet, rising higher to swirl around their bodies. She reached up and locked her hands around his neck, twining her fingers through the rough silk of his hair. He smelled of ink and soap and sweat—and beneath that, the wildness of the forest itself.

When he spoke, his mouth brushed hers, sending shivers through her. "Say it."

"And you'll do as I wish?" she whispered against his lips.

"On my oath as a Shadow. No matter what it costs me."

"Then kiss me," she said, hands fisted in his hair.

He took a sharp, startled breath. Then his mouth closed over hers and his tongue traced the seam of her lips, tasting of mint and night and Niko.

His fingers caught her hips, tugging her closer. He outlined her eyebrows in the darkness, then ran a fingertip down the column of her neck. His palm came to rest above her heart, just below the amulet that held a drop of his blood. “Ah, Katya. I have loved you since we were children, playing, long before I took my oath. And when Baba Marked me, I thought first not of the honor—but that wherever I went, I would bear your touch on my skin.”

With his free hand, he pressed her palm to the tattoo on his arm that marked him as hers. A Shadow’s Mark was his bond, a promise made and a vow kept. To lay your hands on it was more intimate than a lover’s caress. Battles had been fought over the ignominy of such a touch. Even Elena would have no right to it when she and Niko married. It was Katerina’s claim, and hers alone.

She ran her nails over it, following the lines of the circles by the light of the Bone Moon. “One for the fire,” she whispered as the Mark burned beneath her fingers and the wind raged. “Two for the storm.”

At the words of their bonding ritual, Niko’s hand fell from hers, clenching into a fist at his side. He drew himself up, the way he had eight years ago, when they’d stood in Baba’s cottage and sworn their vows in blood. “Three for the black dog that guards against harm.” His voice was a rasp.

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Emboldened, she pressed her lips to the Mark, and Niko gasped. She ran the tip of her tongue along the interlocking circles, tasting salt, and he shook against her.

He cupped her face, tilting her head back. His eyes had gone ink-dark, the gray swallowed by the black of his pupils. She had seen him look this way before—in the heat of a fight, before he struck the blow that brought his opponent to their knees. It had filled her with an odd, unspoken thrill then. It did the same now, vibrating through her bones and settling low in her belly.

Niko inhaled, taking in the shift in her scent. He nipped at her lower lip with sharp, white teeth, his hands weaving their way into her hair.

Katerina thought of other things she had seen those teeth do—in human and canine form—and knew a sensible person would be afraid. But fearing Niko was an impossibility. Far more reasonable that he should fear her. Or what Baba would do to the both of them should she come into the clearing and find them this way.

If Dimi Zakharova saw this, she would use it to end Katerina. To the Saints with exiling her from the Kniaz's bed; this would be ammunition enough to destroy her. But the consort was miles away, her threat toothless. Right now, all that mattered was Niko, here in Katerina's arms.

She lifted her chin and nipped him back, a challenge. A faint coppery taste filled her mouth and he growled in warning, pulling her hard against him. Like called to like, as Baba had always said: Her body recognized his blood and called to it, wanting more. The amulet throbbed like a second heart, a throbbing that ran through her veins, a question that demanded an answer.

Niko's hands tightened on her hips. He lifted her, walking them backward toward the flat stone that stood in the clearing, where they had picnicked when they were children. Then he lowered her down, as carefully as if she couldn't destroy the forest around them with a single thought. The stone still held the heat of the day; she drew against it with her magic and a circle of rowan-fire sprang up around them, holding the rest of the world at bay.

He held himself still above her, his weight on his elbows, searching her face. "I swear on all we hold holy, Katya, you are the other half of me. You are my blood. You are my blade."

The blaze raged higher still. At his sharp intake of breath, she looked down: its red glow outlined both their shapes, as if they had truly caught aflame. The light was a live thing between their bodies, twining, casting shadows. When he bent his head to kiss her, she tasted blood and fire.

Her hand rose, red in the firelight. It slipped under his shirt, tracing the length of the scars she knew as well as the lines of her palm, as Niko's leg slid between hers. His dark hair came loose from its rawhide tie and fell forward, tickling her cheeks. The pressure of his hard body against hers felt both as natural as spellcasting and unbearably new. It felt too big for Katerina's body to contain, spreading outward into the flames and the wind that swept through the forest.

She drew on the wind, letting a tendril of it creep through the circle. The breeze licked at Niko, brushing over every inch it could reach.

"Saints, Katya." His voice was hoarse. "How could I want another woman, when everywhere I go, I feel your touch on my skin?"

"Do you give yourself to me, then?" The words were a caress, her lips tracing the line of his throat as he reared over her.

He closed his eyes, leaning into her touch. “Only if you want me,” he whispered. “Only if you want this.”

She flattened her hand on the small of his back, pressing him down to her. He came, letting her bear his weight. His eyes flickered open, meeting hers, the question in them clear.

He’d promised to throw himself into the face of danger if it meant she would survive. When they’d taken their vows, she had accepted his sacrifice as her due. But now—was his life worth so little, and hers so much? What would be left to her, if she lost him?

What would be left of him, if he failed? And what if they were caught? What then?

She thought, then, of the final lines of the prophecy: So will they forfeit what they love the most: Lost demon. Witchfire. Wandering ghost. So shall she burn as she brings his demise: The Dark will fall. The shadow will rise.

Niko seemed so sure it was an old wives’ tale. But what if it wasn’t? Could she really put him at risk for the sake of her selfish desires?

What if it meant Katerina would lose her magic, and her final act would be to bring about Niko’s death? That the Dark would be destroyed, but at the expense of his life? That he would ascend to the Saints and leave her behind, powerless to help?

She wouldn’t bear that. She couldn’t.

Hands braced on the rock, he drew back to see her face. “Katya?” There was doubt in his voice, uncertainty. Her heart broke at hearing him sound that way—Niko, whose bravado was as much a part of him as his grace with a blade or his need to protect anything defenseless.

She loved him. She wanted him. He was everything to her.

And this would have to end, wouldn't it—when he married Elena, prophecy or no prophecy? For he would never walk back his engagement to the Vila. Say what he would; his father's betrayal had marked Niko deeply. Every day, Niko fought to reclaim his good name. To atone for what had been done to his mother. This was temporary, and so she would savor it while it was hers to have.

She would give herself to him this one time, then. Once only. A single betrayal that surely wouldn't be enough to bring the prophecy down upon them—for she still believed in it, even if Niko didn't. She would keep the memory of this moment close, a precious thing, no matter who came between them.

She ran her fingertips over the silvered line that ran from his temple to his jaw. “A blade cuts deep, and leaves a scar. So, too, may what lives between us. Do you still want me, then?”

His lips rose in a fierce smile, tempered by sadness at what his words might cost them both. “More than my next breath.”

“I'm yours, then,” she said, and, lifting her shift above her head, let it fall. “But just this once, my Shadow. We can't risk more.”

His eyes on hers were hot and hungry as he mirrored her, slipping free of his clothes. Under the Bone Moon, his Mark glowed, and around her neck, her amulet pulsed. She felt the echo of it everywhere, throbbing in her body, passing through her into him. He shook as he arched above her, as her witchfire lapped at his skin. “Just this once,” he vowed, and made of their bodies one twining, yearning thing.

Beneath him, Katerina burned. And deep in the woods, unseen by all but the owls roosting in the trees, the Darkness bared its teeth and uncoiled, feasting on the chaos

to come.

GADREEL

The demon Gadreel didn't know whether to curse his Darkforsaken luck or raise a glass to the Dimi witch who might be his salvation.

He stood on the road to Drezna among his slaughtered people, the single lieutenant who'd managed to survive by his side. The demon was babbling, like he'd been ever since he'd fled the devastation that the Dimi and her accursed black dog had wreaked on Gadreel's army. He'd arrived back in the Underworld smelling unpleasantly of rowan-fire, with a tale of fleeing through the forest and flinging himself through the crater in the middle of Drezna—the last of which Gadreel could attest to, as the demon had landed at his feet.

“You see, sir,” he blathered now, pointing a finger at the charred corpses of his brethren. “She...she incinerated them. We had a hundred foot soldiers, set to do your bidding. Drezna should have been a delectable feast, but that...that...” He gestured in the direction of the crater. “It took them all! When the animals fled the forest, it froze them where they stood. We regrouped, pleased to find a Dimi and Shadow on the road, but then the...thing...swept onward, until the witch and her black dog did the impossible. And now...now your loyal soldiers...”

“Shut up,” Gadreel said absently, and snapped his fingers. The demon—what was his name? Azagrel? Benatroyd?—fell mercifully silent, his lips sewn together by the force of Gadreel's will. Honestly, the creature was useless. Why couldn't it have been Gremory by his side—a grand duke of Hell, commanding twenty-six legions? But no.

Gremory was under Sammael's dominion, and Gadreel was forced to deal with this fool, who was no more than an expendable minion. Unfortunately, Azagrel/Benatroyd was also the only witness to one of the few fascinating events that Gadreel had encountered in thousands of years, since he had been cast out of the skies and sentenced to roam the earth and rule in the Underworld.

Well, that blind human scribe Milton, who'd lived and died in a world far beyond Iriska's borders, had been correct. It was, indeed, better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven. Sammael aside, Gadreel had a huge territory in the Underworld, far more than he'd ever been granted back when he had wings of white and was expected to kowtow to the Almighty. Don't think for yourself. Don't fornicate with human women. Don't teach humankind how to defend themselves from threats. Truly, Gadreel had had enough. He was far more of a doer than a Watcher, after all. When he'd fallen, along with the rest of the Grigori, it had not been long before he'd realized his good fortune.

But he hadn't been the only one. Happy to serve whoever would provide enough hedonism and bloodshed to keep them satisfied, demons weren't leaders by nature. As long as there was a steady flow of souls to devour, pain to inflict, and bodies to debauch, they did just fine. The exception was Gadreel's archrival: the fallen Archangel Sammael, Venom of God.

The demon was an annoyance, especially because he had his eye set on Gadreel's corner of the Underworld. In the beginning, they'd divided Hell up neatly, with a minimum of battles to the death. Everyone had been pleased. Even the minor Watchers, who didn't want the responsibility that came with managing a large realm, had ceased complaining.

Then came Sammael, with his protestations that he needed more land, more demons to command, more souls to devour. More, more, more, that was Sammael. No matter how many minions and commanders Gadreel won over, no matter how many souls

fell beneath his foot soldiers' swords, Sammael was always there: a thorn in his side, a threat to his realm.

The Dark Angel of War Gadreel, Scourge of Humankind, Slayer of Dimi and Devourer of Souls, would not be lesser than the Venom of God. It was insupportable.

Gadreel had spent centuries seething. And then, at last, it came to him.

The Underworld was fueled by human souls; the more that perished at the hands of Gadreel's Grigori, the stronger his territory became. The same was true of Sammael, as well as the lesser demon lords—but those hardly counted. Brooding on this, Gadreel had concluded that if he could command the source of the Darkness, he would be stronger than Sammael had ever dreamed of. With this unshakable conviction in mind, he had unleashed the Darkness, known to Dimis and demons alike by the same name.

Once the idea had entered his mind, it had become, Gadreel was not embarrassed to admit, an obsession. He began to brood, reading all he could in the demonic scrolls, hunting out forgotten, half-faded spirits in the corners of realms that did not belong to him. It was not like he had much else to do, other than defend his realm against Sammael's insistent onslaught. It was getting, quite frankly, rather boring.

Then came the moment when Gadreel had found the answers he'd sought for so long. He'd made the necessary sacrifices, laying souls aplenty and even his own body at the feet of the Darkness. He'd had intimate congress with all sorts of creatures over the years, including Sammael's Lilith—ah, cuckolding his nemesis had been so sweet—but he'd never experienced anything like that before: an icy greed that devoured him from the inside out, always seeking, never satisfied. It had been most unpleasant, and coming from Gadreel, who had once shared a tent with a hydra that hadn't brushed its nine sets of teeth in three centuries, that was really saying something.

But what he'd freed in return was far more than he'd bargained for: a conscienceless, unadulterated hunger for human souls, with no thought for moderation or consequence. He'd thought he could contain it or command it, but he'd been terribly wrong.

Much as it pained Gadreel to admit, he'd lost control over the thing that he'd let loose on the world. It had chewed its way straight through the center of Drezna, sucking humans, Dimis, Shadows, and Vila alike into the Underworld, along with the village itself. Splintered wood and frozen fruit, human and animal corpses, half-forged Shadow blades and half-eaten meals...it had all come thundering straight into Gadreel's throne room, when he was in the middle of dinner. To say it had been unappetizing was the understatement of the millennium.

He'd ordered his minions to clean up the wreckage, threatening to remove their limbs should they so much as question how it had appeared. It had been pure luck that he'd dispatched a small detachment to perform reconnaissance on the path to Rivki, staging an attack on Drezna in an effort to keep the Darkness fed. They'd arrived mere moments before the Darkness had grown impatient and decided to show Gadreel up by boring a hole into the center of the town itself, devouring all of the living souls within. His army had fled—some soldiers they were—whereupon they'd encountered the Dimi and her Shadow on the road to Drezna. And now look at this mess. Corpses everywhere, a hundred ten soldiers wasted, and a witch who could stand against an army of minor demons, flanked only by a single Shadow.

Well, one thing was certain. Gadreel had to lay claim to what had happened, to use it to bolster his power. Sammael and the minor Grigori had to believe it had been his army that had blasted a hole in the middle of Drezna—for there was no way to contain an event of that magnitude, any more than there was a way to contain what the Dimi and her Shadow had done.

Neither should have been possible. Yet here he stood, in the aftermath of both.

There was only one witness to what had transpired in the village that day, and to what had happened afterward, on the road. That was a loose end, and Gadreel hated loose ends.

“I regret this,” he said, and snapped his fingers again. The unfortunate minion who stood beside him—Azatroyd, that was it—fell to the ground, his throat pouring blood. A glance, and he burst into flame.

Gadreel gazed down at his soldier’s sizzling body, satisfied that at least he would no longer have to listen to the demon’s babbling. He would lie here, indistinguishable from the rest. But next time, Gadreel might not be so lucky.

He had to get control of the Darkness. If he could not, it would destroy all of humanity. He personally had no fondness for the creatures, but human souls fueled the Underworld. If the Darkness ate all of them, his realm would collapse and so would the others. His millennia of battles against Sammael would amount to nothing, a mere footnote in history. He would disintegrate into the Void—the nameless, shapeless, lightless space from which new demons originated and into which demons went when they were slaughtered—taking all of his people with him. Sammael would follow, and there they would be, at each other’s throats for all of eternity.

It was a nightmare.

He needed an ally in his battle against the Darkness, someone with enough power to put the Dark back where it belonged. But there was no way he could tell Sammael how, in plotting against him, Gadreel had fatally overshot. That would be the end of thousands of years of work; the bastard would finally have the ammunition he needed to unite the minor realms against Gadreel and rise up against him. And still the Darkness would rage uncontained.

No, there was only one thing to do. He would have to ally himself with the Light,

repellent as the notion might be. Together they could drive the Darkness back into the Void. He would have to get his hands on this terrifyingly powerful Dimi, for she and she alone might have the power to aid him.

But if what his minion had told him was true, her black dog was no ordinary Shadow. The man had blazed up with a Light that had illuminated the entire road, driving the Darkness back. And when he and his Dimi had fought side by side, they had defeated Gadreel's army, which was an impressive inconvenience. His soldiers were replaceable, but still.

He would have to capture the Dimi and bend her will to his own—for she would never believe they were on the same side of this fight—but to get to her, he would have to kill her Shadow. Then he would force her to help him re-quarantine the Darkness. After that...well, perhaps he would keep her by his side, as entertainment. Why not? Surely she would be amusing, and he did so hate being bored.

It was no small series of events to put in motion. But if there was one thing he loved, it was a challenge.

18

ELENA

The sun streamed through the window of Kalach's nursery, making the little ones giggle and lie on their backs, pretending to be kittens luxuriating in its warmth. Elena Lisova reached out and tickled Dominika, the child closest to her. In response, Domi wound herself around Elena's ankles and did her best to purr.

Stroking the little girl's hair, Elena looked through the nursery's window, following the path of the sun. Niko stood next to Katerina at the edge of Kalach's huge vegetable garden, his dark hair gleaming in the light like a crow's wing. Katerina was telling him something, gesticulating at the garden. Whatever it was, it made Niko smile, and Elena couldn't help but do the same.

Soon, they would be wed. Soon, she would be waking up to that smile each morning.

"You really love him, don't you?"

Elena turned her head to look at Alyona, her fellow Vila and closest friend. In addition to sharing a cottage in the Vila's quarter of the village, they worked together in the nursery, preparing for the time they would hold their own children in their arms.

Physically, the two of them were as unlike as you could imagine—Elena was tall and slim, with long, straight blond hair and wide blue eyes, whereas Alyona was short and curvy, with green eyes that tilted up at the corners like a cat's, mahogany skin, and wavy auburn hair that escaped her every attempt to tame it. They'd been

inseparable since they could walk, though, drawn together first by a common sensibility and later by their shared belief that bearing Vila and Shadowchildren was a higher, holy calling.

“You love him,” Alyona said again.

The note of envy in Aly’s voice spurred Elena to touch her friend’s arm in comfort. Alyona was prone to bouts of anxiety, especially when thinking about the future, and the last thing Elena wanted to do was make things worse. “I do. But don’t worry. Whoever Baba Petrova chooses for you to wed will be wonderful. I know it.”

“Maybe,” Alyona said, picking up a rag doll that one of the children had dropped and handing it back. “But it won’t be someone I’ve adored for years, like you and Niko.”

Elena had fallen in love with Niko Alekhin when she was eleven years old and he had rescued her from the back of a bee-stung horse. The horse had lost its mind, tossing its head, rearing, threatening to throw her. Niko had ridden alongside, leaned out of his stirrup, grabbed her around the waist, and somehow dragged her from her horse to his. He’d wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her close, and asked her if she was all right.

Somewhere between his question and her answer, Elena had given her heart to him. Their love was written in the stars; they were destined for each other. He was the fulfillment of the vow she had sworn to Sant Viktoriya, whose ancient blood ran in her veins. Every day since childhood, she’d knelt at her bedroom shrine and prayed to embody the beauty, purity, and fertility of the Vila line. Her marriage to Niko, a handsome, kind, and alpha Shadow bonded to the strongest Dimi in centuries, was the culmination of all she’d prayed for. All she deserved.

“Do you ever think—” Alyona began, her eyes on Niko and Katerina. They’d turned away from the garden and were standing side by side, deep in conversation.

“What?” Elena said when Aly didn’t continue. “No, Dominika—don’t throw that! We don’t hurt other people. It isn’t kind.” She wrested the rag doll from Domi’s hands. “Go on, Aly. What did you mean to say?”

“Nothing,” Alyona said, bending to scoop Dominika into her arms. “Come here, kotik. You’ve got milk all over your face.”

Kotik meant ‘pussycat,’ and the little girl giggled. She was an adorable sight, but Elena wouldn’t be dissuaded. “Tell me, Aly.”

Alyona dabbed milk from Domi’s face, then set the child on the floor again. “It’s just—do you think he feels the same way? That he loves you as much as you love him?”

A pang shot through Elena’s chest. “Why would you ask that?”

“Has he said he loves you?” Alyona pressed.

“No,” Elena said, “but I wouldn’t expect him to. We aren’t married yet. It wouldn’t be proper. I haven’t told him, either.” A tinge of anger crept into her voice, born of fear. Of course Niko loved her...didn’t he? “What are you trying to say?”

“It’s just—” Alyona said again, her voice faltering, “people talk, you know. And I’ve heard rumors—that is, I sometimes wonder—do you think all that exists between Niko and Katerina is friendship?”

Elena’s eyes snapped wide. “What rumors?”

“Never mind.” Alyona fidgeted, toying with the hem of her dress. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Niko is a good servant of the Light, and he will stand by you regardless of where his heart lives.” She gave Elena a shy smile. “You are lucky to love him

yourself. Who knows what Shadow Baba will match me with? It could be Mischa, for all I know. He smells like garlic, no matter how often he washes.”

Elena stared at her friend, speechless. She had never considered that Niko might not love her in return. They were sworn to each other; though they had never so much as exchanged a kiss, she had always known he was destined for her. It went without saying that Niko was dedicated to the Light—but surely his heart would be dedicated to her as well.

She glanced out the window again, at the spot where her Shadow and his Dimi stood. They had turned and were walking down the path that led from the courtyard. Katerina’s face was tilted up toward Niko’s, and Elena caught the flash of her mischievous grin, a moment before Niko lifted his hand to brush away a leaf that had landed in Katerina’s hair. The touch was brief, as casual as the way she herself might wipe a smudge of dirt from a child’s cheek.

Elena watched them go, trying to understand what Alyona saw that she herself did not.

“They’re close, that’s all,” she said. “They’ve been best friends, always, the way you and I have. It’s a tremendous gift to have that sort of friendship between Shadow and Dimi. It makes them stronger.”

Alyona knelt, straightening little Vadim’s shirt, scooping up the carved wooden dog that his Shadow father had made for him. “You’re right, Elena. Of course there’s nothing between them. I shouldn’t have spoken.”

Elena regarded her friend with narrowed eyes. Alyona wasn’t a gossip. If she’d seen fit to bring this up, she had a reason—and Aly wasn’t coy. Once she found the courage to broach a difficult subject, she didn’t shy from seeing the conversation through.

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Maybe this was different, though. Elena had loved Niko for the past ten years—almost half her life. Marrying him was her birthright. The idea that Niko and his Dimi were engaging in some kind of illicit flirtation—that they had feelings for each other, Saints forbid—had the power to break Elena’s heart.

Elena wasn’t a fool. She’d known Niko and Katerina were closer than the average Shadow and Dimi. She’d grown up with them, always on the outside of their private jokes and bizarre antics, the long talks that left the two of them sitting at the outskirts of the village, in burning distance of the rowan-fires, tempting fate long after the sun sank below the fringe of the trees. Once or twice, she’d caught Niko’s eyes on Katerina in an unguarded moment, when he hadn’t known Elena was watching, and thought maybe?—

The thought had fled as quickly as it had come. They were bonded, a warrior union until death sundered one of them from the other’s side. Such closeness would only serve to strengthen their connection. Elena had been ashamed of herself, suspecting anything more existed.

When Baba Petrova had placed her hand in Niko’s, announcing their betrothal, she’d thought her heart would burst with joy. Now, she thought, Niko would look at her the way he’d regarded Katerina: As if Elena were a miracle, a treasure he couldn’t believe he got to keep. As if she were his.

And when he hadn’t, when he’d gazed at her the way he had the day before and the day before that—with a brotherly tenderness that verged on forbearance—she’d convinced herself he only needed time.

Maybe that's what Aly meant. Maybe she too had seen the way Niko looked at Katerina, with the awe and reverence he only reserved for his Dimi—and then the way he looked at Elena, like she was a little sister or a trusted friend.

Maybe everyone in the village had seen, and was laughing at her. Or worse, pitying her. Elena Lisova, prized among Vila, blessed by Sant Viktoriya, cuckolded by the man she loved. Robbed of her rightful destiny. The thought of it sent a sick chill down her spine.

"It's not true," Elena said, her voice too loud in the quiet nursery. "Niko is loyal. We will be happy together."

"Of course you will," Aly said, but the words fell flat.

Elena watched her Shadow and his Dimi as they walked down the path that led to the cottage they shared, and tried to banish the doubt from her heart. But it had taken root, and began to grow.

19

KATERINA

The morning that would change Katerina's life yet again began like any other: with her averting her eyes from Niko as the two of them readied themselves for the day. She did her best to ignore the broad stretch of his shoulders beneath his linen shirt and the grace with which he slid his blades into their holster before striding out the door. And then she braided her hair in preparation for training and stomped after him, sticking her tongue out at his back. He had no business looking so irresistible. Nor being so cool and collected when she was burning up inside.

Her leg was healed now; Baba Petrova's herbs and charms had worked their magic.

Still, she felt undone, off-kilter. It was Niko's fault, Saints damn him. He was right there, but she missed him. Missed having him the way they'd been together in the elderflower clearing three nights ago, hearing him whisper that he wanted her more than his next breath.

She'd said, Just this once, and by honoring it, he'd only done what she'd asked. But then why did she want to shake him, right before she pinned him to the wall of her cottage and took his stupid mouth with hers?

Ana was waiting at the bottom of the walkway, Alexei beside her. Niko fell into step with him as her friend looked Katerina up and down, her wide mouth rising in a sardonic grin. "In a good mood this morning, I see."

Raising an eyebrow, Katerina summoned a hint of wind and pushed Ana back a step. "Does it show?"

Ana shoved a warning hint of heat back in Katerina's direction, making Katerina give a genuine smile. It was good to be among other Dimis, to remind herself of who she was and where her priorities lay.

"Just a tad," Ana said, holding her fingers apart an inch or so. "I mean, you seem a little more annoyed with the world than usual. As for your Shadow"—she gestured at Niko—"you'd think he'd be a bit more cheerful after his engagement to Sant Viktoriya herself. But there he is, looking as uptight as he's been since you came home from the Trials."

Katerina and Niko hadn't so much as exchanged an inappropriate glance since the night of the Bone Moon. They'd never even spoken of what had transpired between them. Still, hearing Ana mention her Shadow's engagement to the Vila cut like a knife.

“He’s not uptight,” she snapped. “You weren’t there when the Grigori swarmed out of the woods. You didn’t see the crater that devoured Drezna. What if whatever it is comes for us next?”

Ana shot her an apologetic look as they stepped onto the path that led to the outdoor arena by the river where the Shadows and Dimis trained together—the easier to summon water and put out fires. “You’re right, Katerina. I was just...joking. Trying to make light, in these dark times. But I shouldn’t have?—”

Her words trailed off as, in front of them on the path, Niko froze, and Alexei followed suit. “What’s wrong?” Katerina said, straining to see, but her Shadow blocked her way.

“There’s someone here,” he said, his tone terse. “I can smell them. Someone who doesn’t belong. Not Grigori, but...three strangers. And their mounts.”

Katerina smelled nothing, heard nothing. But if Niko said there were strangers here, she trusted him. Her magic hummed beneath her skin, ready for battle.

“Alexei?” Ana said, the teasing cadence gone from her voice.

“I smell them, too,” her Shadow said, running a hand through his auburn hair and revealing the star-shaped brand that had manifested after he bonded with Ana. “Human, like Niko said. Not Dimi or Shadow.”

Without a word, Ana moved up to flank Alexei, and Katerina did the same for Niko. They made their way down the path, following the Shadows’ unerring sense of smell. Twenty yards later, a man’s arrogant voice split the air, demanding to speak to Baba Petrova. Then he barked Katerina’s name, in a tone of clear command.

Next to her, Niko flinched. He turned and looked at her full-on, for the first time

since that night in the woods. “Katya,” he said, the word heavy with all she had been dreading.

Whoever had come to Kalach, they had come for her.

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Ana was staring at her, dark eyes wide, and Katerina set her shoulders, refusing to show fear. “No point in dawdling. Wouldn’t want to keep them waiting for me, after all.”

She lengthened her stride, stepping in front of Ana and Alexei. Making a disapproving noise low in his throat, Niko nonetheless did the same, so that he stalked alongside her, one hand resting easily on the hilt of his favored blade. “Katya,” he said quietly, so that Alexei and Ana wouldn’t hear. “Whatever they want, state your terms in response. I’ll not let them take you—or us—against your will.”

Katerina gave a sharp nod. She’d hoped she would have more time before a summons came. But clearly she’d been deluding herself.

The path opened up into the village square, revealing three men clad in the gold-trimmed garments that marked them as the Kniaz’s favored squires. They sat atop horses that were finer than any in Kalach—a golden palomino, an onyx stallion, a blue-speckled, muscled roan. The men were equally impressive: bearded and broad, with an unyielding set to their shoulders that indicated they were used to getting what they wanted. Before them stood Baba Petrova and the five village Elders.

A crowd of villagers gathered at the edge of the square, murmuring in confusion and alarm. And to their right, with the Vila not on child-minding duty this morning, stood Elena and her closest friend, Alyona.

The Vila’s eyes went at once to Niko, as if to assure herself that he was all right. But Niko didn’t notice. His attention was fixed on the men on horseback. A deep, subterranean growl rumbled in his chest.

“Where is the Dimi you call Katerina Ivanova?” the man on the palomino said, his tone imperious. He must be their leader, she thought, his beard woven with the red-and-purple ribbons that denoted his higher rank. “I won’t ask again.”

Next to Katerina, Niko snarled. “He cannot call you like a dog!”

Katerina refrained from remarking on the irony of this statement. She strode forward, shoulders back and head high. “I’m right here,” she said, her voice ringing out in the cool spring air. “Cease harassing the citizens of Kalach and state your business.”

She didn’t dare look at Niko, but next to her, she could sense the amusement baking off of him. Well, let him be amused, then. She had no intention of bowing to these men’s wishes, no matter how fine their garments or how demanding their tone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lara, a fellow Dimi, and Ilya, her Shadow, heading Katerina’s way, closing ranks with her and Niko. Joining them were Svetlana and Luka, a Dimi and Shadow pair beside whom Katerina and Niko had fought many times. On their heels came the other seventeen Dimi and Shadow pairings that were of age to fight. The three unbonded Shadows who had lost their Dimis in battle—Valentin, Pyotr, and Mikhail—accompanied them.

Niko gave a low hum of approval in reaction to the welcome presence of his black dog’s pack. But Katerina didn’t feel soothed. If these men were here for her, then all the other Shadows and Dimis in the world would do her no good. Their gesture was symbolic, nothing more—for if Katerina intended to kill these men, she could do so easily, calling fire to her hand and unleashing it upon them. No, this was a matter of politics. She could not harm these men without bringing down the Kniaz’s wrath upon Kalach.

“Our business,” the leader said, imbuing the word with scorn. “Why, our business is you, Dimi Ivanova. I thought I made that clear.”

The insolence in his voice was unmistakable, and Niko growled louder, a hair-raising, threatening sound. He bared his teeth at the man, and next to him, Alexei tensed in solidarity.

“Niko,” Katerina said quietly. “Hold.”

“He cannot speak that way to you!”

“No,” she said, stepping forward, away from her Shadow and their friends. “He cannot.”

Perhaps she would have restrained herself, had it not been for the expression on Elena’s face: lovestruck, as if seeing Niko’s protective Shadow nature rise to the surface was a gift just for her. As if she were imagining what it would be like for him to protect her, not Katerina. As if all her dreams were coming true at last.

She had no right to take her anger out on Elena; the Vila was betrothed to Niko, after all. But the arrogant man who had spoken to her as if she were his vassal was another story.

At the Trials, she’d had to hide what she was capable of. But after what had happened on the road to Drezna, there was no hiding anymore. And if she didn’t have to conceal what she was, then by the Saints, she would use it to her advantage.

Letting an unpleasant smile lift her lips, she sent her magic out, heat curling through the space between her and the men on horseback. It gripped the leader by the back of the neck, scorching him, and his eyes went wide. “You—you dare...? Let me go!”

“I will,” Katerina said calmly, the smile widening, “as soon as you address me with the respect I deserve.”

Behind her, Ana snickered. Baba Petrova, far less amused, said, “Katerina! Think

about what you're doing, for once in your life. Think about who these men are. Who they represent."

"I know well who they represent." Katerina tightened the grip of her magic, and had the satisfaction of watching the man squirm. His mouth fell open, and a gasp of pain escaped him. "But I don't bend the knee for vassals. Address me with respect, servant of the Kniaz. Or ride back the way you've come, empty-handed."

Baba Petrova raised her hands to her face, presumably to hide her dismay at Katerina's attitude. But before those gnarled hands hid her expression, Katerina could have sworn she detected the slightest glimpse of pride.

Next to her, Niko's growl had tempered into a deep-throated chuckle. "You heard the lady," he said. "What will it be?"

The man scowled, red-faced and furious. Sighing, Katerina summoned the wind and commanded it to shake him, like a kitten in the grip of an angry beast. His horse shifted under him uneasily, and behind him, the two men who accompanied him looked as if they would like nothing more than to flee. Katerina couldn't blame them.

"Dimi Ivanova!" Elder Dykstrova snapped. "Leave off toying with him. You've made your point."

"Fine," Katerina said, and lifted a lazy hand. The wind died down immediately, and the heat retreated. "Feel better?" she said as the man's body stilled.

He shot her a furious glance, then opened and closed his mouth twice before he spoke. He looked, Katerina thought, like one of the giant goldfish she'd seen in the moat that surrounded the Kniaz's castle. "How dare you?" he snarled again when he got his breath.