

KESIA LUPO



WE ARE
BOUND
BY STARS

*'Deft, dark
and daring'*

Melinda
Salisbury

BLOOMSBURY



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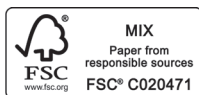
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ONE

The Fighter's Crown

Vico

‘Vico, hurry up! It starts in ten minutes,’ Elisao says, pushing me through the warm spring night and towards the warehouse. ‘For blessed gods’ sake,’ he mutters. I’d protest, but I was late and he was waiting for me at the docks for half an hour, so I can’t blame his ill-humour. I shoot him a grin over my shoulder instead. He returns a watery smile – I knew he couldn’t resist – but quickly smothers it under a frown of irritation. ‘Come *on*.’

I duck after him into the warehouse. The noise and light surround me in a familiar cocoon, the smells of sizzling fish and sweating bodies, of cheap fortified panacea and cheaper perfume. Yellow light spills from the huge lamps suspended from the vaulted ceiling, the wooden beams casting long shadows.

I turn my signet ring round and round my finger as I slide after Elisao through the gaps in the gathered people towards the centre of the room. I nod at a familiar woman,

who smiles warmly – she’s one of the stall keepers who sells grilled shrimp and deep-fried rice on the docks. A tall man with wild golden hair claps me on the back as I slide past. ‘Vico! My money’s on you tonight.’ Gerret, one of Old Jacobo’s crew. His northern accent is strong, despite the fact he’s lived in Scarossa all his adult life.

‘I’ll do my best for you, Gerret,’ I reply.

‘Vico, there isn’t time,’ Elisao says, tugging my arm. I flash Gerret an apologetic smile and allow myself to be led forward.

We’re heading for a large square space, cordoned off with ropes. The crowd is bustling with its usual mixture of fishermen, rogues, prostitutes, lovers, students, professors, tradesmen, immigrants, sailors and more – all the people who live in this city, who give life to this city. Conversation does not hum here; it roars, fuelled by panacea and shouts of laughter, and the coins exchanging hands, and the bets cried out, taunts thrown and thrown back ...

I feel a rush of warmth. Scarossa is my city, but this is my world. As we reach the centre at last, I shout a hello to Old Jacobo, a crime lord and the organiser of the Battaglia, his most profitable venture. He’s taking down wagers but shouts ‘You’re late’ over his shoulder, in his usual jovial tone. I shake a stranger’s hand that’s proffered to my right, accept a chipped glass from an acquaintance to my left.

If only I could stay in this world always.

And then, through the shifting people, I see a cloaked

figure, standing right at the back of the room in a pool of calm. I'm not sure exactly what about the figure draws my eyes: perhaps its stillness; perhaps the black hooded cloak that covers its face, its entire body, so that it's impossible to tell whether they're male or female, rich or poor, young or old. But I'm sure, whoever it is, they're watching me. Despite the heat of the room, I feel suddenly cold.

'Focus, Vico,' says Elisao, pushing away a bottle of panacea poised over my cup in favour of a jug of water. 'We need to talk about your opponent.' I glance down to watch my cup filled – and when I glance up again, the cloaked figure has disappeared. Elisao's voice changes as he catches my expression – softening. 'Are you all right? You look shaken.' His light green eyes are warm but serious behind their spectacles, his skin pale for a native Scarossan – he doesn't spend much time outside. A student of law, he works part time in the city library – a warehouse at the docks isn't his natural habitat. But the Battaglia draws us all here, like moths to a flame. Its contest, the Fighter's Crown, is the worst-kept secret of the city, a glory from its legendary criminal network stretching generations into the past. Once, the winner was crowned King of the Underworld. Nowadays we fight for glory, riches and influence.

'Sorry – I'm fine. I just need a bit of fisherman's courage.' I swig back my water as if it's hard spirits, making Elisao smile. 'What were you going to say?'

'Let's talk about the Raven.'

There's a man standing opposite me, in the far corner, swigging straight from a bottle that I'll wager contains something much stronger than water. He's known as the Raven, and I can see how he got the name – though brown-skinned, like most people of the Wishes, he has bright orange, birdlike eyes, framed by a black mask, which covers the upper half of his face and beaks out over his nose. Medium build, muscular – perhaps he works on the docks during the daytime. Shaggy black hair. I'd put him in his thirties – though it's hard to tell for sure under the mask. Elisao is leaning over my shoulder.

'He doesn't look like much, but he's fast.' His voice is high and nervous.

'Mmhmm.'

'He's won his last seven fights.'

'So I hear,' I say. It's at least the fifth time Elisao has told me this. 'But I have too, you know. As has everyone else who's reached the midway point of the contest.'

'Apparently he's left-handed, Vico.'

'So am I,' I say, grinning at him over my shoulder. 'Elisao, you need to relax. You know I'm going to win, right?'

'This one's different, Vico. The others – they were just doing it for fun, or money, or women. They say this guy's obsessed. He almost won the crown last year.'

'Elisao' – I put my hands on his shoulders – 'I'm. Going. To. Win.'

He puffs out a breath. 'You'd better. I've got a frankly

indecent amount of money resting on you.’

The drums start to beat and I stand up, the crowd jostles, hushing, and the tension seems to draw in around us like a band of thieves.

‘Welcome to la Battaglia!’ Old Jacobo booms. ‘The seventh of this year’s twelve contests is about to begin!’ His face is now nearly as red as his great velvet cloak, stained and ragged from years of use but nevertheless lending him an air of grandeur. The minor crime lord puffs up his chest, pushes back his greased grey hair and spreads his arms. ‘My friends ... and my enemies’ – he smiles wickedly – ‘you are witnessing the war for the city’s greatest honour, the Fighter’s Crown. This contest has been raging in the darkness for centuries. Each year, we award one winner – a man or woman who defeats every one of their opponents in single hand-to-hand combat – the grand prize of twenty thousand golden crowns.’ Whoops break out across the room, a spattering of applause. ‘You have paid well to be here – or you are already a part of our family. Either way, I welcome you and bid you place your bets while the odds are favourable.’ He grins and raises his drink, a glass of golden panacea so brimming full that it sloshes over the rim as he lifts it. ‘To this great city – to Scarossa!’

There’s a roar of appreciation as the crowd answers, lifting their own drinks. ‘Scarossa!’ I join in, raising my water cup.

Once the commotion has died, the drums start up again, a slow, tremulous heartbeat. I’m confident – I *know* I can

win – but even so I feel the adrenalin start to flow through me, sweat prickling across my back. I live for this feeling. Suddenly I feel the heat of the room in a way I didn't before, the snake of cool air from some gap in the wall like a blessing. Everything is heightened.

Then I catch sight of the cloaked figure a second time. Closer, now – a few rows back from the front. The darkness under the cloak unnerves me. *Who are they?* I shift my eyes away and push the figure from my mind, smother the feeling of coldness. I can't afford to be distracted. I am here. I am going to win. My hands curl into fists.

Old Jacobo starts to speak again. 'Tonight's contests pit some of our greatest soldiers against one another – and we begin with a fight attracting considerable attention. In the west corner, four-year veteran of the Battaglia and last year's runner up – famed for his stealth, speed and ghastly eyes, and the marginal favourite for the win tonight – we have ... the Raven!' A cheer fills the warehouse, a tremor of excitement for those who have money on his victory. Those who haven't yet placed their bets are rushing to do so as the Raven stands up, cracking his shoulders and glaring at me across the hard-packed sandy floor. He looks mean; I'll give him that. 'And in the east corner, we have a challenger with all the advantages of youth. New this year, he's lean, he's scrappy, and he's hungry. We call him ... the Wolf!' Another cheer fills the warehouse as I step forward, nearly as big as the first. I grin. Seven months ago, the first time I

fought here, you wouldn't have heard a sound when I was announced. 'The first to remain on the floor for five counts is the loser. Are we ready?'

The crowd claps and cheers.

'Good luck!' Elisao whispers anxiously, pushing his mop of unruly curls from his face. His spectacles are slipping down his nose again. I feel a sudden rush of affection for him, the feeling I've been having, often, that I'd like to press my lips to his.

'Don't need it,' I say, instead, knowing it will annoy him.

He rolls his eyes. 'Just win, all right?'

And then it's time to fight.

I drop into a low, prepared stance. The Raven does the same. He's wearing a pair of loose fisherman's trews tied with a belt and nothing else. Close up, I can see his torso is criss-crossed with pale scars. The world narrows to me and him – we're alone in this shining light, in our own bright and tiny world, circling each other on the head of a needle. I can't even hear the crowd any more, can't even see the shapes of those watching as anything more distinct than fish in dark water.

But then I glimpse the cloaked figure – at the front of the crowd now. A few paces away. *Why don't they show their face?* I feel a coldness on my skin, prickling into goose-bumps. I notice something I hadn't noticed from a distance: a gold pendant hanging around the figure's neck, flashing as it catches the light. A flaming sun on a long chain. I frown.

‘What’s the matter, boy?’ The Raven growls. ‘Scared?’

I wipe the frown from my brow, forcing myself to focus. But I don’t reply. I’ve found it’s best not to talk in a fight; silence is more unnerving for your opponent.

He lunges towards me – he’s quick, but I’m ready, and I duck under his fist. It’s a test, really – he’s figuring out what I’m capable of. I stick out my foot as he retreats, a move that’s worked well in the past – but he doesn’t trip.

I clench my fists tighter. This isn’t going to be easy – but I’m glad. There’s no fun without a challenge.

I duck another two blows – then send my own fist up towards his chin. He’s gone, and out of nowhere I feel his knuckles connect with my stomach. I stagger away, somehow swooping ungracefully out of the reach of another blow aimed at my head.

Damn, he’s good.

I see an opening and ram my shoulder into his gut, hear a satisfying ‘oof’ of pain.

I try to trip him, pull his leg out from beneath him with a jerk of my hands, but he recovers – and I change tack last minute, aiming a punch at his jaw, which – to my surprise – actually connects. He’s dazed, staggering.

I haven’t been listening to the crowd, haven’t even been aware of them since we started fighting, but a shrill scream pierces through at exactly the moment I’m raising my fist again, pressing my advantage, and panic floods me, freezing my muscles. My arm drops. The air has

changed – excitement has shifted subtly but surely towards fear. Some people are watching us, but others are glancing over their shoulders. There’s something else too, something *other* – I can feel it. I think of the cloaked figure. *Where are they?* They were right there, at the front – and now they’ve disappeared.

What’s happening?

A punch in my face: my nose makes a deafening crack and time slows as blood splashes on to the sand. It’s broken – I can tell by how it feels, loose and wet like a sodden rag. The Raven’s on me, pushing me down, my mouth in the dust, my entire face throbbing with pain. Old Jacobo should be over us, counting down to his win, but instead there are more screams, and I see a nearby lamp being extinguished by an unnatural swirl of sand, as if the desert is rising up to reclaim what man has stolen. No one’s watching us now – and I feel the Raven’s weight lift from me as he too realises there’s something more important happening.

Sand whips up nearby – between shuffling legs I see the shape of ... What is that? A shadow, a flash of yellow light like a flame behind dark glass. The Raven curses, then runs away from me, glancing once over his shoulder with an unreadable expression before he shoves his way into the crowd and disappears. Elisao is at my side, hauling me up, as more lights go out. The huge warehouse is alive with shouts.

Blood is pouring from my nose. Elisao pushes something

in my face – a handkerchief. I try to pinch the bridge of my nose shut, but touching it feels like a burning poker is being shoved into my brain. So I hold just the handkerchief there, feel it grow wet.

‘Vico, we have to go! Come on!’

‘What’s happening?’ My voice is thick, muffled. I try to walk but feel dizzy – I clutch my signet ring, turned inward towards my palm, as I always do for courage. People shove past us towards the door. The warehouse is emptying fast – those wide doors designed for wagons releasing people into the cool night. I see a body on the ground in the darkness. And another further on towards the door. Out cold or dead, I can’t tell.

‘I think ... I think sandwolves,’ Elisao says, his voice trembling with fear, tugging my arm. We start to press forward, my legs moving of their own accord.

‘Sandwolves?’ I frown, feel a thrill of mingled fear and excitement, tracing the outline on my ring. The emblem is a sandwolf howling up at the stars. But there have been none of these beasts in Scarossa for fifteen years or more. My whole body is sprung tight as I scan the room. But why am I bothering? You can’t fight sandwolves with your fists.

‘Come on,’ Elisao says, looping my arm around his shoulders.

I stagger towards the door, leaning hard on Elisao as the ground lurches, guilt swirling inside me. Those bodies on

the ground ... I can't just leave them. We're nearly at the doors when I hesitate.

'Vico!' Elisao hisses.

'Wait for me outside,' I say, and I turn back, trembling.

'Vico, the sandwolves are probably still in there,' he says, pleading now. 'Get back here!'

I ignore him.

The first body, near the door, is a woman's. She's in her middle years and dressed in practical treads and a tunic. As I turn her over, I see her eyes flicker. There's a wound on her head, a raised red bruise – but she's all right. My relief feels like a living thing.

'Wolf?' she says doubtfully, as she focuses on my face. At first I think she's mistaken me for one of the creatures – then I realise that's how I'm known here. I help her up. 'What happened?'

'Sandwolves, we think,' I say, offering her a hand and heaving her to her feet. 'You must've got knocked down in the rush to leave. Go, quickly.'

I see her eyes widen and guess my accent has startled her. I can't help it: as much as I try to hide who I am, I can't speak like the people here do. Even through my broken nose, my station is obvious from the way I round my vowels and pronounce my consonants. She must be wondering what a rich boy is doing fighting in the Battaglia under the name of 'the Wolf'. But she nods, finding her way to the door.

I approach the second body, lit by a single lamp fallen, skewed, on to the ground. In the unsteady light I make out the face of a young girl – and even from a distance I can see her open, vacant eyes, the tell-tale lightning marks of a magical attack across her cheeks. The sandwolves didn't hurt this girl as collateral damage; they drained the magic clean out of her. No mage can survive that.

I can tell that she is dead. Even so, I kneel at her side, bend over her. Blood from my nose spatters on to her pale yellow dress. I drop the soaked handkerchief on the sandy ground – the bleeding has slowed anyway. The girl is around twelve or thirteen years old – dressed in civilian clothes, not temple robes. It's likely her powers hadn't even manifested yet. She might not have even known she was a mage, holding a feast for sandwolves inside her body.

There's nothing I can do for her now. My hands are shaking as I pull her cloak gently over her face.

'Vico?' Elisao is calling me from the door. 'What are you doing? Get out of there, you idiot!'

But there's movement from the opposite direction – deeper inside the building. I raise my head, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling. In the darkness of the warehouse, I see two pinpricks of yellow light. My heart flutters like a bird in a cage as the sandwolf swirls slowly towards me. A calm comes over me as the unsteady light falls on its strange floating body, a dust devil of sand curling into the ground, with the head of a wolf. A fur-like consistency

surrounds its ears, and its eyes glow a bright, intelligent yellow. I've never seen a sandwolf before. Never seen any magical creature. I can't help the way my breath catches in my throat.

Then I snap out of it, anger rising inside me. 'What? Aren't you full yet?' I whisper, my voice mocking and cold. 'You want to eat my magic too? I'd like to see you try.' I stand up, draw myself tall. 'Go!' I say.

We hold each other's gaze for a few moments, then suddenly the sandwolf disappears, flickering into thin air, leaving me blinking in surprise. I glance around, half expecting it to reform nearby – but it doesn't. I stand up slowly, expectantly, but nothing happens.

I glance down at the girl one last time and then hurry towards the wide door where Elisao is waiting.

'Thank gods, Vico. What were you doing in there?'

'Sandwolf got someone. A girl,' I say thickly. 'She can't have been more than thirteen. Drained her magic completely.'

'Ah ...' His expression softens. He starts to draw me away from the door, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

'I didn't think sandwolves killed.' My voice is shaky as we step away from the warehouse. I hate how powerless I feel. 'Aren't they scavengers?'

'It's not unheard of for them to kill if they're desperate ... but you're right – wild sandwolves tend to feed on scraps of spells, old enchantments, that sort of thing. They

don't tend to attack people.' Elisao is frowning. 'And what were they doing round here, anyway? Sometimes I hear of them on the isle of Silver, where it's less built up. But in the heart of the city, with Faul's temple of huntsmen right nearby ...'

I lean against the wall of the warehouse as a dizziness suddenly comes over me.

'We should get out of here before the huntsmen come,' says Elisao. 'If they find out about la Battaglia—'

As if on cue, the bells of Faul's temple start to ring, cutting Elisao off. The grey-cloaked mages, sworn to protect mankind from magical threats, will hunt the sandwolves down – if the creatures haven't already disappeared beyond the reach of their tracking spells. But if we're not careful, they'll be hunting us too: the Battaglia is strictly forbidden.

We hurry towards the water, then back round into the shadows of the docks.

'I'll take you to the infirmary,' says Elisao.

'That's all right. I'll make my own way home.'

'But—'

'Eli, seriously. There's a physician in my building too. It's just a broken nose.'

He nods, but his jaw is set tight, and I feel a stab of familiar guilt. He's only trying to help – and I'd love to let him. I hate keeping secrets from him – sometimes it feels like that's all I do.

Soon we reach the high defensive wall at the edge of the docks. Elisao says, ‘Oh my ...’

I turn to see what he’s looking at. On the ten-foot wall, black paint shimmers in the moonlight. The graffiti is painted so large that it takes me a moment to recognise the spiral surrounded by stylised flaming beams.

The symbol on the cloaked figure’s pendant. But it’s not just that ... ‘The Santini sun,’ I say under my breath – it’s the sigil of this city’s ruling family. ‘But it’s incomplete – where are the nine stars?’

Elisao presses his finger to the paint. ‘Still pretty fresh,’ he says. ‘Maybe they didn’t have time to finish it before it’s the sandwolf attack. Or maybe ...’

‘What?’

He shrugs. ‘Well, the Santini sun existed on its own as a sigil. Before the faith of the nine gods arrived on these islands. Back when the rulers of the Wishes were queens in their own right. And look, there’s more.’

Under the sun, close to the ground, a line has been written in crude dripping capitals: *THE REVOLUTION IS COMING.*

‘Probably just some crackpot. Gods know there’s enough of them in this city,’ says Elisao.

But I’m not so sure. The back of my scalp tingles with cold fear. ‘I need to speak to Old Jacobo. There was someone in the crowd today ... cloaked, hooded. Wearing a pendant with this same symbol. It can’t be a coincidence.’ I glance

over at him. ‘Did you see them?’

Elisao shakes his head. ‘You think Old Jacobo will know who it was? You know he’s not the strictest when it comes to spectators ...’

He’s right. Old Jacobo sells tickets to whoever will pay – he doesn’t necessarily ask questions, but he is well-informed, even so. I shrug. ‘He might. If not, he’d probably be able to find out. I’ll ask him.’

Behind us, voices cry out in the night. Magic flashes silver through the alleys of the docks as the mages start their hunt. We can’t linger any longer. We hurry through the gates into the city.

TWO

The Inheritance

Beatrice

In the tall cellar beneath the mask-maker's house, everything is quiet but for the low drone of Priestess Alyssa's voice. The elderly mask-maker is instructing us in the art of decoration from her wing-backed leather chair. 'The quality and category of the gems is one of the factors that determine the powers available to the wearer and the character of the mask's movement.' She wavers. Her old hands are swollen and sore, folded in the lap of her purple robes, never to practise her craft again. Instead, she watches, she judges and she speaks.

Her words wash over me in a familiar, irritating drone.

The three of us sit at our desks in a semicircle facing the Priestess at the front of the room. My elder sister Valentina shoots me a bored glance as she threads a feather through the headdress of her latest practice mask. We stopped learning from the Priestess years ago. We aren't like the other mask-makers in the other temples: when we

inherit our full powers, our masks won't merely be decorative or ceremonial.

'Remember, girls, yours will be living masks,' Priestess Alyssa says. 'The masks you perfect now, your practice masks, are the models for creations that will hold deep and lasting influence over the people of Scarossa and beyond. Each mask has one wearer. One match. And your practical skills determine how effective, how powerful your masks will be.' I mouth along with her next words, I know them so well. 'This is crucial, for every mask plays a role in defending and furthering the interests of the state.' She coughs drily.

Yes, when we inherit our powers, our mask-making will be threaded with magic. Our blood will be like strings, our fingers like tools – and a divine puppeteer will pull the scarlet cords that flow through us like stained lace. And our puppeteer? The masked god, Mythris. One of the nine, but the one few people know or understand – after all, he's a cloaked, faceless, ageless, genderless figure. He is no one. He is everyone. The patron god of the Wishes.

My future master.

I shiver. Part of me longs for the Inheritance, for change from this monotony. A bigger part of me has always feared it.

'The art of decoration is not to be taken lightly,' Priestess Alyssa continues, her coughing spell now passed. Her eyes are shut, as if she's speaking in her sleep. Perhaps she is. Perhaps she's spoken her various lectures over and over

until the very memory of her words is physically imprinted on her lips and tongue, her brain utterly disengaged. ‘When you inherit your full powers ...’

My mind drifts. *When we inherit.* In other words, when the eldest mascherari sister is on the brink of death, the Contessa will arrive at this house and speak the words of the Inheritance ceremony. Mythris will transfer the full magic of his powers from Katherina, Elina and Zia, the current mascherari triplets, to Valentina, me and Ofelia ... and the cycle will start again. Some day, years later, new triplet babes will be born in the city, destined to inherit the powers after us ... after we ...

All those dead sisters. Years upon years of them.

I force my thoughts back to the present. My dummy mask lies out on the desk – a laughing face, already painted a deep forest green. I decided to ring the lower part of eyes with silver gems, like tears brimming, and a cloud of bruised purple-grey hangs over the forehead. My fingers burn with glue. The gems in the cellar are cheap cut glass, reused again and again, unsightly where old glue has crusted on their edges – but somehow it doesn’t matter. In the moonlight shafting down from the high windows, augmented by flickering lamplight, even my humble practice mask looks a little bit magic.

Of course, were it ever worn, this mask would remain hard and still, like it is now. But all that will change when I inherit my powers. Then, whatever magic lies in my

hands, it will react with the magic of the wearer, and the masks I make will *live*. That's what makes a True Mask. That's what makes our masks special. The other temples of Mythris have masks too, but they're only ceremonial – at best, they're enchanted. But these ones grant the wearer potent powers.

As the middle sister, it's my task to create Grotesques. These are masks that draw power from expression, and they are named things like Joy, Sorrow, Fear, Mirth, Jealousy ... The magical effect, I'm told, is the manipulation of emotions.

I glance over at Valentina. Her masks, the Bestials, are the most powerful, drawing from the faces and abilities of animals. She's finishing off the feathered crown of a bird-like visage contorted into a fearsome screech of rage.

And then Ofelia. Her masks are to be more subtle in effect. They're called Ornamentals, and each one is a human face with the same blank expression but decorated with gorgeous variations of abstractions. The one she's working on is a swirl of darkness, like ink running into water. I wonder what its impact would be on the wearer. We've been told that Ornamentals can grant smaller enhancements – sharpened vision or hearing, increased delicacy of spellcraft.

Everything in the cellar is designed to mimic the life for which we were destined – a life we will spend in darkness, eventually working only while the city sleeps. We've been enduring later and later nights down here – gradually

transitioning as we've grown older. Tonight, we will work until midnight – but we've hours to go yet. Suddenly I shiver, feeling as if a god were treading over my soul.

Something is coming.

Priestess Alyssa's cane *tap-tap-taps* across the stone floor as she rises to inspect our work. 'Good, Valentina,' she says, bending over her desk. My eldest sister despises the Priestess, but somehow Valentina is still her favourite. 'Ofelia, your decoration could take a little more delicacy. Remember, Ornamentals are supposed to be particularly beautiful.' My younger sister's cheeks burn, and I see her open and then shut her mouth as if deciding against protesting. 'Beatrice ... that is an unconventional combination of colours. Remember, it is not your task to innovate. And your gem-work is a little uneven.'

I was about to argue that it was *supposed* to be uneven – like tears trembling on the brink – when I hear footsteps at the front door above us, and I drop a glass bead on my table, my hands frozen. Nobody ever calls on us: silence in the mascherari house is normally complete at this time of night, when the three sisters are at their work. I glance at Ofelia, who shrugs in confusion. Footsteps hurry across the hall overhead, the floorboards clacking, and I hear high, panicked voices.

I run upstairs before Priestess Alyssa can call out to stop me – Valentina and Ofelia close at my heels. I gasp as I reach the top, emerging into the hall. Katherina is suspended in

the air, her body supine, floating in through the front door. Her brown hair is feather-like as it wisps in the light breeze from outside. Her eyes are closed, and her face pale as marble, but her chest rises and falls gently. Next to her, a high priest of Imris – the god of healing – is casting the floating spell, muttering under his breath as he slowly lifts her upstairs. The priest in his long blue robes is focused on his work and appears not to notice our entrance. Katherina's sisters, Elina and Zia, are following in her wake like a pair of black shadows.

On the bottom step, Elina turns towards us – I expect disapproval, as usual, but her face is tight with worry as she holds out her hands to stop our hurried steps. I notice a slight tremble in her fingers.

'Will she be all right?' I ask, before Elina has a chance to speak.

She does not respond at first, casting down her eyes. Valentina is stoic next to me, but I hear Ofelia stifle a sob.

'The Priest ...' Elina's voice is uncharacteristically soft – and it crackles slightly, like old paper. 'The Priest of Imris tells us she will not last the night.'

I let her words sink in like ink through blotting paper, darkening everything it touches. Tonight is the night. *Tonight we inherit our powers.* But I'm not ready. It's too soon. I glance at Valentina, who stands up straighter, pulling her shoulders back as if readying herself for battle. Beside me, Ofelia leans hard against the banister, as if she has been

struck a blow, struggling to keep herself upright.

Elina composes her face into a mask of bravery – and when she speaks again, her voice is strong and clear. ‘What she needs most of all, now, is peace. And that’s what Zia and I need too. You can come – *should* come – but ... be quiet and calm, please.’ Her eyes rest on Ofelia for a moment, who nods, her hand pressed to her mouth.

Elina turns and climbs the rest of the stairs, her black dress lapping the steps behind her one by one like a dark wave climbing the shore. The three of us say nothing, but both my sisters’ hands find mine as we follow her into Katherina’s room. Maybe there’s been a mistake. Maybe she’ll be all right.

But she isn’t. Katherina lies propped up on her many cushions in the high bed we were born in, the blue lace curtains pulled back and tied with golden cord. Candlelight flickers across her face. I linger by the door, just close enough to listen to her shallow breath – in and out, in and out – like the whisper of the sea on this calm night. Her skin is flushed with fever, tight with some pain I don’t understand and which appears to have no source but living itself. The Priest of Imris lays a palm on her forehead. For a few moments, a ghostly blue glow fills the half-lit room, and the tightness in Katherina’s face lessens slightly, the tension fleeing from her brows.

The Priest speaks to Elina in a low voice – but I listen, hanging back from the bed.

‘I have relieved her pain. She should regain consciousness long enough for you to say your goodbyes. That is all I can do. But I will remain in the hall in case I’m needed.’

My heartbeat rises in panic as I realise it’s really happening. She’s really dying.

‘Will you send word to the Contessa?’ Elina asks.

‘It is all in hand, Mascherari. Gods be with you and your sisters.’ His voice is gentle. He bows as he leaves the room, and as the door clicks shut, Katherina’s eyes start to flicker open.

‘Sisters?’ she gasps with great effort.

Elina is at her side; she leans in. Katherina squints to focus on her sister’s face, the momentary panic leaving her eyes. ‘Katherina,’ Elina whispers gently. ‘Easy, now. Mythris is calling us home. Soon, the Contessa will arrive, and your pain will end.’

Zia presses her hand between hers. ‘I am here, sister. We are all here.’ She glances over her shoulder at the three of us – hovering awkwardly in the shadows. ‘Come,’ she mouths.

We draw closer. One by one, we perch on the bedside. This was always meant to happen. It’s the natural order. But no matter how many times I tell myself this, I can’t help the way grief and terror are rushing through me in equal measure, molten and stinging, the way my fists clench on my lap. I shut my eyes and breathe, but the whole room smells of death.

Katherina appears to be too weak to speak any more, but she gazes at Elina, then Zia – who somehow summons a loving smile through her tears – then at Valentina and Ofelia, sat next to me on the opposite side of the bed. I can't help noticing how her eyes pass across me like water sliding over rock, as if I'm not here at all.

'Safe journey to the Godsworld, elder sister,' Valentina says, leaning over and planting two kisses firmly on Katherina's cheeks. But there's a tremor in her voice, even though she tries to disguise it.

Katherina once told me of the moment she inherited the mascherari powers. She said it was like lying upon the ocean and feeling the suck and pull of the waves, the cold of the deep at your back. I never liked to swim further out than the shallows – I didn't like the way the sand dropped off beneath you so sudden, how you could feel the darkness twisting in your stomach and creeping over your skin. I reach for her hand now, intending to say goodbye. Instead, it is she who speaks, her eyes flickering open: 'Run, Beatrice.'

Her eyes meet mine at last, and I am shocked at the impact.

'Sorry?' I say, astonished by her lucidity, unable to understand what she means.

'We had no choice ...' Her breathing is laboured, her eyes roving wildly as if she's trying to fix on something behind me. She's feverish. I know she's talking

nonsense – she must be – but I can't help the way my body tenses. 'We had no choice ...'

My heart is pattering. 'What do you mean?' I manage.

'You should run,' she manages, 'Bea ...'

I can do nothing but breathe. I shake my head, stepping backwards in confusion.

'She's out of her mind with pain,' Elina says, laying a hand gently on her shoulder. 'The fever has addled her brain.' She wipes my eyes – I didn't know I was crying – pulls me close and whispers, 'I know this is frightening. Remember, we went through the same thing the night of our Inheritance.' She pulls away, smiling. 'But all is as it should be, little sister. Your time is coming. Soon you will have Mythris's power running in your blood – use it well. Pray every day and remember we are watching over you from the Godsworld.' She lets me go, but I feel far from comforted, Katherina's warning ringing in my ears.

I embrace Zia, who sobs on my shoulder and wishes me 'goodbye, darling'. I shiver mutely, feeling sickness twist in my belly.

The Contessa enters without ceremony: this woman who watched us cut from our mother's womb; this woman dressed, like us, in perpetual-mourning black. We curtsy again, waiting for her permission to rise. I gaze up at her through my eyelashes as I hold myself low. She is an old woman: her hair entirely grey, her brown skin wrinkled. But her eyes are bright as they scan the room, and she still

holds herself tall. The cane at her side is as much an affectation of the nobility, I know, as it is designed for support. Is it my imagination, or does her gaze linger on me a moment longer than the others? I avert my eyes quickly, heart thumping.

‘Is everything as it should be?’ she asks the room. Although she must be in her eighties, her voice has the strength and power of a much younger woman’s – someone accustomed to obedience.

‘Of course,’ Elina replies. ‘We are ready.’

Are we? My heart is hammering against my ribs.

But I hold Katherina’s limp, hot hand, Valentina on my other side, and Ofelia next to her. We all form a circle around the bed. We’ve been preparing for this moment our whole lives – we know what to do. The candlelight flickers as the Contessa starts to speak.

‘I summon you, Mythris, Lord of Shadows, God of Many Faces. I summon you. I summon you.’

The back of my neck tingles in the silence before she continues.

‘We call on you to accept your three elder daughters into your bosom.’ Her voice is slow, deliberate. My senses prickle as a breeze snakes through the room as if from nowhere. ‘Summon their souls into the Godsworld and release their powers into these three fated vessels, their younger sisters.’

Valentina’s hand tightens on mine. I feel light-headed,

the air in the room buzzing as if it's full of flies. The candle-light flickers. Sparks dance in front of my eyes – I blink, shaking my head. Is it my imagination, or are the Contessa's eyes fixed on me, filled with worry even as she utters the ceremonial words? My face tingles.

'Honour your promise, Lord of Mysteries, Lord of Secrets, Lord of All Things Hidden. Honour your vow and grant your humble servants the gift you have bestowed upon us for generations past.'

The candles self-extinguish, snuffed out by an unseen energy.

'Stay calm,' says the Contessa in a different, lower voice. 'Do not break the circle.'

'You're hurting me,' Valentina hisses, and I realise I'm clutching her hand as hard as I can. I loosen my grip slightly. A bead of sweat runs down my cheek. I feel dizzy. I feel as if something is closing in on me. I can smell incense, though none is burning. And now, I can feel a velvety presence against my cheek.

'So mote it be,' the Contessa says. 'So mote it be. So mote it be.'

The tension in the room is unbearable. The ringing in my ears grows louder and louder, and then, in the semi-darkness of the moonlight spilling through the curtains, I watch as Zia and Elina start to tremble. Katherina's hand jerks in mine, and I have to force myself not to pull away as it goes suddenly limp.

The two other sisters drop down, like puppets with cut strings, their bodies *thunking* on the wooden floor.

A wave hits me – almost a physical impact, cold and dark, making me stagger and dragging me down into an unbearable deepness, stealing my breath. I feel another person standing beside me where Katherina's dead hand lies in mine – something old and cunning and cruel. A cloaked, hazy figure. Bodiless, faceless – a shadow in the corner of my eye.

Mythis is here, I think, my thoughts loud as a siren.

The god's cold laughter fills my senses like gurgling water.

I try to scream, but my mouth gapes open in silence.

Where is the air?

And I am gone.