

A BREATHTAKING FANTASY FROM
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KELLEY ARMSTRONG

A stylized illustration of a phoenix or firebird in a forest. The bird is rendered in a teal color, with its wings spread wide, surrounded by a dense field of red leaves. The background consists of dark, vertical tree trunks and a teal, ethereal light filtering through the foliage.

SEA OF
SHADOWS

SEA ^{9^F}
SHADOWS
KELLEY ARMSTRONG

HARPER

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Dedication

To Julia

Contents

Dedication

Prologue

Ashyn: One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Moria: Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Ashyn: Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Moria: Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-one

Twenty-two

Ashyn: Twenty-three

Twenty-four

Twenty-five

[Twenty-six](#)

[Twenty-seven](#)

[Twenty-eight](#)

[Twenty-nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Moria: Thirty-one](#)

[Thirty-two](#)

[Thirty-three](#)

[Thirty-four](#)

[Thirty-five](#)

[Thirty-six](#)

[Thirty-seven](#)

[Ashyn: Thirty-eight](#)

[Thirty-nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty-one](#)

[Forty-two](#)

[Forty-three](#)

[Forty-four](#)

[Forty-five](#)

[Forty-six](#)

[Forty-seven](#)

[Forty-eight](#)

[Forty-nine](#)

[Moria: Fifty](#)

[Fifty-one](#)

[Fifty-two](#)

[Fifty-three](#)

[Fifty-four](#)

[Fifty-five](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Back Ads](#)

[Books by Kelley Armstrong](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

After three days of tramping across endless lava fields, Ronan quickened his steps at the sight of the forest. He swore he could feel soft earth under his feet, hear birds in the treetops, even smell ice-cold spring water. If one had to pick a place to die, he supposed one could do worse.

He glanced over at his father and uncle, but their gazes were fixed straight ahead. Even the guards weren't paying attention. Still Ronan didn't consider escape. There was a reason the exiles weren't bound or chained. They were in the Wastes. There was no place to hide except the Forest of the Dead, and they'd be there soon enough.

Ronan sat around the campfire with the others, eating their final dinner in the livestock enclosure. Once they passed the canyon walls, they'd be expected to fend for themselves. Without weapons. In the forest rumored to be bereft of life.

For their last meal, they got water, dried fish, and overcooked rice. At least the water was clean, which was more than he could say for the murk he'd been drinking.

Beside him, his father sat motionless, staring at the fire. Two of the exiles eyed his untouched food. As soon as Ronan's uncle turned away, one snatched a chunk of fish . . . and found his wrist pinned to the ground.

"Drop it," Ronan said.

"You little—"

The convict didn't get a chance to finish the curse. Ronan's fist slammed him in the throat. The man gasped, eyes bulging as he struggled for breath. The other exiles laughed. Ronan knew they weren't cheering his victory; they'd have laughed just as much if he were lying there with a makeshift blade in his gut. On the road, he'd watched three prisoners die, their killers goaded on by the others who cared only that the deaths lifted the monotony for a moment or two.

He didn't glance at his uncle. He knew he'd be pleased. He also knew that he wouldn't have interfered if Ronan *had* faced a blade. If Ronan wasn't strong enough to survive, then he shouldn't. It was that simple.

Ronan set the fish back in front of his father, who hadn't moved during the entire incident. His uncle shook his head, reached over, and took the untouched meal. He divided the fish and rice and pushed half toward Ronan.

"Eat."

Ronan took it, only to press the fish into his father's hand. It fell to the rocky ground. His uncle snorted. After another try, Ronan kept the food, and his uncle grunted in satisfaction.

A single-word exchange. That's what passed for conversation with his uncle. Ronan's father had been the loquacious one, always talking, always laughing, always charming. And yet, somehow, Ronan

had always felt more affection in his uncle's grunts and glares than in the false and easy charm his father used on marks and family alike.

After eating the rations, Ronan walked to stretch his legs. As he neared the barn, he noticed something perched on the enclosure fence. He slowed to let his eyes adjust to the dark.

The shape looked like a cat, but it was almost half as tall as him. Blacker than the surrounding night, with a swishing, thick tail that kept it balanced on the thin wall. Its massive paws seemed too large for its body. Its tufted ears swiveled and twitched. A wildcat? Ronan recalled seeing one in the imperial zoo, but it hadn't been much bigger than a house pet.

This cat was looking off to the side. Ronan took a few cautious steps. Then he noticed what the cat was watching—a village boy had climbed the fence and was slinking along the barn to get a look at the exiles.

Ronan's practiced eye slid over the boy, taking in his size, his demeanor, and most of all, his clothes. He was half a head shorter than Ronan, with his hood pulled up around his face. Perhaps thirteen summers, given his size. An easy mark. A rich one, too, considering his attire—woolen breeches, a fine cloak, and laced leather boots. Both the cloak and the boots were fur trimmed and likely fur lined. So the boy came from a family of power. That made him valuable.

As Ronan watched the youth, a plan formed. It was not a good plan or even a reasonable one, but it was a single night from exile in the Forest of the Dead. A plan no longer needed to be good or reasonable. If he took the boy, perhaps he could barter him for something—food, a weapon, anything that might help Ronan survive the winter.

He needed to survive. He had a sister and brother back in the imperial city. Aidra was six summers old and Jorn was not yet ten. Ronan knew it wouldn't be long before his aunt decided they needed work for their keep—filching in the marketplace and scouting marks for their older cousins. Ronan would do whatever it took to get back to them.

He crept after the village boy, his worn boots making no sound. When he heard a noise, he glanced back to see the cat's yellow eyes fixed on him. Ronan supposed that ought to be some cause for alarm, but the beast only stared at him balefully. Then it made an odd chirping sound. The village boy didn't seem to hear it.

Ronan slid closer, measuring the distance. The boy had crouched to peer around the barn door. Defenseless. Oblivious. A perfect mark.

Ronan sprang. The moment he was in flight, the boy twisted and dove at him. As he did, his hood fell back and red-gold hair tumbled out. *Long* red-gold hair. Later Ronan would tell himself that *that* was why he ended up on his back, with a girl on his chest and a blade at his throat. Not because she bested him, but because he'd been caught off guard realizing *he* was a *she*.

The dagger didn't help matters. That threw him as much as her gender. Only the warrior caste was permitted to carry edged weapons, and she wasn't dressed as a warrior. And he could see enough of the dagger to know it was relatively new, not a warrior's ancestral blade.

He grabbed the girl by the back of her cloak to wrest her off—and got a knee jab in the stomach, so hard it made him very glad she hadn't aimed lower. The dagger bit into his neck, and he felt blood well up. Still, that might not have been enough to deter him. But the cat was.

The wildcat had appeared beside them, silent as a wraith. It padded closer, as if witnessing a dueling game of capture-my-lord, plunked itself down, and stretched, its front paws coming so close Ronan could see the tips of its giant claws. Then those claws shot out, razor-sharp talons as long as fingernail joints, barely a hairbreadth from his face.

The girl turned to the cat. She made a noise in her throat, a cross between a grunt and a growl. The

cat sighed, then straightened and proceeded to clean a forepaw. Yet it kept its gaze on Ronan.

A hunting cat? He'd heard of such things, in the deserts to the south, where the climate was suited to shaggy hounds. But the girl was clearly Northern-born, with her pale skin and blue eyes.

"Are you the youngest of the damned?" the girl asked. To Ronan's surprise, her voice was low, almost rough. With her red-gold hair and finely cut features, she looked like she ought to speak with a teasing lilt. Of course, she didn't look like she should be able to send him flying either—or knock out his breath with a well-placed knee.

"What?" he said.

"The damned. The exiles. Are you the youngest?"

He was, but he had no idea what it mattered, so he stared at her.

"They sent me to find the youngest. Are you he?"

"Who sent you?" he asked carefully.

Her free hand fluttered, but she said nothing, only asked the question again, sounding impatient now.

"And if I *was* the youngest?" he said.

She looked around, as if waiting for someone. "Do you know what would truly help?" she said, speaking to the air. "Clearer communication."

The cat chuffed and seemed to roll its eyes.

"I know, I know," she muttered under her breath.

She's mad, Ronan thought. I've been taken by a madwoman.

That would have been cause to resume struggling if she weren't already sliding off him. She sprang to her feet, as gracefully as her cat, and pointed the dagger at his chest. "Keep your distance, boy."

Boy? She was older than he'd estimated at first, but she still had to be a summer his junior.

She gave one last look around, muttered, "This was a waste of time," and began backing away. After a few steps she stopped, and her head swung to the side, as if she'd heard something.

"What?" she said.

"I didn't—" he began.

She silenced him with a wave, then focused on the air to her left.

Spirits. She hears the spirits.

No, that didn't make sense. True, there were spirits, all around them, all the time. Everyone knew that. But only the spirit talkers could hear them, and those were mystics who'd sacrificed every other sense to earn that one. Blinded, tongues cut out, nostrils seared, forbidden to touch anything except the paper on which they scribbled messages from the second world. This girl was clearly not one of them.

He looked at the cat. The sight of it triggered some memory. Yes, there was an answer to the riddle, and he should know it, but he'd relegated it to the refuse heap of things he didn't need to remember.

Or the girl was mad. That seemed more likely.

"Are you mad?" she said, as if echoing his thoughts, and he jumped, but she was still addressing the air. "What good will—?"

She paused, then muttered, "Clearer communication. Is it too much to ask?"

She turned to Ronan. "Stay there."

"What?"

She looked back at the air. "He's simple. You do realize that, don't you?"

"Simple? I am not—"

"Stay!"

Still walking backward, she retreated to the fence and climbed on top of it. The wildcat jumped beside her. She whispered something to it, and the beast dipped its head, as if agreeing.

Then, without another word, she hurled the dagger. It hit the barn, embedding itself in the wood.

“There,” she said. “Now, let’s hope you have the intelligence to keep it hidden.”

He stared at the blade. “You’re giving me . . .”

“Not by choice. It won’t do any good anyway. If the swamp fever doesn’t drive you mad, the spirit of the damned will. You’ll probably end up using that blade on yourself. Not much else in the forest you can use it on. A dagger won’t kill the fever. Won’t kill the spirits.” She turned. “But good luck anyway.”

She jumped down, the wildcat leaping beside her, and they were gone.

It was barely past dawn when the exiles were marched to the forest. Beside Ronan, Cecil—a young man a few summers his senior—gaped at the fierce village guards who accompanied them. Had he expected farmers and craftsmen armed with cudgels? Edgewood guarded the only passage from the Forest of the Dead. Of course its guardians would be warriors.

Ronan’s family had been warriors once. Until an ancestor backed the wrong imperial heir, and they’d been stripped of their caste, expected to beg for a living. Yet while the empire could confiscate their blades, it couldn’t rescind generations of martial training. So Ronan’s family had found other ways to keep themselves fed. Which had ultimately led to this.

As they walked, Ronan eyed the youngest village guard. He wasn’t much older than Ronan. Intricate tattoos covered his forearms. In them, Ronan saw a nine-tailed fox. The totem of the Kitsune clan, family of the disgraced former marshal, who’d been exiled to this forest himself. Apparently *his* clan hadn’t been stripped of its caste. They just wound up here, guarding the forest.

The exiles left the village guards behind at the watchtower and continued on with the ones who brought them here. As they walked, the convicts stared into the endless verdant sea ahead. Even with the trees shedding their leaves, the forest was still green, thick moss covering everything.

The guards urged them forward. They’d have two days of walking to reach the middle of the forest. Behind them, a guard unspooled a bright red ribbon in their wake. Once they entered the dense woods, that ribbon would be the only chance for the guards to find their way out again.

Ronan glanced over his shoulder at the village.

“Take a good look,” a guard said, smirking. “It’s the last you’ll ever see of it.”

Ronan shifted and felt the cold steel of the hidden dagger against his leg.

Perhaps, he thought. But not if I can help it.

Four Moons Later

Ashyn

One

Ashyn sat by the fire, eating pork rolls while feeding meat scraps to Tova, the giant yellow hound that never left her side. She gazed out the window and watched the spring sun burn away the lace frost.

Her twin sister, Moria, sauntered in, late for breakfast as always. Moria's wildcat, Daigo, appeared out of nowhere and snatched a scrap from under Tova's nose. As Ashyn scolded the wildcat, Moria whisked the pork roll from her hand.

Ashyn sighed and Tova sighed, too. Then they just helped themselves to more food and moved over to let Moria and Daigo sit with them.

When their father came in a moment later, he said, "Moria, you'll be pleased to know that your new dagger will arrive on the next supply wagon."

"Finally. I lost it before the first snow fell."

"Then perhaps, in future, you ought to be more careful with your belongings."

"I can't help it. I'm forgetful."

Father shook his head. "You've never forgotten anything in your life, Rya. Who got your blade the last time? Another woman needing protection from her husband?"

"That would be wrong. Blades are for warriors. Ash and I are the only exceptions." She took a bite of her pork. "But if I did give it to some poor soul in need, it would be the spirits' fault. They speak and I must obey."

Their father shared an eye roll with Ashyn. While it was true that the girls served the ancestral spirits, it was an excuse Moria used too often.

"Waiting so long for weapons isn't reasonable," Moria continued. "We need a smith. I'm sure there's a strong young man who could take up the task, for the greater good." She chewed. "How about that Kitsune boy?"

"What's Gavril done now that you're volunteering him for smithing?" Ashyn asked.

"It was merely a suggestion. He's young. He's strong. He's in need of a trade."

Ashyn sputtered a laugh. "He's a *warrior*, Moria, from a line of warriors stretching back to the First Age."

"Then his ancestors have forgotten him, because he isn't very good at it."

Ashyn shook her head.

"Since I won't have my dagger by morning, I'll need a knife," Moria said, her voice deceptively casual. "I'm going lizard hunting."

“Are you?” Father mused. “Perhaps I’ll come along.”

“You scare the lizards.”

“No,” he said. “I’ll scare *you*—away from the forest. Which is where you truly plan to go.”

Moria made a face. “Why would I want to go into the forest?”

Neither Ashyn nor their father replied to that. They both knew what Moria had in mind. Tomorrow was the Seeking. Ashyn was the Seeker. Having passed her sixteenth summer, she would enter the Forest of the Dead for the first time, where she would find the bodies of the damned and put the spirits to rest.

“I don’t see why I can’t go,” Moria continued when no one answered. “I’m the Keeper. I protect the empire from unsettled spirits, so it should be my duty to help with the Seeking.”

“No,” Ashyn said. “It’s your duty to stay here and guard the village *during* the Seeking.” She lowered her voice and whispered to Moria. “I don’t need my little sister to protect me.”

Moria grumbled. Ashyn knew she hated the reminder that she’d been born a half day later. Twins were so rare that their mother had gone that long before realizing the ongoing labor pains weren’t merely the aftereffects of Ashyn’s birth.

“I’m trained with a blade,” Ashyn continued evenly. “Besides, I have Tova. He wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

On cue, the hound laid his head on her knee.

“I still don’t like it,” Moria said.

Ashyn leaned against her twin. “I know.”

Tomorrow Ashyn would conduct the Seeking—her primary role as Seeker of Edgewood. There were four pairs of Seekers and Keepers in the empire. Two traveled where they were needed, and one stayed at court. The last pair was permanently stationed at the most spiritually dangerous place in the empire—Edgewood—where they guarded the only break in the box-canyon wall that surrounded the Forest of the Dead.

Their forest had always been thick with spiritual energy, from the old practice of elder abandonment. After that ended, the empire began exiling its criminals here, and the ancestral spirits had fled to the village at its mouth. That was what made Edgewood so dangerous that it needed its own Keeper and Seeker. The village was filled with ancestral spirits in constant need of appeasement, and the forest was filled with angry spirits in constant need of restraint.

Before the Seeking, there was a full day of rituals to be conducted. As they followed the rocky lane to the sanctuary, Ashyn looked at her twin sister. Two of the village children walked backward in front of Moria. A half dozen more followed behind her. The children were not coming along for the rituals of course, but merely tagging along after Moria. If they got too close or grabbed at her cloak, she’d snap and Daigo would growl. They’d dance away, grinning, only to come right back, chattering like Healer Mabill’s pet magpie. *Tell us a story, Moria. Show us a trick. Teach us something.*

Moria would scowl at the younger children and lob insults at the older ones. They still adored her and still followed her through the village like stray dogs, knowing a scrap would eventually come. They’d get a story or they’d get a trick or they’d get a lesson, and they’d get smiles, too, and kind words, if they earned them.

“Better run home,” Moria called as they continued down the lane. “You know what happens if you get too close to the sanctuary and see the rituals.”

“Our eyes will pop!” a boy shouted.

“Yes. They’ll explode like dried corn in a fire, and you’ll be left with holes in your head for your eyes.”

brains to leak out.”

“Eww!” one of the girls said. “And then what?”

“Then you’ll be walking around with only half your wits, drooling and gaping.” She pointed at the oldest boy. “In other words, you’ll end up just like Niles over there.”

The children giggled.

Moria continued, “If you behave yourselves and stay away from the sanctuary, I might tell some stories tonight. But you must stay away. Ashyn needs complete silence outside or she’ll forget the words to all the chants.” She lowered her voice to a mock whisper. “I think *she* might have gotten too close to a ritual when she was little.”

Ashyn made a face at her. Moria tossed back a grin. Despite the insult, Ashyn knew Moria was doing her a favor—a quiet sanctuary would indeed help today. It was the first time she’d conduct the Seeking rituals alone.

“Now, what kind of creature do you want for tonight’s story?” Moria asked. “Thunder hawks? Sand dragons? Water horses?”

As the children called out suggestions, a small voice whispered beside Ashyn. “Are you scared?”

She looked down at the girl, walking so close Tova had to give her room. There were always a couple frightened by Moria’s stories and scowls. This one was Wenda, just past her ninth summer. Ashyn stroked the girl’s black curls.

“I’ve assisted with the rituals many times,” Ashyn said. “It’s not frightening.”

“I mean the Seeking. Finding the”—Wenda shuddered—“bodies. And the spirits. Momma says when the damned die, they become the forsaken and can hurt us.” She looked up, dark eyes glistening. “They can hurt *you*.”

“But they won’t. I’m there to calm them and make sure they are buried properly. That takes away their anger. They’ll go to the second world and be happy.”

Moria glanced over, her rough voice softening. “Ashyn’s been training for this since she was smaller than you. She’s ready.”

Ashyn wished she shared her sister’s confidence. It was true they’d been training most of their lives. The Seeker and Keeper from the imperial court had come every season to train them and conduct the rituals. Ashyn was not fond of the harsh old Seeker, but she wished Ellyn could be here now to guide her, even if she could not enter the forest with her tomorrow—only one Seeker was permitted in at a time.

Ashyn couldn’t even appeal to the ancestral spirits for guidance. While she often heard the wordless whispers, their actual communications were little more than a few words. From that, she had to interpret what they wanted—and it was all about what *they* wanted. She was their servant. They did not assist her.

“Who wants Ashyn’s fortune today?” Moria asked.

The children clamored to be chosen. Then Wenda whispered, “I think Ashyn should take it. For luck.”

Ashyn shook her head. Anyone who left an offering was welcome to a fortune, but she never took hers because there was a chance it could be a curse. It seemed an unnecessary tempting of fate. So Moria let the village children take it, which was fine, because a curse didn’t count if you weren’t the one leaving the offering.

The children ran to the offering tree. It was set just under the eaves of the sanctuary, sheltered from the rare rains. Made of metal, the tree had fortune scrolls in place of leaves and a slotted hole for the offering. The shrine caretaker replaced the scrolls with shipments from the court priests.

Ashyn knelt beside the metal tree and dropped in a copper coin, hearing it clink at the bottom. ~~Then she closed her eyes, selected a scroll, and handed it to the little boy Moria had chosen. He shoved it into his pocket to be opened later, so he wouldn't miss the next part.~~

Moria waved the children away from the tree and stepped back five paces, coin in hand. She measured the distance. Then she pitched the coin. It sailed squarely through the slot and rang off the metal like a bell.

The children cheered, but the show wasn't over. They went quiet as Moria pulled a dart from her cloak. She turned around and threw the dart over her shoulder. It flew straight through a scroll and pinned it to the wooden sanctuary wall.

The children whooped and cheered. Ashyn shot her sister a grin. Moria smiled and went to retrieve her prize.

"Leaving an offering is a sacred act, Keeper," said a deep voice behind them. "It isn't a child's game."

Two

Ashyn winced as Gavril Kitsune stepped from behind the children, but Moria only said, “Yes, it is a sacred act, and so I honor the spirits by demonstrating the skills I have developed for the protection of my village.”

Ashyn swore she heard the whispery chuckle of the ancestors.

One of the older boys turned to Gavril. “The Keeper protects us from the spirits of the damned. Like your father—”

Moria laid her hand on the boy’s shoulder, silencing him. Gavril’s mouth tightened. One could think he was reacting to the insult, but Ashyn suspected Moria’s defense bothered him more.

When Gavril first came to Edgewood, the village had recognized the uncomfortable irony of sending a young man to guard the forest where his father had been exiled to his death. They’d tried to welcome him. But Gavril was as hard as the lava rock of the Wastes. He did his job and asked for nothing, expected nothing, gave nothing. Still, he wasn’t rude to the villagers . . . with one exception—the person who’d been the most outraged by his predicament and had tried most to befriend him.

Gavril goaded Moria, challenged her, and caught her when she was up to trouble. Moria forbade Ashyn to complain. “It’s practice,” she’d say. “He pokes at me and insults me and watches me, and I learn to be tougher, quicker, and stealthier.”

Now Gavril walked close enough to Moria to make Daigo growl. He towered above her by a head, his dark braids brushing her head as he leaned over to whisper to her. His muscled arms glistened with sweat, as if he’d just left his morning drill. The perspiration made the green eyes on his nine-tailed fox tattoos glitter.

“Remember what I said,” he murmured. “If you try tomorrow, I’ll do it. I swear I will.”

Moria’s hand tightened on the dart. “I don’t need to be told twice.”

“I just want to be sure we understand each other, Keeper.”

“What’s going on?” Ashyn said.

Gavril didn’t even look at her. “This is between your sister and me.”

Unrolling her fortune, Moria walked toward Ashyn. She glanced down at the paper, then stopped at a midstep. It was only a moment’s pause before she wrapped her hand around the tiny paper, her expression neutral. But Ashyn noticed.

“It’s a curse, isn’t it?” Gavril said, striding to catch up with her.

Ashyn braced for his next words. He’d say she deserved it after disrespecting the spirits with her performance. Instead, he swung into Moria’s path and said, “Go put it on the statue behind the sanctuary.”

Moria’s brows shot up. “Is that an order?”

“Now is not the time to take a curse—” Gavril began.

“I’m not going on the Seeking. That has been made very clear.” She gave him a look. “If I accept my good fortunes, then I must also accept my curses.”

“Ashyn, tell her to put the curse on the statue.”

Ashyn jumped at the sound of her name. It was quite possibly the first time he’d ever said it. And definitely the first time he’d looked straight at her. She decided she much preferred being ignored. Her eyes were discomfiting enough. Green. A rare color in the empire. Kitsune eyes, her father said, the mark of Gavril’s illustrious family. A sign of sorcery, others said, whispering old stories about how the Kitsunes first gained their power.

“You know I won’t, so don’t ask.” Moria took Ashyn’s arm. “Everyone’s waiting inside. Father keeps peeking out. We’re late.”

As they walked to the door, Moria glanced over her shoulder. Ashyn did the same and saw that the children were still there, quiet now, their faces tight with concern. They’d overheard enough to know Moria had picked a curse.

“What are you waiting for?” she called to the children. “You know what happens if you see the rituals.”

Silence answered her.

Moria reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of coppers. “Huh. Seems I have extra. What should I do with these?”

That got a few smiles and whispers, but most of the faces stayed solemn. Moria opened her hand under the fountain water. Then she clenched her fist around the wet coins.

“Grant me a boon, o spirits,” she said. “Twice-bless these coins for the children. May they have nothing but good fortune until the Seeking is done.”

Wind rustled through the fortune scrolls, making them whisper, as if the spirits themselves were replying. Moria kept one of the coins and threw the rest to the children. As they scrambled after them shrieking, she tossed the remaining copper to Gavril.

He made no move to catch it, letting it fall, clinking. Then he turned on his heel and marched away.

Ashyn’s knees ached. Which was exactly the wrong thing to be thinking about in the middle of a spiritual ritual, and it only made her feel all the more ill prepared to lead the Seeking tomorrow. This was not the first ritual she’d ever done—she’d been assisting Ellyn since she was old enough to recite the words. It was not even the first one she’d conducted alone—lately, Ellyn had left the minor seasonal rituals to Ashyn, only coming back in the spring for the Seeking. And yet Ashyn was not prepared. She simply wasn’t.

The Seeking rituals took the longest by far, and by this point her knees always ached from the cold stone floor. In the past, any guilt at fussing over discomfort had been mitigated by the knowledge that her participation didn’t matter. She’d do better when Ellyn was gone.

How? she wondered now. Had she expected that her knees would miraculously toughen as she passed her sixteenth summer? That the endless chants would suddenly flow without stammers and stutters?

When something brushed her hand, she jumped, eyes flying open.

“Shhh.” Moria laid a hand on her shoulder.

Her sister held out a cloth, and Ashyn thought she’d read her mind. She was about to refuse—she wasn’t allowed a kneeling pad—but then she saw the bowl of steaming water.

“It’s time for your purification.” Moria kept her voice low. The others—the governor, their father, and the shrine caretaker—had retreated outside long ago, but might still be close enough to overhear.

Ashyn shook her head. "I need to finish the Song for the Fallen first."

"You did," Moria whispered. "You started it over again."

Ashyn's cheeks warmed and tears prickled. *I can't do this. I truly can't.*

"I'm sure no one noticed," Moria whispered. "I only did because I woke up when you got to the interesting part." Ashyn knew Moria hadn't truly fallen asleep, but the thought made her smile.

As Moria helped with the ritual bath, Ashyn tried to cleanse her mind as well. She opened her mind to the spirits—all the spirits. While the ancestral ones of the village were her primary concern, there were many, many others. Spirits were everywhere, inhabiting everything—spirits of hearth and fire, of wind and rain, of plant and beast. She did not hear those. They were not the sort that spoke. There were other human spirits, though, ones she might hear, if they passed her way. The hungry dead. The lonely and the angry.

Like the spirits in the forest. The forsaken. The vengeful—

She inhaled so sharply that Tova lifted his head and whined.

Moria rubbed the steaming cloth over Ashyn's aching knees. "Did I tell you that Levi wrote me a poem? I can recite it if you like."

"You memorized it?"

"Of course. It was truly memorable. I've never heard anything so terrible."

Ashyn sputtered a laugh.

"Do you want to hear it?" Moria asked.

"Please." Ashyn leaned back, closing her eyes and relaxing as Moria finished the purification ritual and recited Levi's poem.

As for whether the rituals went well or not, Ashyn couldn't say. That evening, as promised, Moria entertained the children with stories, but Ashyn knew they were truly for her. Distracting tales of legendary beasts and wild adventures.

There were some creatures that didn't find their way into Moria's tales that night. Monsters of the spirit world, like fiend dogs and shadow stalkers. Those would not calm Ashyn's fears as she headed into the Forest of the Dead.

"You'll do fine," Moria said later as they slid onto their sleeping mats.

"What if I don't?"

Moria sighed. "Nothing ever goes wrong, Ash. If it did, we'd hear the stories. The only thing people love more than a good story is a bad one. Tales of tragedy and woe and bloody entrails, strung like ribbons, decorating the battlefields."

"I could do without that last bit."

Moria grinned. "That's the best part. You know what I mean, though. There are no bards' tales about Seekings because they are boringly predictable. You find the bodies. You purify the bodies. You bury the bodies. No one's ever done it wrong before."

"What if I'm the first?"

A coin thumped off Ashyn's forehead.

"Oww."

"Don't complain. That's one of the twice-blessed coins. I kept it for you. Put it in your pocket tomorrow, and you'll be protected from evil spirits and snakebites and Faiban." Moria paused. "Unless you don't want to be protected from Faiban. I hear he *volunteered* for the Seeking."

Ashyn's cheeks heated. She lay in the darkness, feeling the copper warming in her hand.

"What kind of curse was it?" she whispered finally. "A minor one?"

Moria groaned. “What does it matter? It was one of many I’ve taken. It only means I’ll suffer some small misfortune. Daigo will probably get gas tomorrow night. You’ll be thankful you missed it.”

The wildcat growled softly beside her sister.

“So it *was* only a minor curse?”

“Good night, Ashyn.”

Moria flipped onto her other side, ending the conversation.

Ashyn waited until her sister began to snore. Then she slipped from her sleeping mat and tiptoed to Moria’s cloak, left thrown over the chair. As she reached into the pocket, Daigo watched her but did nothing. She pulled out the curse scroll. Then she tugged on her own cloak and headed for the door with Tova padding along behind her.

Three

During the day, it was clear that spring had arrived—the sun bright, the air warm. But the nights still seemed determined to cling to winter. An icy wind blew off the north, freezing Ashyn’s nose and cheeks. As she pulled her hands under her cloak, the scroll rustled against the fur lining. She clutched it tighter.

The village was particularly dark tonight. There were always lanterns left blazing, holding off the endless black of the Wastes. Tonight they were a necessity, with the moon hidden behind clouds. When Ashyn peered up, the sky looked faintly red.

The color of blood.

She shivered, cursing her sister’s stories.

As she walked, the scent of burning wood wafted around her. She could see the lazy trails of smoke over the houses and inhaled deeply, letting the familiar smell calm her.

The sounds were familiar, too, like the lonely yips of Blackie, the carpenter’s dog, never let in the house, even on the coldest nights. Ashyn rested her hand on Tova’s head as he stiffened in sympathy with the poor beast. She could pick up the distant squawk of chickens, the low of cows, and the grunt of pigs. No horses—they produced nothing edible, so the village couldn’t afford to waste feed on them when there was so little soil for growing and so few wagon trains bringing supplies.

As she drew close to the sanctuary, she thought she heard the scuff of a boot against the lava rock. Tova confirmed it by glancing in that direction. He gave no sign of alarm, though. Other girls might need to worry about a guard who’d had too much honey wine and been too long from court. But the penalty for touching the Seeker or the Keeper without her permission was . . . well, it would ensure he never had any urge to touch a woman again. No amount of honey wine would addle a man’s brain enough to risk that.

Ashyn reached the sanctuary and ducked around back, where the statue waited. It was a small wooden figure, so battered by the elements that she could only make out faint grooves to show it once had a face. Instead of clothing, it wore a cloak of scrolls pinned over its entire body, some yellowed, others nearly disintegrated with time.

Ashyn bent and took out Moria’s scroll. She looked down at it, still tightly rolled.

What type of curse was it?

She didn’t want to know. She just wanted to pin it to the figure and run. But that was cowardly. After all, she was getting rid of it, so it didn’t matter what sort it was.

She unfurled it, a half roll, and then . . .

She stopped. At her side, Tova whined.

Even in the darkness the lines on the white scroll were easy to read. The symbol seemed blacker than most, and she swore she could feel it under her finger, as if the writer had pushed the quill in

the paper, hoping the ink would soak through enough to warn anyone who thought of choosing it from the tree.

Not a major curse, but a *great* one. The worst there was. Something terrible was about to befall her sister.

Fingers trembling, Ashyn rerolled the scroll and pinned it to the statue, in the rear, as if that could hide it from whatever powers governed fate.

As Ashyn hurried from behind the sanctuary, she could feel someone watching her. She glanced at Tova. He noticed, but was simply watching.

When Ashyn turned the corner, a boot squeaked. She glanced back. A figure stood in front of the sanctuary, his back to her. A guard's heavy coat cloaked his figure. Then he bent, braids falling forward, and she knew who it was.

The braids didn't give him away—many of the warrior caste wore them. Almost all warriors, though, tied theirs with bright beads. Only one used dull, black leather.

Gavril crouched, reaching for something on the ground. When he picked it up, copper glinted in the moonlight. The twice-blessed coin Moria had thrown to him. He shoved it into his pocket. Then he stood and gazed at the sanctuary.

He made a noise, like a grunt of satisfaction, and she knew he'd watched her take the curse to the statue. Had he mistaken her for Moria? Thinking she'd slunk back to discard it in private, like a coward? Ashyn was ready to stride out and disabuse him of any such notion. Then Tova brushed her hand, and she looked down at him, his pale fur glowing in the darkness.

There was no way Gavril could have mistaken her for her sister. So why did he seem pleased that the curse was discarded?

She shook off the thought. Moria always said that there was no use trying to make sense of anything the young Kitsune did.

As Gavril crept away, Ashyn took one last look at the sanctuary. She'd gotten rid of her sister's curse. Was she too late?

She whispered her question to the spirits. They didn't answer.

At dawn, Ashyn met with the rest of the Seeking party—the governor, the healer, four guards, and six villagers who'd volunteered. The party gathered by the first tower, a wooden structure as tall as four men, yet still not cresting the forest's trees. The top was open to the elements, so as not to impede the vision of the warrior within as he guarded the sole break in the canyon wall.

Most people in the empire believed that the box canyon explained how the forest had survived the Age of Fire—that the lava had simply run around it. As Ashyn knew from her books, that wasn't true.

When the volcanos erupted, everyone fled or died under the flood of lava. After it cooled and hardened, they returned and found the Forest of the Dead, now ringed by stone, as if some invisible force had shielded it and the lava had flowed upward, forming walls around the wilderness.

Ashyn had always looked on those canyon walls and seen safety. They kept the forest inside. They kept the damned and their vengeful spirits inside. And now, for the first time in her life, *she* was going inside.

"Everyone comes back."

Ashyn turned to see Moria there, having snuck up unnoticed as the others milled about, preparing to go. Ashyn looked up at Gavril in the tower. Even from that distance, she could see his hawkish gaze fixed on her sister.

"I'm tempted to run into the forest, shrieking and cackling, just to see what he'd do." Moria

waggled her foot over an imaginary line. Gavril scowled and turned away to look out over the forest.

“As I was saying, everyone comes back,” Moria said. “Every Seeker. Every hound. Every volunteer. Every guard. They do their duty and they return, and all is well. You can’t tell me that every Seeker has been perfect. They must make mistakes. It doesn’t matter. I’m not even sure if the ritual matters at all. It is a kindness to the spirits of the damned, but would they truly rise up and attack? If it’s never happened before, I’ll wager it can’t.”

“Don’t be blasphemous, Rya.”

“If you don’t fret, I’ll not say scandalous things.” Moria paused. “Which would be rather difficult, but since I’m quite certain you’ll never stop fretting, I do believe I’m safe.”

Ashyn threw her arms around her sister so abruptly that Moria let out a yip of surprise. Ashyn smiled and hugged her until that rigid steel melted and Moria embraced her, whispering, “You’re ready, Ash. I know you are.”

Ashyn hung there feeling her sister’s arms around her, wishing she didn’t have to leave. Then the governor cleared his throat, and she opened her eyes to see her father, back by the path’s edge, waving that Ashyn needed to go and Moria needed to come back.

“Off with you, then,” Moria said as they parted. “Tova? Watch out for her. Or I’ll set Daigo on you.”

Ashyn wasn’t sure which beast looked more affronted. She managed a laugh, pushed her sister toward their father, and joined the party as it headed into the forest.

As a Seeker, Ashyn was as much a part of Edgewood as the village wall, and no more able to leave. Yet she read books from every part of the empire. She knew what a forest ought to be like. There ought to be burbling streams and twittering birds. Rabbit and deer tracks should crisscross every path. If you were lucky—and quiet—you might catch a glimpse of a wolf or a wildcat. The air ought to hum with the very energy of life.

There was none of that in the Forest of the Dead. No birds. No rabbits or deer. No wolves or wildcats. Even insects didn’t buzz past. She’d heard it was like this, but now, experiencing it was something different altogether.

She gazed up at the trees. They were lush and rich, covered in vibrant green leaves and moss. Yet when she touched one, the bark was as cold and dead as the lava rock of the Wastes.

Some said there *was* life deep in the forest—twisted life, revealing itself only in a flash of fur or feather or scale. Even when Seeking parties spotted more, they could never quite say what they’d seen. Her sister swore those parties had seen not living things but monsters. Shadow stalkers and death worms and fiend dogs.

Today, Ashyn wouldn’t care if her twin spent the whole Seeking tormenting her with stories of monsters. She just wanted her there, at her side. Without her, Ashyn felt smaller. Weaker.

Tova bumped her hand, as if to say, *I’m still here*.

“Yes, you are,” Ashyn said, smiling as she patted his head.

She took a deep breath and continued into the forest.

Four

They were heading into the true forest now, beyond the second tower. As the trees closed in around them, Tova whined. Ashyn put her hand on his massive head. Normally that was enough to calm him, but his whine grew steadily louder until the governor glowered back at her.

“Silence your cur, girl,” he said. “Or he’ll bring the forsaken on us.”

Ashyn bristled. Tova was a Hound of the Immortals, almost as much a creature of legend as those in her sister’s tales. Raised in a secret location and given only to Seekers, a Hound of the Immortals lived as long as a human and was said to be the reincarnation of a great warrior from the First Age. Clearly *not* a cur.

Moria said the governor saw them as threats. He was a highborn warrior—tattoos covered him from neck to foot, leaving only a bare strip down his chest. The girls were merchant-born, which would place them in the lowest caste, except that caste laws did not apply to the Seeker and the Keeper. Moreover, Ashyn and Moria had a direct connection to the only force in Edgewood that superseded the governor—the spirits of the ancestors.

Still, Ashyn wasn’t convinced of any ill will on the governor’s behalf. Yes, he was brusque and sometimes rude. But he treated everyone that way. He was simply not a happy man, growing old and realizing he’d never be more than governor of this empire-forsaken outpost.

Ashyn was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she didn’t notice when Tova blocked her path—until she stumbled over him, landing on all fours on hard earth. Before she could rise, the hound grabbed the hem of her cloak and yanked. Her limbs shot out and she was suddenly facedown on the ground, being dragged back along the path.

She sputtered a laugh and twisted to see the governor bearing down on them. He was *not* laughing.

“This isn’t the time for play,” he said.

“I know. I’m sorry. The forest is making him uneasy.”

Tova’s snort denied the charge. Legend said that bond-beasts could speak to the Seekers and Keepers, but it wasn’t true. It was simply that, having been with Tova almost since birth, Ashyn could read her Tova as well as she could read her twin sister.

When she turned back to the forest, Tova raced into her path and planted himself there again. He lowered his head and a noise bubbled up from his deep chest. It took a moment for Ashyn to realize what the noise was. Tova was growling. At *her*.

Something’s wrong here.

She rubbed down the goose bumps on her arms. Tova whined in apology. When she moved forward, though, he stayed in her path. She stepped left. He lunged to block.

“Bring him to heel,” the governor said.

A Hound of the Immortals did not obey commands like a common dog. Ashyn would never dream

of giving him one. Instead, she knelt, coming to eye level with him.

~~“I need to go into the forest, Tova. No matter how horrible it feels, this is our job. Our duty. Yours and mine.”~~

He laid down in the path.

“Tova, please.”

Again he whined in apology. But he would not move.

“Faiban,” the governor snapped. “Help the girl move her dog along.”

The young guard looked at Tova and shook his head. “It’s a Hound, sir. We aren’t to interfere.”

The governor strode forward. Tova stayed where he was, growling. The governor grasped Ashyn’s elbow. He only seemed to be trying to get her attention, but he startled her and she yelped. Tova sprang and his teeth clamped on the governor’s arm.

The governor reeled back. His sword arm swung up, as if in self-defense. The blade flashed. Tova let out a howl and dropped.

Ashyn saw the governor pull back his sword, his eyes wide with shock. Blood flecked from the blade and oozed from Tova’s rear leg. Ashyn crouched beside him. The sword had cut to the bone. Someone pressed a scarf into her hand. She looked up to see the village healer.

“Thank you,” Ashyn said.

Healer Mabill helped her bind Tova’s leg. Tova tried to walk but lurched and whimpered until Ashyn made him stop, and he collapsed at her feet.

“I need to take him back,” Ashyn said. “He’ll be fine tomorrow. Hounds heal quickly.” Even as she spoke the words, she knew what the others would say.

“We can’t delay the Seeking, child,” Healer Mabill whispered. “It always takes place on this day when the veil between the worlds is thin. Someone will need to go back for help while we push on.”

Ashyn wanted to argue. Moria would snarl and spit like her wildcat. That’s why she was the Keeper, and Ashyn the Seeker. Like Tova, Ashyn’s world was ruled by duty. That duty lay with the spirits waiting for peace.

“I’ll run for help,” Faiban said. “I’ll tell them to come for the hound, then rejoin the search.”

The governor shook his head. “We need all the guards.” He turned to the bard, who’d joined the group to soothe their difficult task with music. “You go. Hurry to the village and then run back to us.”

The bard—a portly man who likely hadn’t run in twenty summers—stared at the governor.

“We can spare you,” the governor said. “If you do not go, we must bind the hound and hope someone in the village hears its howling. I know the Seeker would not want that.”

The bard nodded with some reluctance and took off back toward the village as fast as his thick legs would carry him.

Ashyn tried simply to leave Tova on the path. But as soon as she’d start walking away, he’d limped after her. So, for the first time in his life, he had to be bound. Ashyn knelt and explained it as she tied him, but he kept lunging against the rope until he collapsed in pain and exhaustion.

Even then, Ashyn looked back to see him trying to crawl after them, and it took Faiban and another guard to keep her moving forward. When he began to howl, the tears started.

“He’ll be fine,” Faiban whispered. “He’s a good, strong dog. But we can’t do this without the Seeker.”

Duty over self. The spirits over Tova. She only hoped he understood.

It wasn’t long before the forest was so thick that Faiban had to walk ahead of Ashyn and let the other guard follow her. Although they could still hear Tova’s howling, the path was nearly gone. That

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