



THE INHERITANCE TRILOGY

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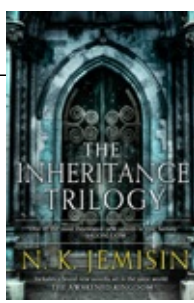
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THE

HUNDRED

THOUSAND

KINGDOMS

BOOK ONE OF
THE INHERITANCE TRILOGY

1

Grandfather

I AM NOT AS I ONCE WAS. They have done this to me, broken me open and torn out my heart. I do not know who I am anymore.

I must try to remember.

My people tell stories of the night I was born. They say my mother crossed her legs in the middle labor and fought with all her strength not to release me into the world. I was born anyhow, of course nature cannot be denied. Yet it does not surprise me that she tried.

My mother was an heiress of the Arameri. There was a ball for the lesser nobility—the sort of thing that happens once a decade as a backhanded sop to their self-esteem. My father dared ask my mother to dance; she deigned to consent. I have often wondered what he said and did that night to make her fall in love with him so powerfully, for she eventually abdicated her position to be with him. It is the stuff of great tales, yes? Very romantic. In the tales, such a couple lives happily ever after. The tales do not say what happens when the most powerful family in the world is offended in the process.

But I forget myself. Who was I, again? Ah, yes.

My name is Yeine. In my people's way I am Yeine dau she Kinneth tai wer Somem kanna Darre which means that I am the daughter of Kinneth, and that my tribe within the Darre people is called Somem. Tribes mean little to us these days, though before the Gods' War they were more important.

I am nineteen years old. I also am, or was, the chieftain of my people, called *ennu*. In the Arameri way, which is the way of the Amn race from whom they originated, I am the Baroness Yeine Darr.

One month after my mother died, I received a message from my grandfather Dekarta Arameri inviting me to visit the family seat. Because one does not refuse an invitation from the Arameri, I set forth. It took the better part of three months to travel from the High North continent to Senm, across the Repentance Sea. Despite Darr's relative poverty, I traveled in style the whole way, first by palanquin and ocean vessel, and finally by chauffeured horse-coach. This was not my choice. The Darre Warriors' Council, which rather desperately hoped that I might restore us to the Arameri's good graces, thought that this extravagance would help. It is well known that Amn respect displays wealth.

Thus arrayed, I arrived at my destination on the cusp of the winter solstice. And as the driver stopped the coach on a hill outside the city, ostensibly to water the horses but more likely because he was a local and liked to watch foreigners gawk, I got my first glimpse of the Hundred Thousand

Kingdoms' heart.

There is a rose that is famous in High North. (This is not a digression.) It is called the altarskirt rose. Not only do its petals unfold in a radiance of pearly white, but frequently it grows an incomplete secondary flower about the base of its stem. In its most prized form, the altarskirt grows a layer of overlarge petals that drape the ground. The two bloom in tandem, seedbearing head and skirt, glowing above and below.

This was the city called Sky. On the ground, sprawling over a small mountain or an oversized hill: a circle of high walls, mounting tiers of buildings, all resplendent in white, per Arameri decree. Above the city, smaller but brighter, the pearl of its tiers occasionally obscured by scuds of cloud, was the palace—also called Sky, and perhaps more deserving of the name. I knew the column was there, the impossibly thin column that supported such a massive structure, but from that distance I couldn't see it. Palace floated above city, linked in spirit, both so unearthly in their beauty that I held my breath at the sight.

The altarskirt rose is priceless because of the difficulty of producing it. The most famous lines are heavily inbred; it originated as a deformity that some savvy breeder deemed useful. The primary flower's scent, sweet to us, is apparently repugnant to insects; these roses must be pollinated by hand. The secondary flower saps nutrients crucial for the plant's fertility. Seeds are rare, and for every one that grows into a perfect altarskirt, ten others become plants that must be destroyed for their hideousness.

At the gates of Sky (the palace) I was turned away, though not for the reasons I'd expected. My grandfather was not present, it seemed. He had left instructions in the event of my arrival.

Sky is the Arameri's home; business is never done there. This is because, officially, they do not rule the world. The Nobles' Consortium does, with the benevolent assistance of the Order of Itempas. The Consortium meets in the Salon, a huge, stately building—white-walled, of course—that sits among a cluster of official buildings at the foot of the palace. It is very impressive, and would be more so if it did not sit squarely in Sky's elegant shadow.

I went inside and announced myself to the Consortium staff, whereupon they all looked very surprised, though politely so. One of them—a very junior aide, I gathered—was dispatched to escort me to the central chamber, where the day's session was well under way.

As a lesser noble, I had always been welcome to attend a Consortium gathering, but there had never seemed any point. Besides the expense and months of travel time required to attend, Darr was simply too small, poor, and ill-favored to have any clout, even without my mother's abdication adding to our collective stain. Most of High North is regarded as a backwater, and only the largest nations there have enough prestige or money to make their voices heard among our noble peers. So I was not surprised to find that the seat reserved for me on the Consortium floor—in a shadowed area, behind a pillar—was currently occupied by an excess delegate from one of the Senm-continent nations. It would be terribly rude, the aide stammered anxiously, to dislodge this man, who was elderly and had bad knees. Perhaps I would not mind standing? Since I had just spent many long hours cramped in a carriage, I was happy to agree.

So the aide positioned me at the side of the Consortium floor, where I actually had a good view of the goings-on. The Consortium chamber was magnificently apportioned, with white marble and rich dark wood that had probably come from Darr's forests in better days. The nobles—three hundred or so in total—sat in comfortable chairs on the chamber's floor or along elevated tiers above. Aides, page

and scribes occupied the periphery with me, ready to fetch documents or run errands as needed. At the head of the chamber, the Consortium Overseer stood atop an elaborate podium, pointing to members as they indicated a desire to speak. Apparently there was a dispute over water rights in a desert somewhere; five countries were involved. None of the conversation's participants spoke out of turn; no tempers were lost; there were no snide comments or veiled insults. It was all very orderly and polite, despite the size of the gathering and the fact that most of those present were accustomed to speaking however they pleased among their own people.

One reason for this extraordinary good behavior stood on a plinth behind the Overseer's podium: a life-size statue of the Skyfather in one of His most famous poses, the Appeal to Mortal Reason. Hard to speak out of turn under that stern gaze. But more repressive, I suspected, was the stern gaze of the man who sat behind the Overseer in an elevated box. I could not see him well from where I stood, but he was elderly, richly dressed, and flanked by a younger blond man and a dark-haired woman, as well as a handful of retainers.

It did not take much to guess this man's identity, though he wore no crown, had no visible guard, and neither he nor anyone in his entourage spoke throughout the meeting.

"Hello, Grandfather," I murmured to myself, and smiled at him across the chamber, though I knew he could not see me. The pages and scribes gave me the oddest looks for the rest of the afternoon.

I knelt before my grandfather with my head bowed, hearing titters of laughter.

No, wait.

There were three gods once.

Only three, I mean. Now there are dozens, perhaps hundreds. They breed like rabbits. But once there were only three, most powerful and glorious of all: the god of day, the god of night, and the goddess of twilight and dawn. Or light and darkness and the shades between. Or order, chaos, and balance. None of that is important because one of them died, the other might as well have, and the last is the only one who matters anymore.

The Arameri get their power from this remaining god. He is called the Skyfather, Bright Itempas, and the ancestors of the Arameri were His most devoted priests. He rewarded them by giving them a weapon so mighty that no army could stand against it. They used this weapon—weapons, really—to make themselves rulers of the world.

That's better. Now.

I knelt before my grandfather with my head bowed and my knife laid on the floor.

We were in Sky, having transferred there following the Consortium session, via the magic of the Vertical Gate. Immediately upon arrival I had been summoned to my grandfather's audience chamber, which felt much like a throne room. The chamber was roughly circular because circles are sacred to Itempas. The vaulted ceiling made the members of the court look taller—unnecessarily, since Arameri are a tall people compared to my own. Tall and pale and endlessly poised, like statues of human beings rather than real flesh and blood.

"Most high Lord Arameri," I said. "I am honored to be in your presence."

I had heard titters of laughter when I entered the room. Now they sounded again, muffled by hands and kerchiefs and fans. I was reminded of bird flocks roosting in a forest canopy.

Before me sat Dekarta Arameri, uncrowned king of the world. He was old; perhaps the oldest man I have ever seen, though Amn usually live longer than my people, so this was not surprising. His thinning hair had gone completely white, and he was so gaunt and stooped that the elevated stone chair on which he sat—it was never called a throne—seemed to swallow him whole.

“Granddaughter,” he said, and the titters stopped. The silence was heavy enough to hold in my hands. He was head of the Arameri family, and his word was law. No one had expected him to acknowledge me as kin, least of all myself.

“Stand,” he said. “Let me have a look at you.”

I did, reclaiming my knife since no one had taken it. There was more silence. I am not very interesting to look at. It might have been different if I had gotten the traits of my two peoples in a better combination—Amn height with Darre curves, perhaps, or thick straight Darre hair color with Amn-pale. I have Amn eyes: faded green in color, more unnerving than pretty. Otherwise, I am short and flat and brown as forestwood, and my hair is a curled mess. Because I find it unmanageable otherwise, I wear it short. I am sometimes mistaken for a boy.

As the silence wore on, I saw Dekarta frown. There was an odd sort of marking on his forehead, I noticed: a perfect circle of black, as if someone had dipped a coin in ink and pressed it to his flesh. On either side of this was a thick chevron, bracketing the circle.

“You look nothing like her,” he said at last. “But I suppose that is just as well. Viraine?”

This last was directed at a man who stood among the courtiers closest to the throne. For an instant I thought he was another elder, then I realized my error: though his hair was stark white, he was only somewhere in his fourth decade. He, too, bore a forehead mark, though his was less elaborate than Dekarta’s: just the black circle.

“She’s not hopeless,” he said, folding his arms. “Nothing to be done about her looks; I doubt even the best makeup will help. But put her in civilized attire and she can convey... nobility, at least.” His eyes narrowed, taking me apart by degrees. My best Darre clothing, a long vest of white civvetfur and calf-length leggings, earned me a sigh. (I had gotten the odd look for this outfit at the Salon, but I hadn’t realized it was *that* bad.) He examined my face so long that I wondered if I should show my teeth.

Instead he smiled, showing his. “Her mother has trained her. Look how she shows no fear or resentment, even now.”

“She will do, then,” said Dekarta.

“Do for what, Grandfather?” I asked. The weight in the room grew heavier, expectant, though he had already named me granddaughter. There was a certain risk involved in my daring to address him the same familiar way, of course—powerful men are touchy over odd things. But my mother had indeed trained me well, and I knew it was worth the risk to establish myself in the court’s eyes.

Dekarta Arameri’s face did not change; I could not read it. “For my heir, Granddaughter. I intend to name you to that position today.”

The silence turned to stone as hard as my grandfather’s chair.

I thought he might be joking, but no one laughed. That was what made me believe him at last: the utter shock and horror on the faces of the courtiers as they stared at their lord. Except the one called Viraine. He watched me.

It came to me that some response was expected.

“You already have heirs,” I said.

“Not as diplomatic as she could be,” Viraine said in a dry tone.

Dekarta ignored this. “It is true, there are two other candidates,” he said to me. “My niece and

nephew, Scimina and Relad. Your cousins, once removed.”

I had heard of them, of course; everyone had. Rumor constantly made one or the other heir, though no one knew for certain which. *Both* was something that had not occurred to me.

“If I may suggest, Grandfather,” I said carefully, though it was impossible to be careful in the conversation, “I would make two heirs too many.”

It was the eyes that made Dekarta seem so old, I would realize much later. I had no idea what color they had originally been; age had bleached and filmed them to near-white. There were lifetimes in those eyes, none of them happy.

“Indeed,” he said. “But just enough for an interesting competition, I think.”

“I don’t understand, Grandfather.”

He lifted his hand in a gesture that would have been graceful, once. Now his hand shook badly. “It is very simple. I have named three heirs. One of you will actually manage to succeed me. The other two will doubtless kill each other or be killed by the victor. As for which lives, and which die—” He shrugged. “That is for you to decide.”

My mother had taught me never to show fear, but emotions will not be stilled so easily. I began to sweat. I have been the target of an assassination attempt only once in my life—the benefit of being an heir to such a tiny, impoverished nation. No one wanted my job. But now there would be two others who did. Lord Relad and Lady Scimina were wealthy and powerful beyond my wildest dreams. They had spent their whole lives striving against each other toward the goal of ruling the world. And here I came I, unknown, with no resources and few friends, into the fray.

“There will be no decision,” I said. To my credit, my voice did not shake. “And no contest. The victor will kill me at once and turn their attention back to each other.”

“That is possible,” said my grandfather.

I could think of nothing to say that would save me. He was insane; that was obvious. Why else turn the rulership of the world into a contest prize? If he died tomorrow, Relad and Scimina would rip the ears apart between them. The killing might not end for decades. And for all he knew, I was an idiot. Even by some impossible chance I managed to gain the throne, I could plunge the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms into a spiral of mismanagement and suffering. He had to know that.

One cannot argue with madness. But sometimes, with luck and the Skyfather’s blessing, one can understand it. “Why?”

He nodded as if he had expected my question. “Your mother deprived me of an heir when she left our family. You will pay her debt.”

“She is four months in the grave,” I snapped. “Do you honestly want revenge against a dead woman?”

“This has nothing to do with revenge, Granddaughter. It is a matter of duty.” He made a gesture with his left hand, and another courtier detached himself from the throng. Unlike the first man—indeed, unlike most of the courtiers whose faces I could see—the mark on this man’s forehead was a downturned half-moon, like an exaggerated frown. He knelt before the dais that held Dekarta’s chair, his waist-length red braid falling over one shoulder to curl on the floor.

“I cannot hope that your mother has taught you duty,” Dekarta said to me over this man’s back. “She abandoned hers to dally with her sweet-tongued savage. I allowed this—an indulgence I have often regretted. So I will assuage that regret by bringing you back into the fold, Granddaughter. Whether you live or die is irrelevant. You are Arameri, and like all of us, you will serve.”

Then he waved to the red-haired man. “Prepare her as best you can.”

There was nothing more. The red-haired man rose and came to me, murmuring that I should follow

him. I did. Thus ended my first meeting with my grandfather, and thus began my first day as a
Arameri. It was not the worst of the days to come.

The Other Sky

THE CAPITAL OF MY LAND is called Arrebaia. It is a place of ancient stone, its walls overgrown by vines and guarded by beasts that do not exist. We have forgotten when it was founded, but it has been the capital for at least two thousand years. People there walk slowly and speak softly out of respect for the generations that have trodden those streets before, or perhaps just because they do not feel like being loud.

Sky—the city, I mean—is only five hundred years old, built when some disaster befell the previous Arameri seat. This makes it an adolescent as cities go—and a rude, uncouth one at that. As my carriage rode through the city’s center, other carriages went past in a clatter of wheels and horseshoes. People covered every sidewalk, bumping and milling and bustling, not talking. They all seemed in a hurry. The air was thick with familiar smells like horses and stagnant water amid indefinable scents, some acrid and some sickly sweet. There was nothing green in sight.

What was I—?

Oh, yes. The gods.

Not the gods that remain in the heavens, who are loyal to Bright Itempas. There are others who were not loyal. Perhaps I should not call them gods, since no one worships them anymore. (How does one define “god”?) There must be a better name for what they are. Prisoners of war? Slaves? What did you call them before—weapons?

Weapons. Yes.

They are said to be somewhere in Sky, four of them, trapped in tangible vessels and kept under lock and key and magic chain. Perhaps they sleep in crystal cases and are awakened on occasion to be polished and oiled. Perhaps they are shown off to honored guests.

But sometimes, sometimes, their masters call them forth. And then there are strange new plagues. Occasionally the population of an entire city will vanish overnight. Once, jagged, steaming peaks appeared where there had been mountains.

It is not safe to hate the Arameri. Instead we hate their weapons, because weapons do not care.

My courtier companion was T’vril, who introduced himself as the palace steward. The name told me at least part of his heritage at once, but he went on to explain: he was a halfbreed like me, part Arameri and part Ken. The Ken inhabit an island far to the east; they are famous for their seacraft. His strange, red-colored hair came from them.

“Dekarta’s beloved wife, the Lady Ygreth, died tragically young more than forty years ago,” T’vril explained. He spoke briskly as we walked through Sky’s white halls, not sounding particularly broken.

up about the tragedy of the dead lady. “Kinneeth was just a child at the time, but it was already clear she would grow up to be a more-than-suitable heir, so I suppose Dekarta felt no pressing need to remarry. When Kinneeth, er, left the family fold, he turned to the children of his late brother. There were four of them originally; Relad and Scimina were the youngest. Twins—runs in the family. Alas, their elder sister met with an unfortunate accident, or so the official story goes.”

I just listened. It was a useful, if appalling, education about my new kin, which was probably what T’vril had decided to tell me. He had also informed me of my new title, duties, and privileges, at least in brief. I was Yeine Arameri now, no longer Yeine Darr. I would have new lands to oversee and new wealth beyond imagining. I would be expected to attend Consortium sessions regularly and sit in the Arameri private box when I did so. I would be permitted to dwell permanently in Sky in the most welcoming bosom of my maternal relatives, and I would never see my homeland again.

It was hard not to dwell on that last bit, as T’vril continued.

“Their elder brother was my father—also dead, thanks to his own efforts. He was fond of young women. Very young women.” He made a face, though I had the sense he’d told the story often enough that it didn’t really trouble him. “Unfortunately for him, my mother was just old enough to get with a child. Dekarta executed him when her family took exception.” He sighed and shrugged. “We highbloods can get away with a great many things, but... well, there are rules. We were the ones to establish a worldwide age of consent, after all. To ignore our own laws would be an offense to the Skyfather.”

I wanted to ask why that mattered when Bright Itempas didn’t seem to care what else the Arameri did, but I held my tongue. There had been a note of dry irony in T’vril’s voice in any case; no comment was necessary.

With a brisk efficiency that would have made my no-nonsense grandmother jealous, T’vril had measured for new clothing, scheduled for a visit to a stylist, and assigned quarters all in the span of an hour. Then came a brief tour, during which T’vril chattered endlessly as we walked through corridors lined with white mica or mother-of-pearl or whatever shining stuff the palace was made of.

I stopped listening to him at about this point. If I had paid attention, I probably could have gleaned valuable information about important players in the palace hierarchy, power struggles, juicy rumors, and more. But my mind was still in shock, trying to absorb too many new things at once. He was the least important of them, so I shut him out.

He must have noticed, though he didn’t seem to mind. Finally we reached my new apartment. Floor-to-ceiling windows ran along one wall, which afforded me a stunning view of the city and countryside below—far, far below. I stared, my mouth hanging open in a way that would have earned me a scolding from my mother, had she still been alive. We were so high that I couldn’t even make out people on the streets below.

T’vril said something then that I simply did not digest, so he said it again. This time I looked at him. “This,” he said, pointing to his forehead. The half-moon mark.

“What?”

He repeated himself a third time, showing no sign of the exasperation he should have felt. “We must see Viraine, so that he can apply the blood sigil to your brow. He should be free from court duty by now. Then you can rest for the evening.”

“Why?”

He stared at me for a moment. “Your mother did not tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Of the Enefadeh.”

“The Enewhat?”

The look that crossed T’vril’s face was somewhere between pity and dismay. “Lady Kinneth didn’t prepare you for this at all, did she?” Before I could think of a response to that, he moved on. “The Enefadeh are the reason we wear the blood sigils, Lady Yeine. No one may pass the night in Sky without one. It isn’t safe.”

I pulled my thoughts away from the strangeness of my new title. “Why isn’t it safe, Lord T’vril?”

He winced. “Just T’vril, please. Lord Dekarta has decreed that you are to receive a fullblood marriage. You are of the Central Family. I am a mere halfblood.”

I could not tell if I had missed important information, or if something had been left unsaid. Probably several somethings. “T’vril. You must realize nothing you’re saying makes any sense to me.”

“Perhaps not.” He ran a hand over his hair; this was the first sign of discomfort he’d shown. “But a full explanation would take too long. There’s less than an hour ’til sunset.”

I supposed that this, too, was one of those rules the Arameri insisted on being sticklers for, though I could not imagine why. “All right, but...” I frowned. “What of my coachman? He’s waiting for me in the forecourt.”

“Waiting?”

“I didn’t think I’d be staying.”

T’vril’s jaw flexed, containing whatever honest reply he might have made. Instead he said, “I’ll have someone send him away and give him a bonus for his trouble. He won’t be needed; we have plenty of servants here.”

I had seen them throughout our tour—silent, efficient figures bustling about Sky’s halls, clad all in white. An impractical color for people whose job it was to clean, I thought, but I didn’t run the place.

“That coachman traveled across this continent with me,” I said. I was irked and trying not to show it. “He’s tired and his horses are, too. Can he not be given a room for the night? Give him one of those marks and then let him leave in the morning. That’s only courteous.”

“Only Arameri may wear the blood sigil, my lady. It’s permanent.”

“Only—” Understanding leapt in my head. “The servants here are *family*?”

The look he threw me was not bitter, though perhaps it should have been. He had given me the clue already, after all: his roaming father, his own status as the steward. A high-ranking servant, but still a servant. He was as Arameri as I, but his parents had not been married; strict Itempans frowned on illegitimacy. And his father had never been Dekarta’s favorite.

As if reading my thoughts, T’vril said, “As Lord Dekarta said, Lady Yeine—all descendants of the Shahar Arameri must serve. One way or another.”

There were so many untold tales in his words. How many of our relatives had been forced to leave their homelands, and whatever future they might have had, to come here and mop floors or peel vegetables? How many had been born here and never left? What happened to those who tried to escape?

Would I become one of them, like T’vril?

No. T’vril was unimportant, no threat to those who stood to inherit the family’s power. I would not be so lucky.

He touched my hand with what I hoped was compassion. “It’s not far.”

On its upper levels, Sky seemed to have windows everywhere. Some corridors even had ceilings of clear glass or crystal, though the view was only of the sky and the palace’s many rounded spires. The

sun had not yet set—its lower curve had only touched the horizon in the past few minutes—but T’vril set a more brisk pace than before. I paid closer attention to the servants as we walked, seeking the small commonalities of our shared lineage. There were a few: many sets of green eyes, a certain structure of the face (which I lacked completely, having taken after my father). A certain cynicism though that might have been my imagination. Beyond that, they were all as disparate as T’vril and though most seemed to be Amn or some Senmite race. And each of them bore a forehead marking; I had noticed that before but dismissed it as some local fashion. A few had triangles or diamond shapes but most wore a simple black bar.

I did not like the way they looked at me, eyes flicking near and then away.

“Lady Yeine.” T’vril stopped a few paces ahead, noticing that I had fallen behind. He had inherited the long legs of his Amn heritage. I had not, and it had been a very trying day. “Please, we have little time.”

“All right, all right,” I said, too tired to be strictly polite anymore. But he did not resume walking and after a moment I saw that he had gone stiff, staring down the corridor in the direction we were to go.

A man stood above us.

I call him a man, in retrospect, because that is what he seemed at the time. He stood on a balcony overlooking our corridor, framed perfectly by the ceiling’s arch. I gathered he had been traveling along a perpendicular corridor up there; his body still faced that direction, frozen in midpace. Only his head had turned toward us. By some trick of the shadows, I could not see his face, yet I felt the weight of his eyes.

He put a hand on the balcony railing with slow, palpable deliberation.

“What is it, Naha?” said a woman’s voice, echoing faintly along the corridor. A moment later she appeared. Unlike the man, she was clearly visible to me: a reedy Amn beauty of sable hair, patrician features, and regal grace. I recognized her by that hair as the woman who’d sat beside Dekarta at the Salon. She wore the kind of dress that only an Amn woman could do justice to—a long straight tube the color of deep, bloody garnets.

“What do you see?” she asked, looking at me although her words were for the man. She lifted her hands, twirling something in her fingers, and I saw then that she held a delicate silver chain. It dangled from her hand and curved back up; I realized that the chain was connected to the man.

“Aunt,” T’vril said, pitching his voice with a care that let me know at once who she was. The lady Scimina—my cousin and rival heir. “You look lovely this evening.”

“Thank you, T’vril,” she replied, though her eyes never left my face. “And who is this?”

There was the faintest pause. By the taut look on T’vril’s face, I gathered he was trying to think of a safe answer. Some quirk of my own nature—in my land, only weak women allowed men to protect them—made me step forward and incline my head. “My name is Yeine Darr.”

Her smile said that she’d already guessed it. There could not have been many Darre in the palace. “Ah, yes. Someone spoke of you after Uncle’s audience today. Kinneeth’s daughter, are you?”

“I am.” In Darr, I would have drawn a knife at the malice in her sweet, falsely polite tone. But this was Sky, blessed palace of Bright Itempas, the lord of order and peace. Such things were not done here. I looked to T’vril for an introduction.

“The lady Scimina Arameri,” he said. He did not swallow or fidget, to his credit, but I saw how his eyes flicked back and forth between my cousin and the motionless man. I waited for T’vril to introduce the man, but he did not.

“Ah, yes.” I did not try to mimic Scimina’s tone. My mother had tried, on multiple occasions,

teach me how to sound friendly when I did not feel friendly, but I was too Darre for that. “Greeting Cousin.”

“If you’ll excuse us,” T’vril said to Scimina almost the instant I closed my mouth, “I’m showing Lady Yeine around the palace—”

The man beside Scimina chose that moment to catch his breath in a shuddering gasp. His hair, long and black and thick enough to make any Darre man jealous, fell forward to obscure his face; his hand on the railing tightened.

“A moment, T’vril.” Scimina examined the man thoughtfully, then lifted her hand as if to cup his cheek under the curtain of hair. There was a click, and she pulled away a delicate, cleverly jointed silver collar.

“I’m sorry, Aunt,” T’vril said, and now he was no longer bothering to hide his fear; he caught my hand in his own, tight. “Viraine’s expecting us, you know how he hates—”

“You will wait,” Scimina said, cold in an instant. “Or I may forget that you have made yourself so useful, T’vril. A good little servant...” She glanced at the black-haired man and smiled indulgently. “So many good servants here in Sky. Don’t you think, Nahadoth?”

Nahadoth was the black-haired man’s name, then. Something about the name stirred a feeling of recognition in me, but I could not recall where I’d heard it before.

“Don’t do this,” T’vril said. “Scimina.”

“She has no mark,” Scimina replied. “You know the rules.”

“This has nothing to do with the rules and you know it!” T’vril said with some heat. But she ignored him.

I felt it then. I think I had felt it since the man’s gasp—a shiver of the atmosphere. A vase rattled nearby. There was no visible cause for this, but somehow I knew: somewhere, on an unseen plane, part of reality was shifting aside. Making room for something new.

The black-haired man lifted his head to look at me. He was smiling. I could see his face now, and his mad, mad eyes, and I suddenly knew who he was. *What* he was.

“Listen to me.” T’vril, his voice tight in my ear. I could not look away from the black-haired creature’s eyes. “You must get to Viraine. Only a fullblood can command him off now, and Viraine is the only one—Oh, for demons’ sake, look at me!”

He moved into my line of sight, blocking my view of those eyes. I could hear a soft murmur of Scimina speaking in a low voice. It sounded like she was giving instructions, which made a peculiar parallel with T’vril in front of me doing the same. I barely heard them both. I felt so cold.

“Viraine’s study is two levels above us. There are lifting chambers at every third corridor juncture. Look for an alcove between vases of flowers. Just—just get to one of those, and then think *up*. The door will be straight ahead. While there’s still light in the sky you have a chance. Go. Run!”

He pushed me, and I stumbled off. Behind me rose an inhuman howl, like the voices of a hundred wolves and a hundred jaguars and a hundred winter winds, all of them hungry for my flesh. Then there was silence, and that was most frightening of all.

I ran. I ran. I ran.

3

Darkness

SHOULD I PAUSE TO EXPLAIN? It is poor storytelling. But I must remember everything, remember and remember and remember, to keep a tight grip on it. So many bits of myself have escaped already.

So.

There were once three gods. The one who matters killed one of the ones who didn't and cast the other into a hellish prison. The walls of this prison were blood and bone; the barred windows were eyes; the punishments included sleep and pain and hunger and all the other incessant demands of mortal flesh. Then this creature, trapped in his tangible vessel, was given to the Arameri for safekeeping, along with three of his godly children. After the horror of incarnation, what difference could mere slavery make?

As a little girl, I learned from the priests of Bright Itempas that this fallen god was pure evil. In the time of the Three, his followers had been a dark, savage cult devoted to violent midnight revels worshipping madness as a sacrament. If that one had won the war between the gods, the priests intoned direly, mortalkind would probably no longer exist.

“So be good,” the priests would add, “or the Nightlord will get you.”

I ran from the Nightlord through halls of light. Some property of the stuff that made up Sky substance made it glow with its own soft, white luminescence now that the sun had set. Twenty paces behind me charged the god of darkness and chaos. On the one occasion that I risked a glance back, I saw the gentle glow of the hallway fade into a throat of blackness so deep looking that way hurt the eye. I did not look back again.

I could not go straight. All that had saved me thus far was my head start, and the fact that the monster behind me seemed incapable of moving faster than a mortal's pace. Perhaps the god retained a human form somewhere within all that dark; even so, his legs were longer than mine.

So I turned at nearly every juncture, slamming into walls to brake my speed and give me something to push against as I sprinted away. I say this as if the wall slamming was deliberate on my part; it was not. If I had been able to reason through my abject terror, I might have retained a general sense of which direction I was going in. As it was, I was already hopelessly lost.

Fortunately, where reason failed, blind panic served well enough.

Spying one of the alcoves that T'vril had described, I flung myself into it, pressing against the back wall. He had told me to think *up*, which would activate the lifting spell and propel me to the next level of the palace. Instead I thought *AWAY AWAY AWAY*, not realizing the magic would oblige that, too.

When the coach had brought me from the Salon to Sky-the-palace, I'd had the curtains closed. The coachman had simply driven us to a particular spot and stopped; my skin had prickled; a moment later

the coachman opened the door to reveal we were there. It had not occurred to me that the magic had pulled me through half a mile of solid matter in the blink of an eye.

Now it happened again. The little alcove, which had been growing dim as the Nightlord closed it, suddenly seemed to stretch, its entrance moving impossibly farther away while I remained still. There was an inbreath of tension, and then I shot forward as if from a sling. Walls flew at my face; I screamed and flung my arms over my eyes even as they passed through me. And then everything stopped.

I lowered my arms slowly. Before I could muster my wits enough to wonder whether this was the same alcove or another just like it, a child thrust his face through the opening, looked around, and spied me.

“Come on,” he said. “Hurry up. It won’t take him long to find us.”

The Arameri magic had brought me to a vast open chamber within the body of Sky. Dumb, I looked around at the cold, featureless space as we hurried through it.

“The arena,” said the boy ahead of me. “Some of the highbloods fancy themselves warriors. That way.”

I glanced back toward the alcove, wondering if there was some way to block it off so the Nightlord couldn’t follow.

“No, that won’t work,” said the boy, following my gaze. “But the palace itself inhibits his power on a night like this. He can hunt you using only his senses.” (*As opposed to what else?* I wondered.) “On a moonless night you’d be in trouble, but tonight he’s just a man.”

“That was not a man,” I said. My voice sounded high and shaky in my own ears.

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be running for your life right now.” And apparently I wasn’t running fast enough. The boy caught my hand and pulled me along faster. He glanced back at me, and I caught a glimpse of a high-cheekboned, pointed face that would one day be handsome.

“Where are you taking me?” My ability to reason was returning, though slowly. “To Viraine?”

He uttered a derisive snort. We left the arena and passed into more of the mazelike white halls. “Don’t be foolish. We’re going to hide.”

“But that man—” Nahadoth. Now I remembered where I’d heard the name. *Never whisper it in the dark, read the children’s tales, unless you want him to answer.*

“Oh, so now he’s a man? We just have to keep ahead of him and everything will be fine.” The boy ran around a corner, more nimble than me; I stumbled to keep up. He darted his eyes around the corridor, looking for something. “Don’t worry. I get away from him all the time.”

This did not sound wise. “I w-want to go to Viraine.” I tried to say it with authority, but I was still too frightened, and winded now besides.

The boy responded by stopping, but not because of me. “Here!” he said, and put his hand against one of the pearlescent walls. “*Atadie!*”

The wall opened.

It was like watching ripples in water. The pearly stuff moved away from his hand in steady waves, forming an opening—a hole—a door. Beyond the wall lay an oddly shaped, narrow chamber, not so much a room as a *space between*. When the door was big enough for us both, the boy pulled me inside.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Dead space in the body of the palace. All these curving corridors and round rooms. There’s another half a palace in between that no one uses—except me.” The boy turned to me and flashed an up-to-n

good grin. "We can rest for a little while."

I was beginning to catch my breath, and with it came a weakness that I recognized as the aftermath of adrenaline. The wall had rippled shut behind me, becoming as solid as before. I leaned back against it gingerly at first, then gratefully. And then I examined my rescuer.

He wasn't much smaller than me, maybe nine years old, with the spindly look of a fast grower. Not Amn, not with skin as dark as mine and sharpfold eyes like those of the Tema people. They were murky, tired green, those eyes—like my own, and my mother's. Maybe his father had been another wandering Arameri.

He was examining me as well. After a moment, his grin widened. "I'm Sieh."

Two syllables. "Sieh Arameri?"

"Just Sieh." With a child's boneless grace, he stretched his arms above his head. "You don't look like much."

I was too tired to take offense. "I've found it useful," I replied, "to be underestimated."

"Yes. Always good strategy, that." Lightning-quick, he straightened and grew serious. "He'll find us if we don't keep moving. *En!*"

I jumped, startled by his shout. But Sieh was looking up. A moment later, a child's yellow kickball fell into his hands.

Puzzled, I looked up. The dead space went up several floors, a featureless triangular shaft; I saw no openings from which the ball could have come. There was certainly no one hovering above who could have thrown the ball to him.

I looked at the boy and suffered a sudden, chilling suspicion.

Sieh laughed at my face and put the ball on the floor. Then he sat on it, cross-legged. The ball held perfectly still beneath him until he was comfortable, and then it rose into the air. It stopped when he was a few feet above the ground and hovered. Then the boy who was not a boy reached out to me.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "I'm helping you, aren't I?"

I just looked at his hand, pressing myself back against the wall.

"I could have led you in a circle, you know. Right back to him."

There was that. After a moment, I took his hand. His grip left no question; this was not a child's strength.

"Just a little ways," he said. Then, dangling me like a snared rabbit, he floated us both up through the shaft.

There is another thing I remember from my childhood. A song, and it went... How did it go? Ah, yes. "*Trickster, trickster / Stole the sun for a prank. / Will you really ride it? / Where will you hide it? Down by the riverbank...*"

It was not *our* sun, mind you.

Sieh opened two ceilings and another wall before finally setting me down in a dead space that was as big as Grandfather Dekarta's audience chamber. But it was not the size of this space that made my mouth gape.

More spheres floated in this room, dozens of them. They were fantastically varied—of all shapes and sizes and colors—turning slowly and drifting through the air. They seemed to be nothing more than a child's toys, until I looked closely at one and saw clouds swirling over its surface.

Sieh hovered near as I wandered among his toys, his expression somewhere between anxiety and

pride. The yellow ball had taken up position near the center of the room; all the other balls revolved around it.

“They’re pretty, aren’t they?” he asked me, while I stared at a tiny red marble. A great cloud mass—a storm?—devoured the nearer hemisphere. I tore my eyes from it to look at Sieh. He bounced on his toes, impatient for my answer. “It’s a good collection.”

Trickster, trickster, stole the sun for a prank. And apparently because it was pretty. The Three had borne many children before their falling-out. Sieh was immeasurably old, another of the Arameri with deadly weapons, and yet I could not bring myself to dash the shy hope I saw in his eyes.

“They’re all beautiful,” I agreed. It was true.

He beamed and took my hand again—not pulling me anywhere, just feeling companionable. “I think the others will like you,” he said. “Even Naha, when he calms down. It’s been a long time since we had a mortal of our own to talk to.”

His words were gibberish strung together without meaning. Others? Naha? Calm?

He laughed at me again. “I especially like your face. You don’t show much emotion—is that a Darri thing, or your mother’s training?—but when you do, all the world can read it.”

My mother had warned me of the same thing long ago. “Sieh—” I had a thousand questions and couldn’t decide where to begin. One of the balls, a plain green one with bright white poles, went past us, tumbling end over end. I didn’t register it as an anomaly until Sieh saw it and stiffened. That was when my own instincts belatedly sent a warning.

I turned to find that Nahadoth stood behind us.

In the instant that my mind and body froze, he could have had me. He was only a few paces away. But he did not move or speak, and so we stared at each other. Face like the moon, pale and somehow wavering. I could get the gist of his features, but none of it stuck in my mind beyond an impression of astonishing beauty. His long, long hair wafted around him like black smoke, its tendrils curling and moving of their own volition. His cloak—or perhaps that was hair, too—shifted as if in an unfelt wind. I could not recall him wearing a cloak before, on the balcony.

The madness still lurked in his face, but it was a quieter madness now, not the rabid-animus savagery of before. Something else—I could not bring myself to call it humanity—stirred underneath the gleam.

Sieh stepped forward, careful not to move in front of me. “Are you with us yet, Naha?”

Nahadoth did not answer, did not even seem to see Sieh. Sieh’s toys, I noticed with the fragment of my mind that wasn’t frozen, went wild when they came near him. Their slow, graceful orbits changed; some drifted in a different direction, some froze in place, some sped up. One split in half and fell broken to the floor as I watched. He took a step forward, sending more of the colored balls spinning out of control.

That one step was enough to jar me out of my paralysis. I stumbled back and would have fallen screaming if I’d known how to make the walls open.

“Don’t run!” Sieh’s voice snapped at me like a whip. I froze.

Nahadoth stepped forward again, close enough that I could see a minute shiver pass through him. His hands flexed. He opened his mouth; struggled a moment; spoke. “P-predictable, Sieh.” His voice was deep, but shockingly human. I had expected a bestial growl.

Sieh hunched, a sulky little boy again. “Didn’t think you’d catch up that fast.” He cocked his head, studying Nahadoth’s face, and spoke slowly, as if to a simpleton. “You are here, aren’t you?”

“I can see it,” whispered the Nightlord. His eyes were fixed on my face.

To my surprise, Sieh nodded as if he knew what such ravings meant. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

either,” he said softly. “But perhaps you remember now—we need this one. Do you remember?” Sieh stepped forward, reaching for his hand.

I did not see that hand move. I was watching Nahadoth’s face. All I saw was the flash of blind, murderous rage that crossed his features, and then one of his hands was ’round Sieh’s throat. Sieh had no chance to cry out before he was lifted off the ground, gagging and kicking.

For a breath I was too shocked to react.

Then I got angry.

I *burned* with anger—and madness, too, which is the only possible explanation for what I did then. I drew my knife and cried, “Leave him alone!”

As well a rabbit threaten a wolf. But to my utter shock, the Nightlord looked at me. He did not lower his hand from Sieh, but he blinked. Just that quickly, the madness left him, replaced by a look of astonishment and dawning wonder. It was the look of a man who has just discovered treasure beneath a pile of offal. But he was still choking the life out of Sieh.

“Let him go!” I crouched, shifting my stance the way my Darren grandmother had taught me. My hands shook—not with fear, but with that mad, wild, righteous fury. Sieh was a *child*. “Stop it!”

Nahadoth smiled.

I lunged. The knife went into his chest, going deep before lodging in bone with such a sudden impact that my hand was jarred free of the hilt. There was an instant in which I braced myself against his chest, trying to push away. I marveled that he was solid, warm, flesh and blood despite the power writhing about him. I marveled even more when his free hand wrapped around my wrist like a vise. So fast, despite the knife in his heart.

With the strength in that hand, he could have crushed my wrist. Instead he held me in place. His blood coated my hand, hotter than my rage. I looked up; his eyes were warm, gentle, desperate. *Human*.

“I have waited so long for you,” the god breathed. Then he kissed me.

Then he fell.

Magician

WHEN THE NIGHTLORD SAGGED to the ground, dropping Sieh in the process, I nearly fell with them. I had no idea why I was still alive. The tales of the Arameri's weapons are full of them slaughtering whole armies. There are no stories of crazed barbarian girls fighting back.

Sieh, to my great relief, immediately pushed himself up on his elbows. He seemed fine, though his eyes went very round at the sight of Nahadoth's motionless form. "Look what you did!"

"I..." I was shaking, almost too hard to talk. "I didn't mean... He was killing you. I couldn't"—I swallowed hard—"let him."

"Nahadoth would not have killed Sieh," said a new voice behind me. My nerves did not like this. I jumped and grabbed for the knife that was no longer tucked into my back-sheath. A woman resolved out of the silent drift of Sieh's toys. The first thing I noticed was that she was huge, like the great ships of the Ken. She was built like one of those ships, too, broad and powerful and astonishingly graceful; none of it was fat. I could not guess her race, because no woman of any race I knew was that damned big.

She knelt to help Sieh up. Sieh was shaking, too, though with excitement. "Did you see what she did?" he asked the newcomer. He pointed at Nahadoth; he was grinning.

"Yes, I saw." Setting Sieh on his feet, the woman turned to regard me for a moment. Kneeling, she was taller than Sieh standing. Her clothing was simple—gray tunic and pants, a gray kerchief covering her hair. Maybe it was her *grayness* after the unrelenting black of the Nightlord, but there was something about her that seemed fundamentally gentle to me.

"There is no greater warrior than a mother protecting her child," the woman said. "But Sieh is far less fragile than you, Lady Yeine."

I nodded slowly, not allowing myself to feel foolish. Logic had not been part of what I'd done.

Sieh came over and took my hand. "Thank you anyway," he said shyly. The purpled, ugly handprint around his throat was fading even as I watched.

We all looked over at Nahadoth. He sat on his knees as he had fallen, the knife still hilt-deep in his chest, his head slumped. With a soft sigh, the gray woman went to him and pulled the knife out. I had felt it lodge in bone, but she made the withdrawal look easy. She examined it, shook her head, then offered it to me hilt first.

I made myself take it, getting more god's blood on my hand. I thought that she held the blade more firmly than necessary because my hand was shaking so badly. But as I got a better grip on the hilt, the woman's fingers trailed down the blade. When I had the knife again, I realized that not only was it clean of blood, but it was a different shape—curved now—and finely honed.

"That suits you better," said the woman, giving a solemn nod at my stare. Unthinking, I put the knife into its sheath at the small of my back, though it should no longer have fit. It did; the sheath had

changed, too.

“So, Zhakka, you like her.” Sieh leaned against me, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his head on my breast. Immortal or not, there was such innocence in the way he did it that I did not push him away. I put my arm around him without thinking, and he uttered a deep, contented sigh.

“Yes,” said the woman without prevarication. She leaned forward, peering into Nahadoth’s face. “Father?”

I did not jump, not with Sieh leaning against me, but he felt me stiffen. “Shhh,” he said, rubbing my back. That touch was not quite childlike enough to be truly soothing. A moment later, Nahadoth stirred.

“You’re back,” said Sieh, straightening with a bright smile. I took that opportunity to step away from Nahadoth. Sieh caught my hand quickly, all earnestness. “It’s all right, Yeine. He’s different now. You’re safe.”

“She will not believe you,” said Nahadoth. He sounded like a man waking from a deep sleep. “She will not trust us now.”

“It isn’t your fault.” Sieh sounded unhappy. “We just need to explain, and she’ll understand.”

Nahadoth looked at me, which made me jump again, though it seemed the madness was indeed gone. Nor did I see that other look—when he’d held my hand in his heartblood and whispered soft, longing words. And that kiss... no. I had imagined it. That was clear, as the Nightlord who sat before me now was detached, regal even on his knees, and contemptuous. I was reminded painfully of Dekarta.

“Will you understand?” he asked me.

I could not help taking another step back in answer. Nahadoth shook his head and rose, nodding gracefully to the woman Sieh had called Zhakka. Though Zhakka towered over Nahadoth, there was no question which was the superior and which the subordinate.

“We have no time for this,” Nahadoth said. “Viraine will be looking for her. Mark her and be done with it.” Zhakka nodded and came toward me. I stepped back a third time, unnerved by the intent in her eyes.

Sieh let go of me and stood between us, a flea confronting a dog. He barely came up to Zhakka’s waist. “This isn’t the way we were supposed to do it. We agreed to try and win her over.”

“That isn’t possible now,” said Nahadoth.

“What’s to stop her from telling Viraine about this, then?” Sieh put his hands on his hips. Zhakka had stopped, waiting patiently for the dispute to be resolved. I felt forgotten and supremely unimportant—as I probably should, given that I stood in the presence of three gods. The term *form* gods just didn’t seem to fit.

Nahadoth’s face showed something less than a smile. He glanced at me. “Tell Viraine and we’ll kill you.” His gaze returned to Sieh. “Satisfied?”

I must have been tired. After so many threats that evening, I didn’t even flinch.

Sieh frowned and shook his head, but he stepped out of Zhakka’s path. “This wasn’t what we planned,” he said with a hint of petulance.

“Plans change,” said Zhakka. Then she stood before me.

“What are you going to do?” I asked. Somehow, despite her size, she did not frighten me nearly as much as Nahadoth.

“I will mark your brow with a sigil,” she said. “One that cannot be seen. It will interfere with the sigil Viraine intends to put on you. You will look like one of them, but in truth you’ll be free.”

“Are they...” All the sigil-marked Arameri? Was that who she meant? “... not free?”

“No more than we, for all they think otherwise,” said Nahadoth. There was, for just that moment,

hint of the softness in him that I'd seen before. Then he turned away. "Hurry up."

Zhakka nodded, and touched my forehead with the tip of a finger. Her fists were the size of dinner plates; her finger seemed to sear like a brand when it touched me. I cried out and tried to slap her finger away, but she lifted her hand before I could. She was done.

Sieh, his sulk forgotten, peered at the spot and nodded sagely. "That will do."

"Take her to Viraine, then," said Zhakka. She inclined her head to me in courteous farewell, then turned away to join Nahadoth.

Sieh took my hand. I was so confused and shaken that I did not fight when he led me toward the nearest of the dead space's walls. But I did glance back over my shoulder once, to watch the Nightlord walk away.

My mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. I say that not because I am her daughter, and not because she was tall and graceful, with hair like clouded sunlight. I say it because she was strong. Perhaps it is my Darre heritage, but strength has always been the marker of beauty in my eyes.

My people were not kind to her. No one said it in front of my father, but I heard the murmurs when we walked through Arrebaia sometimes. *Amn whore. Bone-white bitch.* They would spit on the ground after she passed, to wash the streets of her Arameri taint. Through all this she maintained her dignity and was never less than polite to people who were anything but. My father, in one of the few clear memories of him that I have, said this made her better than them.

I am not sure why I remember this now, but I am certain it is somehow important.

Sieh made me run after we left the dead space, so that I would be out of breath when we arrived at Viraine's workshop.

Viraine opened the door after Sieh's third impatient knock, looking irritated. The white-haired man from Dekarta's audience, who had judged me "not hopeless."

"Sieh? What in demons—ah." He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I'd rather thought T'vril was taking too long. The sun went down nearly an hour ago."

"Scimina sicced Naha on her," said Sieh. Then he looked up at me. "But the game was to end if you made it here, right? You're safe now."

This was my explanation, then. "That was what T'vril said." I glanced back down the hall as if I was still afraid. It was not difficult to pretend.

"Scimina would have given him specific parameters," Viraine said, which I suppose was meant to reassure me. "She knows what he's like in that state. Come in, Lady Yeine."

He stepped aside, and I entered the chamber. Even if I hadn't been bone tired I would have stopped there, for I stood in a room like nothing I had ever seen. It was long and oval-shaped, and there were floor-to-ceiling windows down both of the longer walls. Twin rows of workbenches had been placed along either side of the room; I saw books, flasks, and incomprehensible contraptions on each. Along the far wall were cages, some containing rabbits and birds. In the center of the chamber was a huge white orb set on a low plinth. It was as tall as me and completely opaque.

"Over here," Viraine said, heading toward one of the workbenches. Two stools sat in front of it. He chose one of them and patted the other for me. I followed him, but then hesitated.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, sir."

He looked surprised, then smiled and gave me an informal, not-quite-mocking half bow. "Ah, yes, manners. I am Viraine, the palace scrivener. Also a relative of yours in some way or another—to

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