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## **PROLOGUE: 317 A.C.**

CELESTE SAN MARINA DUG A GRAVE THAT NIGHT.

The season's drought had hardened the earth in Esmeraldas, and every strike of her shovel sent pain up her arms, making her muscles twitch and her bones ache. But still she kept digging, dust sticking to rivulets of sweat coursing down her weathered tan skin.

The half moon hid behind thick clouds that refused to break, and the only light came from the dying oil lamp beside the body loosely wrapped in linens. Thrusting the shovel back into the ground, she didn't stop until her palms were blistered red, and there was a hole deep enough for the body. Then she sank to her knees beside him.

"You deserved better, Rodrigue," the spymaster said, a tremble in her voice. Had she more warning, more help, she could have given him the traditional burial, but in times like this, an unmarked grave was all they had.

She reached around his neck and cut the leather cord that held his alman stone—the single remnant of Rodrigue's legacy—and slipped the jagged white crystal into the pocket sewn inside her gray tunic. The stone rested beside a single glass vial carried by every other Moria spy in the kingdom, right over her heart. How many more secrets would she have to collect before she could rest?

Rest was out of the question for that night. With all her strength, Celeste pushed the body into the waiting grave and proceeded to shovel the mountain of earth on top of him.

Another dead Moria. Another dead rebel.

The horse whinnied and kicked at shadows as Celeste packed up her lamp and shovel. She needed to get back to the village before sunrise. She mounted the steed, sinking her heels into the horse's sides. Wind beat against her face, hooves beat a trail of dust in their wake, and stars sparkled above.

With one hand firmly gripping the reins, Celeste kept checking to make sure Rodrigue's alman stone was still in her pocket. All of her hopes and the future of her people were trapped within that bit of rock, mined from veins that ran deep beneath the mountain ranges of the kingdom. Along the Cliffs of Memoria, alman stone dotted the landscape. Now it was as rare as miracles. Once used to build temples and statues of the goddess herself and cut into dazzling gems and reliquaries by artisans of neighboring lands. But for the Moria, gifted with the powers of the Lady of Shadows, it was always so much

more than a stone. Its prisms captured the surrounding world into living memory. Rodrigue's information was worth dying for. Celeste had to believe that.

She prayed to Our Lady of Whispers that this was the day help would arrive. It had been eight days exactly since she'd sent the messenger to the Whispers, and nine days since Rodrigue arrived at her doorstep half-dead, with news so terrifying that even her hardened heart had stirred. Rodrigue had survived nearly a month under the torture of the Arm of Justice and then the journey from the capital. That alone could make anyone mad—make anyone see things.

But if it were true . . .

There was no worse fate for the kingdom. The world would be forced to bow to Puerto Leones. She kicked her horse harder, held the reins as tightly as the breath in her chest.

Finally, the horse's hooves hit the main dirt road of Esmeraldas. The village still slumbered, but she bypassed the square, avoiding the cobblestones that would wake her neighbors. Despite the dark, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

Celeste dismounted and locked the horse back in the small stable. She just needed to make it to the door, and then she'd be safe in her hosts' house.

She crept through the rows of thorn bushes, hoping Emilia hadn't lost sleep waiting up for her. In her many years as spy for the Whispers, Celeste had called several places home, but none had been as welcoming as Emilia Siriano and her family. They knew her as Celeste Porto, a widow, a midwife, a caretaker. Though they were used to her insomnia, she had never brought trouble to their home. Come daylight she'd have to explain why Rodrigue could not be buried in the cemetery and why there was no family to claim him. Celeste and the Whispers were all the family he had.

Turning her key in the kitchen's side door, Celeste paused, listening. The silence was disturbed by the drying crackle of fire and rustle of her shawl as she slipped inside. Soft light came from the red embers in the hearth. Her bones ached for sleep, but the Sirianos would rise soon. Nights in Esmeraldas weren't usually so cool this time of year, but she loved any excuse to build a fire, busy her hands with simple tasks. That, and the perfect loaf of bread were the gifts she brought to this household.

A touch of smoke mingled with the sweet, grass-perfumed breeze that pushed through the window as Celeste warmed her wind-ravaged face in the hearth. Flames swallowed the kindling and caught the edges of the dried logs. In moments like this it was easy to let herself believe she was only a housemaid with a simple life. But after decades of hiding in plain sight, her senses wouldn't let her rest. She identified two scents that hadn't been there when she'd left—anointing oils and unwashed bodies. She remembered she'd shut all the windows and doors before dragging Rodrigue out.

Her spine stiffened.

“Celeste San Marina,” a clear, cutting voice spoke as the growing fire illuminated the corners of the dark. A man rose from a chair with deadly grace. “I’d hoped our paths would cross again.”

Celeste’s breath caught. Though he only wore a rumpled white tunic and brown riding trousers, she would have recognized his regal face anywhere. The only surviving son of King Fernando. They called him so many things, but they never uttered his name, as if afraid it would somehow conjure his likeness, no matter the time or place.

Príncipe Dorado.

Bloodied Prince.

The Lion’s Fury.

Matahermano.

As he took a step closer in the faint light, she could almost see the ghost of the child he’d been during her time at the palace—a curious, golden-haired boy. A boy who would grow up to be worse than his father.

She’d only ever called him Castian.

Before Celeste could run, the prince motioned with his gloved hand, and two soldiers bounded in from the hall. One of them closed a meaty fist around her throat. The second blocked the kitchen door.

“We can make this simple,” Castian said, his voice deep and even as he strode over to them. He tugged off his fine leather gloves to reveal hands that did not belong to a prince. Calloused and scarred knuckles from years of hard training and fighting. “Tell me where he is, and I will make your death a swift and painless one.”

“Life under your family’s rule is neither swift nor painless,” Celeste spoke slowly, her voice hoarse. She’d waited for the day to come when she would face him once again. “I would not trust the Lion’s Fury to honor his word.”

“After everything you’ve done, it is you who does not trust me?”

The kitchen seemed to shrink with the prince’s presence. She could taste his emotions in the air. His anger tasted like a bitter tincture that would be her undoing. But she’d known that long ago. All she could do for the rebels was stall and take their secrets beyond the veil.

The soldier’s fingers dug into her windpipe, and as she struggled to breathe, she kicked out. Every muscle and bone in her body ached from hours of digging and sleepless nights since Rodrigue’s arrival. Her eyes flicked toward the Siriano family’s closed bedroom door. What had the prince and his men done to them?

Then a terrible thought surfaced.

Had the Sirianos, who'd hired and housed her, who'd believed in peace among all the peoples of Puerto Leones, betrayed her the moment she'd left? A twisting sensation wrenched her already strained heart. She desperately wanted—needed—to breathe.

She pushed thoughts of betrayal aside and concentrated on the alman stone that was still tucked into her pocket. She could not let it be found. She slapped at the guard's hands, scratched at the exposed skin between sleeve and glove, her eyes straining to see beyond bursts of black splotches.

"Enough." The prince held up his hand and the soldier relinquished his hold on her. "The dead can't speak."

"That shows how much you know of the dead," Celeste rasped as she dropped to her knees. Pressing her hands to the cool stone floor for balance, she coughed. She needed time to think, but the prince was not famous for his patience. She stared at the fire in the hearth for focus. Before Rodrigue had succumbed to his injuries she'd promised to do whatever it took to get his alman stone to the Whispers. They should have been there. Unless the reason the prince was here was because they'd already been captured.

For the first time, the spymaster realized that perhaps rest would never come. At least not in this life. Her aging body was no good in a fight. All she had was the glass vial and her magics.

With eyes narrowed on him, she twisted the thick copper ring on her middle finger, immediately feeling the strength of her magics pulsing inside her veins as the metal charged her power of persuasion. A primordial buzz surged through every inch of her skin, bleeding into the air, thickening it enough to bring a sweat to the guard's forehead. Her gift was as old as time—old as the trees, old as the minerals and metals that strengthened the power in her veins—and they wanted release. She sifted through the weakest emotions in the room. The guards. Their heightened fear of her was easy to latch onto. Their muscles and tendons seized and left them petrified in place. But the prince was just out of reach. She needed him closer. Close enough to touch.

"Thank the stars your dear mother isn't alive to see what you've become," Celeste said.

Just as she intended, the prince advanced. She pushed her magics harder. Sweat trickled down the prince's fine cheekbone, where a crescent scar marred his sharp features. Only then did Celeste San Marina stare into Prince Castian's eyes, blue like the sea he was named after, and confront her greatest nightmare.

"Don't you dare speak of her." He clamped a hand around Celeste's mouth.

At his touch, Celeste acted quickly. Her magics traveled from her body to his, like a gust of wind cycling between them. Closing her eyes, she searched for an emotion to latch onto—pity, hate, anger. If only she could grab hold of the thing that made the young prince so cruel, she could draw it out and smother it.

With her Persuári gifts she could take a fraction of any emotion that existed within someone and bring it to life, amplifying it into action. She knew all the colors that made up a person's soul— star-white hope, mud-green envy, pomegranate love. But when she focused on the prince, she could only see a faint, muted gray.

He jerked his hand off her jaw, and she gasped, trying to regain her breath. Her thoughts spun. Everyone's emotions expressed themselves in colors. Gray was for those passing on from the worlds, fading into nothingness. Why was he different? She knew of nothing that could block the powers of the Moria. Her magics drew back, and she was forced to release her hold on the petrified guards. They crumbled to their knees, but with a single wave of their commander's hand, the men pushed back up at attention.

The prince's smile was malevolent in his triumph. "Did you really think I'd face you again without taking precautions against your magics?"

"What have you done to yourself, Castian?" Celeste managed before rough hands grabbed her shoulders and dragged her to the small wooden table in front of the hearth. The soldier slammed her into a chair and held her in place.

"I am what you made me," he said, low and just for her. She breathed in his rage. "I dreamed of finding you for so long."

"You will not find us all. The kingdom of Memoria will rise once more."

"Enough of your tricks and your lies!" He spoke each word like his own personal truth. "I know everything you did."

"Surely you can't know everything I've ever done, princeling." She wanted to toy with him. To let him know that she did not fear him or death.

"What does a prince want with a lowly runaway? Or are the king's armies so depleted he'd send out his only living child in the dead of the night? I thought you loved an audience for your executions."

"I love nothing," the prince shouted, his temper burning like a lit fuse. "Where is he?"

"Dead," Celeste spit. "Rodrigue is dead."

Castian growled his frustration and lowered his face to hers. "Not the spy. Dez. I want Dez."

Celeste ground her teeth. Her magics could not help her anymore. She'd survived the rebellion eight years ago, prison, and decades of hiding and gathering information across Puerto Leones. But she knew she would not survive Prince Castian. So long as the alman stone was safe she would make peace with herself. "If you know everything I've ever done, my prince, you should know that I would never tell you."

There was no room for regret in her heart. There was only the cause, and every terrible thing she'd ever done for the good of her people, she would do again and again.

Prince Castian crossed his arms, a bemused smile playing on his lips as the side door opened. “Perhaps you’ll tell her.”

Celeste’s blood ran cold as another soldier entered through the kitchen door, escorting a young woman. The spymaster’s mind struggled to place the green palor to the girl’s olive skin. Gaunt in a way that made her look like she’s been drained from the inside out by leeches. When recognition sparked, tears she thought had long run dry pooled in her eyes. Celeste knew this girl.

Lucia Zambrano, a mind reader of the Whispers, known for her bright brown eyes and sweet laughter that made it easy to fall in love with her, just as Rodrigue had. Rodrigue, whose grave dirt was still under Celeste’s fingernails. Lucia’s quick wit was only matched by the speed of her footwork, both of which were useful when she spied for Celeste in Citadela Crescenti. Celeste had heard of Lucia’s capture during a raid, and after Rodrigue’s tales of what was happening in the dungeons, she’d feared the worst.

That was when she’d believed the worst that could happen to the Moria was slow, torturous deaths.

The king has discovered a fate worse than death, Celeste thought now, unable to look away from Lucia. Her eyes were vacant, a house where the lights has been snuffed out. Her lips were cracked and had a white film at the corners. Lucia’s bones and veins were hugged by too-tight skin.

“Come closer, Lucia,” Castian said.

The girl’s movements appeared to be commanded by the prince’s voice. She took slow steps, her dead eyes focused on the fire in the hearth behind Celeste. “What have you done to her?” Celeste asked, her voice small.

“What will be done to all Moria unless you tell me what I want to know.”

The realization thundered through every part of her body: Rodrigue was right. Rodrigue was right. Rodrigue was right. How would she protect the alman stone now? Castian was somehow immune to her magics, but she could try her best with the guards.

And then what? She wouldn’t make it past the bridge check points without travel documents. She had to be there for the Whispers to find—even if she wasn’t alive.

“This will be your future unless you tell me where Dez is,” Castian said, louder, impatient.

For a moment, Celeste’s eyes flicked to the closed door where the Sorianos slept. No, no one could sleep through this disturbance. They were dead. Or they abandoned her.

Celeste’s stomach churned because it didn’t matter now. She was out of options, and the knowledge of what she had to do over- came her. She barely had time to turn away

before she vomited. The soldier cursed and shook the sickness from his hand, but one look at the Príncipe Sangrado and he kept his other hand firmly on Celeste's shoulder.

"I won't ask again," the prince said, his face a vicious mask inches from hers. "I will burn this village to the ground with you in it."

Celeste knew that she had a single moment to get things right. All she needed was to hide the alman stone for another Moria to find. Illan's spies were clever, and if they weren't, then she'd pray to the Lady of Shadows for a guiding hand. After that, she'd fight until she couldn't fight anymore—but she wouldn't be taken alive.

Despite the pain—despite the bile that pooled across her tongue and threatened to choke her windpipe—Celeste, finally, began to laugh.

One moment, one life.

She wished she had more to give the Whispers.

The prince closed a fist around her hair, pulling her away from the soldier. "You laugh at the fate of your own?"

Blinking her eyes to focus, Celeste stared back at the prince.

"I laugh because you will not win. We are a flame that will never burn out."

Then she slammed her forehead into the prince's face.

He released her, reaching for his bloody nose.

In that moment, she was free, rolling away onto the ground,

her quick fingers retrieved the hidden contents over her heart. The guard dove for her. She grabbed the oil lamp on the table and threw it. The glass shattered against his chest, and the guard screamed as fire caught on his clothes, anointed with oils meant for protection.

It was an ugly way to die and it would not be her fate. She dug into her tunic pocket and held the glass vial for the prince to see.

"You're mad," the prince shouted, his heavy steps charging to stop her.

Celeste whispered a prayer to the Lady. Forgive me. Forgive me for my past. Welcome me at last.

She swallowed the contents of the vial, slipping the stone that she would protect with her life into her mouth. She gave into the numbness of the poison rushing through her body, a cold she'd only ever felt when she swam in the mountain lakes near her family home as a girl. When she closed her eyes, she could see that deep blue water, feel the calm of floating for hours, but she could still hear the prince calling her name, the shouting from the guards, the crackle of flames.

Celeste San Marina made a second grave at dawn.

Hers was one of fire.

## CHAPTER 1

AFTER A WHILE, ALL BURNING VILLAGES SMELL THE SAME.

From a hilltop, I watch as fire consumes the farming village of Esmeraldas. Wooden homes and sienna clay roofs. Bales of rolled hay amid a sea of golden grass. Vegetable gardens of ripening toma- toes, bushels of thyme and laurel. All common to Puerto Leones, but here, in the eastern province of the kingdom, the fire burns through something else: manzanilla.

The deceptively bitter flower with a yellow heart and white mane of pointed petals is prized for its healing properties not only in our kingdom, but in the lands across the Castinian Sea, ensuring a steady flow of gold and food into this tiny corner of the country. In Esmeraldas, where the manzanilla grows so wild it takes over entire fields, its sweetness momentarily masks the acrid scent of homespun wool and rag dolls, abandoned in haste as the villagers ran along the dirt paths to escape the flames.

But nothing covers the scent of burning flesh.

“Mother of All—” I start to say a blessing. Words the Moria use when someone is moving from this life and onto the next. But I remember flashes of a different fire, of cries and screams and helplessness. A heavy weight settles around my throat. Taking deep breaths, I try to compose myself, but the blessing still won’t leave my lips. So, I think it instead. Mother of All, bless this soul into the vast unknown.

I turn away from the flames just in time to see Dez march up behind me. His honey-brown eyes take in the scene below. There’s dirt on his tawny brown skin from that last scramble through the woods that borders the north of Esmeraldas. His fingers rake through thick tangled black hair, and his broad chest expands with quick shallow breaths as he tries to retain composure. He touches the sword at his hip the way a child might check for a favorite toy, for comfort.

“I don’t understand,” Dez says. Even after everything we’ve been through he searches for a reason for why bad things happen.

“What’s there to understand?” I say, though my anger isn’t directed toward him. “We turned a six-day journey into four by sheer will, and it still wasn’t fast enough.”

I wish I had something to hit. I settle for kicking a cluster of rocks and regret it when the dust billows around us. The wind shifts, pushing the smoke away from us. I sink into my boots as if grounding myself to this place will stop my heart from racing, my mind from thinking, “too late. you’re always too late.”



“This has been burning for half a day by the looks of it. We never would have gotten here in time to stop it. But Esmeraldas’s exports are worth their weight in gold. Why would the king’s justice set it ablaze?”

I retie my forest green scarf around my neck. “The message from Celeste said Rodrigue’s discovery would turn the tide of our war. They didn’t want it found.”

“Perhaps there is hope yet,” Dez says. When he turns to the village at the base of the hill, there’s a new fervor in his eyes.

Or perhaps all hope is lost, I think. I am not like Dez. The other Whispers do not come to me for hope or rousing speeches. Perhaps it is best that he is our unit leader and not me. I know two truths: the king’s justice will stop at nothing to destroy its enemies and we’re waging a war we cannot win. But I keep fighting, maybe because it is all I’ve ever known, or maybe because the alternative is dying and I can’t do that until I’ve paid for my sins.

“Do you think Celeste is—”

“Dead,” Dez answers. His eyes are fixed on the village, what’s left of it. A ripple passes along the fine line of his jaw, his skin darker after our journey the sun.

“Or captured,” I suggest.

He shakes his head once. “Celeste wouldn’t allow herself to be taken. Not alive.”

“We have to know for certain.” I pull a thin spyglass from the inside of my leather vest pocket and turn back to the forest line, twisting the lens until I find what I’m looking for.

A bright light glints between the trees and flashes twice. Though I can’t make out her face, I know it’s Sayida waiting with the rest of the unit for our signal. I take out a square mirror to signal back. I don’t need to communicate that the city is burning, or that we’ve traveled all this way for nothing. They should see the smoke by now. I signal only that we’ve made it.

“Go back to the others. The Second Sweep will be here soon,”

Dez says. Then his voice softens. Suddenly, he’s no longer my unit leader but something else. The boy who rescued me nearly a decade ago. My only true friend. “You shouldn’t have to see this.”

His thumb brushes softly over the top of my hand, and I stop myself from seeking comfort in his arms the way I am always tempted to do. A week ago there was a raid near our safe house, and I was sure we were going to be taken captive. Somehow we squeezed into a crate reserved for sandstone brick shipments, our limbs entwined. The kiss we shared then would have been romantic if it hadn’t felt like we’d been stuffed into a coffin and sure our luck had run out.

I slam the spyglass between my palms and return it to its hiding place. “No.”

“No?” He cocks an eyebrow and tries to twist his features into a fearsome mask. “There are no memories to steal here. I can finish the task.”

I cross my arms over my chest and close the distance between us. He’s a head taller than me and as my unit leader he could order me to listen. I hold his stare and dare him to look away first.

He does.

His gaze goes to the side of my neck, to the finger-long scar courtesy of a royal guard during our last mission. Dez’s hands reach for my shoulders, and a sliver of temptation winds itself around my heart. I would prefer that he give me a command than tell me he’s worried for my safety.

I step back, though I catch the moment of hurt on his face. “I can’t go back to the Whispers a failure. Not again.”

“You’re not a failure,” he says.

On our last mission, Lynx Unit was tasked with finding safe passage on a ship sailing out of the kingdom for a merchant family whose father had been executed by the king. We were nearly to the shipyard when I was caught. I know I did everything right. I had the correct documents and I wore a dress covered in stitched flowers like a chaste farmer’s daughter. My job was to rip memories from the guard, enough to confuse him and give us insight into the ships coming in and out of the Salinas harbor. There was something about me that the guard didn’t like, and the next moment I knew, I was drawing my sword to defend myself. We won and the family has spent two months somewhere in the empire of Luzou. It took ten stitches and a week burning off a fever in the infirmary. But we can’t show our faces in that town to help other families. In those two months the king’s justice has doubled its guards there. Our presence is supposed to be silent. Our units meant to be shadows. We saved one family, but what about the others trapped in the citadela living in fear of their magics being discovered? Even if Dez is right, and I’m not a failure, I’m still a risk.

“I have to be the one to find the alman stone, and I have to be the one to return it to your father.”

A smirk plays on his lips. “And here I thought I was the glory seeker among us.”

“I don’t want glory,” I say, a bitter laugh on my tongue. “I don’t even want praise.”

The wind changes, smoke encircling us. When I look at him, he could be one of my stolen memories, coated in a layer of gray, somehow distant and close all at once as he asks, “Then what do you want?”

My heart tugs painfully because the answer is complicated. He of all people should know this. But how could he, when even in the moments I’m the surest of this answer, a new kind of want overpowers the next? I settle on the simplest and truest words I can.

“Forgiveness. I want the Whispers to know I’m not a traitor. The only way I can do that is by getting as many Moria on the next ship to Luzou as I can.”

“No one thinks you’re a traitor,” Dez says, brushing aside my worry with a careless toss of his hand. That dismissal stings even though I know he believes it. “My father trusts you. I trust you, and since Lynx Unit is mine to command, that’s what matters.”

“How do you walk around with a head that big, Dez?”

“I manage.”

I’d still be a scavenger if Dez hadn’t petitioned his father and the other elders that I be trained to be a spy. My skill has been useful at saving Moria trapped in the Puerto Leones borders, but no one among our kind wants a memory thief like me in their midst. Robári are the reason we lost the war, even if our side has been on the losing end for decades. Robári can’t be trusted. I can’t be trusted.

Dez believes in me despite everything I’ve done. I would put my life in his hands—have done it before and will do it again. But for Dez, everything comes so easy. He doesn’t see that. Among the Whispers Dez is the cleverest and bravest. The most reckless, too, but it’s accepted as part of what makes him Dez. And yet, I know, even if I were just as clever, just as brave, I’d still be the girl that sparked a thousand deaths.

I will never stop trying to prove to them that I am more. Seeing destruction like this in Esmeraldas makes it so hard to hold onto what little hope I have.

“We’re going in together,” I say. “I can handle myself.”

He makes a low grumble at the back of his throat and turns from me. I fight the impulse to reach out for him. We both know he won’t send me away. He can’t. Dez runs his fingers through his hair and reties the knot at the base of his neck. His dark eyebrows knit together and that’s the moment he relents.

“Sometimes, Ren, I wonder who the Persuári is—you or me. We’ll rendezvous in the Forest of Lynxes or—”

“Or you’ll leave me at the hands of the Second Sweep for being too slow.” I try to put humor into my voice, but nothing will stop the flutter of my heart, the memories pulsing to be freed. “I know the plan, Dez.”

I begin to turn, new purpose coursing through my veins. But he grips my wrist and tugs me back to him.

“No. Or I’ll come looking for you and kill anyone who tries to stop me.” Dez presses a hard, quick kiss on my lips. He doesn’t care if the others are watching us through their spyglasses, but I do. Wrenching myself from him leaves me with a dull ache between my ribs. When he smiles I feel a heady want that has no place here.

“Find the alman stone,” he says. He’s Dez again. My unit leader. Soldier. Rebel. “Celeste was to meet us in the village square. I’ll search for survivors.”

I squeeze his hand, then let go and say, “By the Light of Our Lady, we carry on.”

“We carry on,” he echoes.

I drum all the nervous energy in my body down into my legs. Pulling my scarf over the bottom half of my face, I take one last breath of fresh air, then run alongside him, down the hill from our lookout point, and into the blazing streets below. For someone built so tall and broad, Dez is fast on his feet. But I’m faster, and I make it to the square first. I tell myself not to look back at him, to keep going. I do it anyway and find he’s watching me, too.

We split up.

I plunge deeper into the ruins of Esmeraldas. Flames as large as houses don’t crackle—they roar. The heat on the smoldering cobblestones is oppressive, and the snap of roof beams caving in sets my teeth on edge as houses crumble along the road. I say a silent prayer that their inhabitants have already made it out alive. Smoke tings tears from my eyes.

In the square, fire has eaten through every building it has touched, leaving nothing but black ruins behind. Hundreds of foot-steps mark the ground, all of them leading east toward the town of Agata. By now there should be no one left in Esmeraldas. I can tell by the sickening silence.

The only thing untouched is the cathedral and whipping post in front of it. God and torture: the two things the king of Puerto Leones holds dearest to his heart.

There’s something familiar about the bone-white stone of the cathedral, surrounding flames glinting off the stained-glass windows. Though I’ve never been to Esmeraldas, I can’t shake the impression of having walked this very street before.

I brush away the feeling and make my way toward the whipping post. Occasionally, if there is time, doomed Moria hide messages or small parcels in the last place the king’s men would think to look—and what better place than where the accused are taken to die?

Alman stone isn’t conspicuous on its own, though when it captures memories, it glows like it’s been filled with starlight. Before King Fernando’s reign, it was common, but now, with temples desecrated and mines run dry, Moria are lucky to find it at all. If spymaster Celeste had enough warning, she would’ve hidden Rodrigue’s alman stone for the Whispers to retrieve.

“What happened to you, Celeste?” I ask aloud, but only the crackle of fire answers, and I continue my search.

The executioner's block has dozens of long grooves from where a killing blade struck. The wood is dark, stained with dried blood. As I run my hands along the base, I am thankful I always wear gloves. The thought of heads rolling— of bodies hanging, of people locked into the paddocks and beat senseless— makes my stomach turn and my legs tremble. My body reacts the same way to blood as it does fire. And that is precisely why I force myself to be here.

I move to the hangman's noose. Esmeraldas is such a small village. I wonder when they find the time to practice so many forms of execution. Kneeling, I run my hands along the wooden boards beneath the noose for a break or a loose slat. Nothing. I walk around the whipping post, but all I find is a thin leather cord with a long strip of skin dried to it. Bile rises to my throat. I drop the whip, and when I do, the strangest sense of remembrance moves through me, and a vivid memory—one that does not belong to me, but is mine anyway—bursts into my mind.

I squeeze my eyes shut and palm my temples. It's been months since I've lost control of the memories living in my head. Silent smoke gathers in my mind's eye, then clears to reveal a scene drained of all color, and I'm forced to relive a stolen past, as the Gray cracks open. I see the same street, the same square, but as it was once before the fire—

A man adjusts his grip around a freshly cut tree and drags it down this street. His shoulders ache, but his thin gloves protect against splinters. His mud-covered boots stomp blue-and-gray cobblestones into the heart of the village. A crowd gathers in front of the cathedral. It is the sixth day of Almanar, and his neighbors carry branches, broken furniture, cut trees. They stack and stack the pyre until no one can reach the top. Music spills from open cantina doors. The drummers have come around, slapping leather skins to the festive songs. Couples dance as torches are lit. He sees the faces he's been waiting for—his wife and child run to him. They help him drag the tree onto the pyre—their offering for the festival of Almanar. Together, they sing and dance and watch the pyre burn.

Now I know why Esmeraldas felt familiar. Every memory I've ever stolen is a part of me. It's taken years and training to push them back, keep them in compartments I can't pry open. But some- times, they find a way out. I should thank the stars that the memory that has spilled from the vault of my mind is a joyous one. A rural harvest where everyone comes together to burn the old year away. And yet, my hands tremble and sweat drips down my back. I don't want to look at it anymore. I force myself out of the Gray, shoving the memory back into the dark where it belongs. I've heard it called the curse of the Robári. Curse or not, I can't let it get in the way of finding the alman stone.

My eyes sting from smoke and the piercing pain that stabs my temples. I push my weary bones to stand. There is no alman stone here. If I were Celeste, where would I have run?

Then I hear it. A single sound pierces the crackle of fire.

At first, I think it's from another unwanted memory slipping out of the Gray, but it grows clear as cathedral bells on Holy Day. A voice crying out for help.

Someone in Esmeraldas is trapped.