

Excerpted from [These Feathered Flames](#) by Alexandra Overy © 2021, used with permission from Inkyard Press/HarperCollins.

Chapter One

The prey wasn't meant to be a child.

When Asya had smelled the sharp tang of magic—strong even before she emerged from the tree line—that possibility hadn't so much as fluttered across her mind. It was never meant to be a child.

But the scent of magic was undeniable. That indistinguishable combination of damp overturned earth and the metallic copper of blood, cut through with the acrid burn of power. It was overlaid with the cloying sweetness of waterose, as if someone had tried to mask it.

A futile attempt.

And Asya was sure this time. The person they were looking for had to be here.

The comfort of the forest stood at her back, the dark canopy of trees stretching behind her in every direction. The fading sunlight could not break through the writhing tangle of branches, so in the shadow of the trunks, it was dark as twilight.

Most people feared the forest. Stories of monsters that lurked in its depths, witches who lured unsuspecting children in and tore out their hearts. But to Asya it had always felt safe, the gnarled trunks and rustling leaves were like old friends.

"This is it," Asya said, inclining her head toward the clearing in front of them.

A slight smile tugged at her lips. Two years ago, when her great-aunt had first deemed her ready to try tracking herself—to follow the magic with only her mortal senses once they were close enough to the source—she'd found it impossible. More often than not, she just led them in circles until Tarya gave up on her. But today, Asya had managed it.

She might not be as unwavering as her aunt, as strong or as dutiful, but at least Asya had succeeded in this.

She glanced over at Tarya, waiting for her reaction. But her aunt stood stiller than the trees, an immovable presence in their midst. The shadowed light filtering through the leaves cast her face in stark relief, carving deep hollows into her snow-white cheeks and emphasizing the wrinkles at her brow. She could have been a painting—one of the old oil portraits of the gods, soft brushstrokes of light adding an ethereal glow to her stern face.

It made her look otherworldly. *Inhuman.*

Which she was. One of the creatures that prowled these trees.

While Asya, or any other mortal, could smell the residual magic, her aunt could *feel* it. No amount of waterose or burned sage—or any of the other tricks people tried—could hide magic from Tarya.

Her dark eyes flickered to Asya. “Correct,” her aunt murmured, a hint of satisfaction in her soft voice.

In front of them, the comforting trees gave way to an open paddock. It had been allowed to run wild, chamomile glinting yellow in the long grass, like sun spots on water. Purple-capped mushrooms pushed their way through the weeds, intertwining with the soft lilac of scattered crocuses.

The tinge of pride in Asya’s chest melted away, replaced by a thrumming anticipation. The paddock could have been beautiful, she supposed. But the cold apprehension burning in her stomach overshadowed it, darkening the flowers to poisonous thorns and muting the colors like fog. It was always like this. Ever since the first time Tarya had taken her on a hunt. Once she was left without a task to complete—a distraction—Asya couldn’t pretend to forget what came next. She’d hoped it would get better, but she still couldn’t shake the lingering fear.

She shifted her feet, trying to ignore the erratic rhythm of her heart. She hated waiting. Each frantic beat stretching out into an eternity.

She just wanted this to be over.

After all, her sister had always been the brave one.

But that was why Asya was here. Why she had to follow this path, no matter how she wavered. She owed it to her sister. They were the two sides of a coin, and if Asya failed, then her sister would too.

Tarya’s words—the words Asya had to live by—pounded through her. *This is our duty. Not a question of right or wrong, but balance.*

Her aunt stepped forward. She moved silently, slipping like a shadow untethered from its owner, from the gnarled trees and out into the overgrown paddock beyond. She didn’t speak—she rarely did when she felt a Calling—but Asya knew she was meant to follow.

Asya took a shaky breath, touching one finger to the wooden icon around her neck. An unspoken prayer. She could do this.

Far less quietly, she followed Tarya into the uneven grass, wincing at the snapping twigs beneath her boots.

The paddock led to a small cottage, surrounded by more soft crocuses. Their purple seeped out from the house like a bruise. The building’s thatched roof had clearly been recently repaired, and the gray stone was all but consumed by creeping moss. The stench of magic grew with each step Asya took. Wateroses lay scattered on the ground, interspersed with dried rosemary sprigs. The too-sweet scent, cut through with the burn of magic, made her stomach turn.

Tarya stopped by the wooden door. Marks of various saints had been daubed across it in stark black paint, uneven and still wet. Acts of desperation. They felt out of place in the idyllic scene. The sight sent a prickle of unease through Asya's gut.

"Your weapon," Tarya prompted, her voice as low as the rustle of grass behind them.

Asya's fingers jumped to the curved bronze shashka at her waist. A careless mistake. She should have drawn the short blade long before. She couldn't let the apprehension clawing at the edge of her mind overwhelm her. Not this time.

She had to be sure. Uncompromising. She had to be like Tarya.

Asya unsheathed the weapon, the bronze glinting in the fading light, and forced her hand to steady.

Her aunt gave her a long look, one that said she knew just how Asya's heart roiled beneath the surface. But Tarya just nodded, turning back to the freshly marked door. Sparks already danced behind her eyes—deep red and burnished-gold flames swallowing her dark irises. It transformed her from ethereal into something powerful.

Monstrous.

Asya swallowed, pushing that thought away. Her aunt wasn't a monster.

Tarya reached out and pressed her palm to the wood. Heat rolled from her in a great wave, making Asya's eyes water. A low splintering noise fractured the air, followed by the snap of the metal bolt. The door swung open. All that was left of the painted sigils was a scorched handprint. Asya's mouth went dry. She couldn't help but feel that breaking the saints' signs was violating some ancient covenant.

But Tarya just stepped inside. Asya tightened her grip on the blade, trying to shake off the sense of foreboding nipping at her heels, and followed.

The cottage was comprised of a single small room. Heavy fabric hung over the windows, leaving them half in shadow. As Asya's vision adjusted, she took in the shapes of furniture—all overturned or smashed against the cracked walls. Clothes were strewn across the floor in a whirl, along with a few shattered plates and even a broken viiila, its strings snapped and useless. A statue of Saint Meshnik lay on its side, their head several paces from their armored body. The room looked like it had been ransacked, perhaps set upon by thieves.

Or like someone wanted it to seem that way.

Tarya turned slowly, her sparking eyes taking in the room. Then her gaze fixed on a spot to her left, and flames reared across her irises again. Asya couldn't see anything. But she knew her aunt was not really looking at the wall, she was *feeling*—reaching for those intangible threads that bound the world and using them to narrow in on her prey.

Asya waited, her breath caught in her chest.

Tarya moved in a flash, as though Vetviya herself had looked down and granted her secret passage through the In-Between. One moment beside Asya, the next in front of the wall. Flames, as golden and bright as sunlight, sputtered from her wrists, licking along her forearms. She put her hands on the wall, and the flames eagerly reached out to devour.

They burned away what must have been a false panel, revealing a tight crevice behind. Three faces stared out, eyes wide and afraid. Two children, a boy and a girl, clutching onto a man with ash-white hair, now covered in a faint sheen of soot.

“Oryaze,” he breathed, terror rising on his face like waves over a hapless ship. *Firebird*.

Bile burned in Asya’s throat. She took a halting step back, staring at the huddled family. *It’s the man*, she told herself. It had to be. The thought murmured through her, a desperate prayer to any god or saint who might be listening.

The man leaped forward, spreading his arms as though hiding the children from view might protect them. As though anything he did would make a difference. “I won’t let you touch her!” he cried, grabbing one of the broken chair legs and brandishing it like a sword.

Asya clenched her teeth, a sharp jab of pity shooting through her. It would be no use. Nothing would.

The flames coiled lazily around Tarya’s wrists as she watched the man with a detached curiosity. “The price must be paid.”

He let out a low sob, the chair leg clattering uselessly to the ground as he clasped his hands together as if in prayer. “Please, take it from me. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

The room was too hot, the flames scorching the very air in Asya’s lungs. *This is what has to be done*, she intoned. *This is our duty*. The same words her aunt had hammered into her. Asya’s knuckles shone white on the hilt of her shashka, the cool metal tethering her to the ground, to this moment, and not the rising guilt in the back of her mind. A panic that threatened to crush her.

“I cannot,” Tarya said, her voice hollow. “The price must be taken from the one who cast the spell.” With a casual flick of her wrist, a burst of fire sprang at the man. He dived aside, toppling into an overturned table.

The little boy was crying now, soft whimpers barely louder than the spitting flames. But the girl did not cry, even as Tarya wrapped an elegant hand around her arm and dragged her forward.

Asya saw the stratsviye clearly against the milk-white skin of the girl’s wrist. A mass of black lines that coalesced to form a burning feather, seared into her flesh like a brand. The mark of the Firebird. The mark that meant a debt had to be paid.

“Please,” the man said again, pulling himself from the collapsed table. “Please, she didn’t mean to—”

“Asya,” her aunt said, without looking up from the mark.

Asya knew what she was meant to do, but her legs took a moment to obey. Muscles protesting though her mind could not. But she moved forward anyway, placing herself between the man and the little girl, shashka raised in warning.

No one could interfere with the price.

The man scrambled for the chair leg again, leveling it at Asya with trembling hands. “She only did it to save her brother,” he pleaded, emotion cracking through his voice like summer ice. “He was sick. She didn’t know the consequences.”

Asya’s gaze slid to the little girl. To the determined set of her jaw, her defiantly dry eyes. That look wrenched something in Asya’s chest. The resolve she’d so carefully built crumbled around her. She knew what it was like to have a sibling you would do anything—*risk* anything—for.

But Tarya was unmoved. “Now she will know—magic always comes with a price.”

He lunged. He was clumsy, fueled by fear and desperation. Asya should have been able to stop him easily, but she hesitated. A single thought caught in her mind: *Is it so wrong of him to want to protect his daughter?*

That one, faltering breath cost her. The man swung the chair leg at her, catching the side of her head. Bright lights danced in front of her eyes. She stumbled into the wall as the man let out a fractured cry and threw himself toward Tarya.

Tarya did not hesitate.

Another tongue of flame reared from her, forcing the man back. This one was more than a warning. The acrid smell of burnt flesh sliced through the scent of magic. A low, broken sob trembled in the air as the man clutched his now-scorched left side.

Tarya’s head snapped to Asya, flames flashing bloodred.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in her head, Asya darted forward. She grabbed the man’s arm and twisted, sending the chair leg tumbling to the ground again. It was painfully easy. The injury made his attempt to swing back at her fly wide, and her hands fastened on him again. She spun him, one arm wrapping around him, the other holding the shashka to his throat. Her chest heaved, and her head reeled. But she didn’t move.

He let out a low whimper, still trying to struggle free. Asya pressed the blade deeper, almost wincing as a trickle of blood ran down his throat. “Don’t,” she said, half command, half plea. “You’ll just make it worse.”

Tarya had already turned back to her prey. Her gleaming eyes, still threaded with flame, stared down at the girl. There was no malice on her face, just a cold emptiness. Asya wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse.

“You must understand, child,” Tarya said. “The price has to be paid.”

And in a breath, she transformed.

Flames devoured her eyes, spreading from the pupils until they were no more than luminous orbs. Twin suns, captured in a face. But the fire did not end there. It rose up out of her like a living thing. Glinting golds and burnt oranges twisted with deepest crimson to form hooked wings, spread behind her like a blazing cape. Another head loomed above her own, a vicious, living mask. It formed a sharp beak, feathered flames rising from it to forge the great bird's plumage. They arched up into an expression of cruel indifference, mirroring the human features below. The very walls of the cottage trembled.

The Firebird.

Asya felt her hand go slack. A deep, instinctual fear sank into her bones. She had seen her aunt transform before, more times than she could count. But that primal fear never went away. The mortal instinct that she should run from this creature.

She was eleven when she'd first seen her aunt exact a price. Asya had been naive and desperate to shirk her new responsibility, to run back to her sister. Tarya had brought her on a hunt to see—to truly understand—the weight of this responsibility.

It had terrified Asya then. It still terrified her now, six years later.

Everything about the flaming creature exuded power. Not the simple spells mortals toyed with, but the kind of power drawn from the depths of the earth, ancient and deadly.

The girl could not hide her fear now. It shone in her dark eyes like a beacon as she tried to back away, but Tarya's curled fingers held her tight. The boy was screaming. The sound rose in Asya's ears to a high keening, writhing through her insides.

The creature—*Tarya*—looked down at the girl, head cocked to one side. Considering.

Asya wanted to close her eyes. To pretend she was somewhere far away, safe beneath a canopy of trees. But she couldn't.

She had to do this. This was the duty the gods had chosen her for. The burden she had accepted.

And looking away would feel like abandoning the little girl.

Asya tried to take a breath to steady her whirling thoughts, but the very air was bitter and scorched. *Please be something small*, she thought. *Not her heart*.

She couldn't stand back and watch that. Or, perhaps, she didn't want to believe that she *would* just stand aside as this monster tore the girl's heart from her body.

Because Asya knew she would. Knew she had to. That was her price.

The flames spread down Tarya's left arm, coiling like a great serpent as they bridged across her fingers to the girl. A cry tore through the air, raw and aching human. The greedy, blazing tendrils wrapped around the girl's arm, as unmoved by the screams as their master. They consumed the flesh as if it were nothing more than parchment.

In only a few frantic beats of Asya's heart, the girl's left arm was gone. Not just burned, but *gone*. No trace of it remained. No charred bone, not even a scattering of ashes.

The price had been paid.

The flames receded, the creature folding back in on itself until it was no more than a spark in Tarya's eyes. All that was left was a heavy smoke in the air, thick and choking.

Asya let her hand holding the shashka fall. The man threw himself forward—though Asya had a feeling he would have moved even if her blade had still been at his throat—and clutched the little girl, who was still half-frozen in shock. The boy flung himself at his sister too, his screams reduced to gasping cries.

Asya's stomach curled as she stared down at the huddled family, enclosed in a grief she had helped cause.

She backed away. It was suddenly all too much. The suffocating smoke. The man's ragged sobs. The blistered stump that had been the girl's arm. Her aunt's impassive face, as empty as the carved saint's head on the ground.

Asya whirled around, pushing back through the broken door. She doubled over as she stumbled across the threshold, leaning a hand against the moss-eaten stone to keep upright. Bile rose in her throat.

It had never been a child before. Despite all the hunts Tarya had taken her on, all the training lessons, Asya hadn't thought of that possibility—that it could be a little girl desperate to save her brother.

Something wet trickled from the wound on Asya's head, but she barely felt it. Her insides had been hollowed out.

All she could see were the little girl's eyes. The ghastly reflection of the Firebird in them, looming and monstrous. A creature of legend.

A creature that, one day, Asya would become.