

Late Lunessir, 1206
Port Tonderah, Tondereth Province

The fog rolled in over the harbor, spreading across the murky waters, the air entirely still. The twin moons of Tyrathenia pierced through the mists, pinpricks that offered the dimmest of light to an otherwise pitch black city.

The lantern flotillas to remember the dead had long been extinguished, ships returned to their rest. The Night of the Crossing Veils was coming to an end for all that slept this night —

All save for one.

He dreamed of a marble chamber, beneath the veiled throne, where he had ruled for more than thirty years, bringing sense and order to a wild world. His name was spoken with reverence, hushed awe, and in some places, fear.

And in this marble chamber, he saw himself laying in response upon a stone altar, dressed in stark white, his gray hair brushed back neatly, his eyes closed —and around him the room was filled with others, dressed in the mourning white colors of Tondereth.

A life well lived, a world saved from the madness and unpredictability of stark-raving mad women. If this was the premonition of his own ending, well, then it was—for once—a welcome vision.

Then the veil slid from the throne, revealing the jewel encrusted chair where no man had ruled in no living memory save the old, wrinkled crones who could recall the coronation of Alaric and Cadhla, the doomed dual monarchs who had briefly reined.

The throne had lain dormant since their deaths, since the death of their young son shortly after, since the disappearance of their infant daughter, and it was his duty to see that it remained that way, that the Council reigned over all.

The veil slipped and a man stepped forward, his face in shadows, but upon his head shone brightly the jeweled crown of Rhigwyn. A king had risen, and there were

cheers among the crowd—

Cesar Faison woke up with a gasp torn from his throat, his chest heaving, his skin damp with sweat. He threw back the bedclothes, stumbling, nearly falling out of bed, crawling towards the window. He threw open the sash, the frost-tipped wind swirling into his bedchamber, and he inhaled deep, and long.

The Night of Crossing Veils was a night for prophetic dreams, and though he had fought believing in such sorcery, there was no mistaking the horror he'd envisioned.

For thirty years, he'd ruled with an iron fist over the kingdom, bringing rational order to a sick, twisted world but he had not prepared for what would happen after him. There was no successor. No heir apparent. No one who could command the way he could.

No. Faison gripped the wooden ledge tightly, dragging himself to his feet. No. This was not a prophetic dream, not a vision of what was to come. It was a warning. He was not immortal.

It was time to prepare for the next generation — to ensure that his work would live on.

And that a king — or queen — would never reign over these lands again.

There was work to be done.

*Virellen, 1207
Shadwell, Treham Province*

The only road into Shadwell was rarely traveled this deep into winter, with snow drifts nearly three feet deep making the trek practically impossible. The hamlet forgotten by all but the traders in Tredegar and the scribes in Wymoor was an isolated one, beneath the shadow of Veilspire.

No sane man would attempt such a dangerous journey in the dead of winter, and few even went past Knell Pass this time of year.

But a man might do a lot for coin, and Valentin Cassadine had offered enough coin to make any journey seem reasonable.

Though the closer Jason Morgan drew to Shadwell, the more he found himself questioning the motives of the man who had hired him. He'd worked for the Governor-General more than a few times over the year without asking questions, and it had earned him a good reputation with the Council's man in Wymoor.

But a winter journey into the mountains, climbing towards the highest peak on the island—this might be the first contract he couldn't complete.

He came to the top of a bluff, and the village appeared for the first time, a cluster of buildings tucked into the ridge above him — one more climb. The night had fallen — though the days were short, no more than six hours of light.

Jason exhaled on a rush of frosted air when he realized the village was entirely dark — he'd lost track of the days since he'd left Tredegar. His suspicions were confirmed as he drew closer, his gloved hand curled tightly around his horse's leather reins.

Not only was the entire village completely dark, but some of the doors were veiled in cloth—a dark covering pinned to the wood.

Once he was in the village proper, he could see the candles — small, dimly lit in each window. Not enough to cast light for illumination, but an offering to the goddess, a promise of their belief and to the memory of those that had left them.

The Night of the Hollow Veil. An auspicious time to arrive — the turning of the year. The cold seeped into his bones as he stood in the street, wondering at the revelation that Shadwell openly worshiped the old ways.

Did Valentin know this? Impossible. Faison would have seized the opportunity to put him on trial, to publicly proclaim the punishment for the treasonous beliefs. And Valentin never did anything that might diminish his power or standing.

Tomorrow was enough time, Jason thought, to wonder why he'd been sent to

Shadwell on this mission. He'd find the public house — for he knew it existed, traders from Tredegar had given him the location — take a room —

And tomorrow, he would find the young woman he'd been sent to fetch — and perhaps, then he might learn why Valentin was contracting a marriage with a girl from an isolated village of heretics.

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A little less than a mile away, where the ground met the rock face that climbed up towards Veil's Spire, the cool trickle of the water pooled in a pond. It fed into one of the many rivulets that trickled around Shadwell, the source for the mighty Wyrfall that emptied out into the sea at Wymoor.

The waterfall was sacred to those who lived in the village — in the winter, though the water slowed, it never ceased rushing over the edge of the rocks into the pond, and even on the darkest of nights, the twin moons rose above, creating an ethereal shaft of light that illuminated the clear water of the pond, enough to see the rock beneath it. Next the pond, a natural formation of rocks had created a large bowl — and it was here where rituals were performed—

And where Elizabeth knelt on this night, when the year turned anew. She dipped a ceramic bowl into the pond, then filled the rock basin. She set the bowl aside, and reached for her dagger. Like all girls of the faith, she'd been gifted her daggers on the thirteenth anniversary of her birth. One small, for ritual rites, and one larger, for protection.

She dipped the tip of her dagger into the basin, then brought it to her lips. "To Isereth, I pledge, to Isereth, I promise. To Isereth, I remember. I ask you for your protection, for your guidance." The words she'd been taught from the cradle were rote spoken, and while she believed —

This year, doubt was growing in her heart.

For this was the eighth rite of the Hollow Veil since that night at Yserin, since the flames and screams and smoke and clash of steel had stolen her family, her name, her heritage.

"I know there is a reason why I have dwelt here in silence, in study, in training for all this time. But I ask you, Isereth—" She lifted her eyes to the moon. "I ask you if I have not yet sacrificed enough breath for this cause or if I will be here when the year turns again, making this pledge."

The ground beneath her was frozen, the cold sliding through up through her body, numbing her extremities, until the only heat was the hatred that burned in her heart.

"I ask you, Isereth, if I have not yet done enough to prove I am worthy for this task, show me what I have yet to do. Give me a task, and I will complete it. I pledge, Isereth." She laid the dagger in her palm, pressing the tip against the base of her thumb until a prick of blood appeared on the blade.

She then dipped the dagger back in the rock basin to cleanse it, to close the ritual. Year after year she'd hoped for an end to her an exile — but this was the first she'd asked the goddess for guidance.

Elizabeth stowed her tools in the heavy wool sack, then got to her feet. It was time to go home, sleep, and hope that somehow, it would also be last.

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He'd forgotten to pull the cloth over the window, and the blind, blinding light pulled from him from sleep.

Jason grunted, then rolled over to his feet, sitting up in the small room. The fire he'd lit before going to sleep was ashes in the hearth, the wood planks beneath his feet almost frozen.

He rose from the bed, and crossed to the washbowl resting on the stand next to the window. A small knife sat beside it, a crescent veil carved into the blade. Jason lifted the dagger, turning it over in his palm, then setting it back down.

He washed his face, cleaning out the vestiges of sleep. He'd not managed more than a few hours, but a warm bed inside four walls rather than the caverns and huts along the Feathered Pass was a welcome change, and he wouldn't mind if he had to bide a few days in the village before leaving.

He used the cloth to wipe down the rest of his travel-weary body, then dressed in the one set of clean clothes he'd put in his bags. Valentin had assured him that his task would be an easy one, but Jason had learned long ago that a good impression smoothed the way. He preferred the contracts that could be carried out with nothing more than a fist or sword, but this job called for something else.

Jason made his way down the stairs to the main room of the public house where long trench tables had been set up, a crackling fire burning in the hearth opposite a long wooden bar.

The publican stood there, wiping out a large pint glass, an unhappy expression etched in the wrinkles of his face. "So our visitor has waked. For all the time you used the bed, you could have slept in the street and saved us the trouble."

He'd roused the publican and his wife from their own warm bed, and though it was their lot in life to do just that, Jason needed information from them. He reached in his cloth bag where index tokens and crown marks mingled, and let his fingers close around a smooth slate stone.

He laid it on the counter, drew back his hand. "I came to see the healer Audrey March. Can you direct me to her dwelling?"

The publican picked up the slate stone with a scorch mark, weighed it in his beefy hand, and questions flared in his dark eyes. Jason could almost hear their echo — who was this stranger to Shadwell who carried a ledger slate stone from Tredegar? But the currency was enough to guarantee that such questions would remain silent ones.

He closed his hand around the stone, met Jason's careful gaze. "The widow lives in the cottage near the Frost Vein. Leave this inn, turn to the left and walk until there's nothing but drop — you'll see a path on the right. It will lead you there."

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Elizabeth scraped a thin layer of moss from the bark into her basket, wiping the blade of her dagger on her cloak before turning it to its sheath at her side.

She'd woken with the first light to gather the ingredients for her guardian, as she did every first morning after Hollow Veil. For they were never more potent than they were on this day. They'd be crushed and grind into one of Audrey's many tonics or salves.

Elizabeth got to her feet and let a long, slow breath, a puff of white in the cool, bright morning. Today would be like all the others that came before it, she thought. Gathering ingredients for Audrey, tending to the shrine, training in the clearing, delivering medicines to those in need, and returning home to lay her head down —

And to repeat it all again tomorrow

The cut beneath her gloved hands had been tended to, the same cut she'd made every year for seven years, a ritual that had begun to feel empty and hollow.

Time stretched out around, an unbending, unyielding circle that would keep going round and round, with no end, no change —

Unless *she* did something different.

But what could she do? Ride to Tondereth, storm the High Council, and demand justice? Travel to Wymoor, begin to shout the truth to any who would listen? She'd be dead before the words fell from her lips.

Remaining in exile might not be the answer, but neither would rash action.

She was alive, which was more than any in her bloodline could say. She was all that was left of Nevoie, a heavy burden.

Isereth had not yet answered her call, but that did not mean she would *never*. That did not mean the goddess had deserted her.

Patience. A virtue Audrey had attempted to drum into her every day for seven years. And one that Elizabeth had not yet mastered.

Maybe tomorrow.

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The two story stone cottage was set away from the rest of the village, with an outbuilding made of the same gray stone behind it, likely for livestock.

Jason tied the reins of his horse to the post at the gate, then started up the path — but before he could reach the gray, weathered door, it was opened, and a tall, elderly woman stepped out. She was reed thin, with steely gray hair tightly braided against her scalp, a pinched expression pursing her lips.

"I don't need to ask who you are. Or why you've come."

Jason exhaled in a rush of breath. "You'd be Audrey March then. The healer. I've come from Wymoor—"

"I've already told you, I know why you've come." She folded her arms, the green wool of her sleeves draping down from elbow to wrist. "How can I trust a man who would take a contract from a man like Valentin Cassadine?"

Jason arched a brow. "About as well as I can trust a woman who would take one from his as well. Or is he wrong? Were you not paid well to be guardian to your ward?"

"She's not my ward. Not any longer. She reached her majority on Crescentfall." Audrey lifted her brows. "I've discharged my oath to Valentin."

"I haven't. Do you intend to stand in my way?"

Audrey looked away, her gray eyes flickering with sadness. "What has he told you about her? Do you know why you've been sent?"

"The terms of my contract are confidential. I keep my word."

"So your loyalty is to a piece of paper?" she demanded. "Why should I be surprised that he's sent a soulless man with no conscience to take her from me?"

Jason bristled at the accusation, as if keeping his word was somehow a mark against his character. "I'll ask you again. Do you intend to stand in my way?"

"I do not." Her lips pursed again. "I might want to, but it's time for her to go. This place —" Audrey shook her head. "It's too small for her. I might not want the future Valentin has planned, but I'll trust her to know her own mind. She's waited long enough. You'll find her training in the clearing beyond those trees."

Unsure what to make of the steely-eyed guardian, Jason followed her directions and trudged along the path between the cottage and the trees. More and more questions, but like the publican, he didn't intend to ask any of them.

He'd been given a job, and he'd fulfill it. Fetch the girl, deliver her to Wymoor. Nothing more, nothing less. What did it matter what Valentin had planned? Audrey March was right. The girl was her own person. If she didn't want the marriage her family was contracting on her behalf, she could handle it.

He reached the line of trees before he heard the crunch of footsteps coming towards him — and then she stepped out from between a pair of pine trees.

She wore a heavy pale gray cloak, lined with snow hart fur. The hood had been thrown back, revealing tumbling masses of chestnut waves pinned back at her temples. She stopped, her cheeks flushed from the chill, her eyes wide when she saw him.

Jason cleared his throat. "I've been sent by Valentin Cassadin."

He didn't know what to expect — upset, disdain, protest — but he *definitely* wasn't ready when her mouth curved into a brilliant smile and her eyes sparkled.

"Finally. I've been waiting for you."