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SEEK THE TRAITOR'S SON

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**SEEK THE
TRAITOR'S
SON**

BEFORE

The man kneels in the dark and waits.

The plant before him, suspended in water by a delicate metal lattice, is a cluster of dark purple leaves drawn up and in, like a teardrop. It isn't moving, but the exarch told him to be patient, so he is. He waits until his knees ache.

Then: a creak. The sound of a bent stem.

And a shiver, right through the middle of the teardrop.

The man suppresses a gasp as the plant splits open and peels apart, the leaves unfurling all at once. Then in the center of each one, a vein of light. Of color.

It's only a plant, but the gentle pulse of its light is almost like a heartbeat.

"Are you ready for the hardest part of our journey?" he says to it, his voice gentle.

He reaches into the water to run a fingertip along one of the leaves. He checks that the lattice is secured to the tank. Then he replaces the lid, locks it down, and steps out of the room and into the main deck of the ship.

There, looming huge in the front windows, is a gate. The sight fills him with dread. He's passed through so many gates, spent more time in the Manifold than most people ever will, but still: that dread. It's primal.

A gate is a strange-looking thing. A spherical warping, almost like a soap bubble. At the edges of it he can see pieces of other universes—a streak of starlight, the sliver of a planet, or a moon, or a planetary ring. As his ship draws closer, all those pieces swirl together, as if he's going down a drain.

He wishes he'd taken a sedative.

He sits and straps himself in.

The ship passes through the threshold, and the gate in front of it splits in two. Two identical soap bubbles. Then three. Then four. The sight makes him dizzy, so he closes his eyes. The ship chimes at him when the array is complete: twelve universes, each with an identical yet distinct gate.

He's already programmed the ship for the correct one, the second from the left. Passing through that gate is punishable by execution without a

trial. It leads to the Cloistered Planet, the one that once refused the offer to join the greater order.

The Cloistered Planet is also the only safe place left. The only place where they won't look for him.

So he watches as that gate draws closer—or rather, as he draws closer to it, his ship creeping across the vast space that separates them.

When the gate is so large it seems to engulf him, he sees it: the edge of a massive planet with a bright red eye swirling along its belly. It's not his destination, just a waypoint, but still, his body trembles at its size.

The gate swallows him, and in the instant before the wormhole rips him to shreds, he screams.

Wait.” The Sword stops her before she can descend the steps.

Elegy stares at the hand on her shoulder. The Sword removes it.

“This place has been neutral ground for hundreds of years,” the Sword says. “I need your assurance that you will tread lightly.”

“‘Tread lightly?’” Elegy repeats. “I’m unarmed. What do you think I’m going to do, throw a boot at them?”

They’re about to meet their enemies, the Talusar, under a temporary ceasefire. But even if the ceasefire didn’t compel Elegy to restrain herself, she’s seen enough battlegrounds to know how foolish it is to engage with Talusar soldiers on foot. Especially when outnumbered—and the Talusar always outnumber them.

The Sword presses her already thin mouth into an even thinner line. “Six years in the army have made you rough around the edges, at best. But this is a delicate situation. So I want your word.”

The door at the bottom of the steps opens, and warmth rushes into the Sparrow. Elegy tastes dust and salt on the air. Wind kisses her cheeks, soft and prickling with particles of earth.

“You have it,” she says to the Sword.

The Sword nods, and walks on.

Elegy stretches her hand behind her, and her husband’s calloused fingers catch it. For a moment he stands at her back, and she can feel the heat of him.

“Wow, you can really feel the love between you and your mom,” Shir says into her ear. “I don’t understand why you waited so long to introduce us.”

Elegy’s laugh surprises her.

Shir’s eyes crinkle at the corners. When she first met him, she noted—with disdain—that he looked like he’d walked straight out of an old-fashioned romance designed to appeal to as many people as possible. Thick, wavy hair. Easy smile. Long eyelashes.

But she fell for him anyway. Annoying.

“Are you ready?” he asks, his thumb tracing a circle on the back of her hand.

She isn't—how can a person be “ready” to hear a prophecy?—but she nods, and together they descend to the salt flat, where the Sword waits for them.

She doesn't think of the Sword as her mother, though that's who she is. Elegy is the result of a transaction. The Sword was required to have two children, one to inherit her title and the other as a spare. Elegy is that spare. Her father applied for the privilege of contributing his genes to her, and once he was approved, he was given the lifelong job of protecting and instructing her. Growing up, she visited her mother and half sister once a year to learn what her father couldn't teach her, but otherwise, she only had one parent . . . and it wasn't the woman in front of her.

Her hand trails behind her to keep hold of Shir's. The salt flat is wide and white and surrounded by mountains. It's patterned with hexagons the size of dinner plates, like the scaly skin of a mythical creature. She understands why the Cenobium is here—it feels like a holy place.

She lets go of Shir's hand and crouches to press her palms to the earth. The salt is hard but fragile, cracking under pressure. It flakes onto her palms and stings the little cuts on her cuticles.

Behind the Sword is a lonely building of flat, circular stone with a vaulted wooden roof: the Cenobium, which houses the augurs. The ones who summoned her here.

Elegy's first reaction to the summons was a snort. *I'm not a dog*, she said to Shir. *They can't just call my name and expect me to come running.*

But the augurs' foretellings are something even she can't ignore. That they perceive the future isn't a matter of faith; it's a biological reality produced by the Fever in their blood. And they don't issue a summons for anything less than world-shaking prophecy.

Movement catches Elegy's attention in the land behind the Cenobium. Approaching the structure from the north is a line of people on horseback, shimmering in the desert heat. Even from here, she can tell their clothes are too heavy for the hot sun. They're not used to the desert.

Fear and rage war inside her at the sight of them. They're Talusar. The augurs summoned them, too.

“Did the augurs say anything else about what to expect?” she asks the Sword.

“No.” The Sword sighs. “As usual, they were irritatingly vague.”

“And we're sure they're trustworthy? This isn't an ambush?”

“They've never given us a reason not to trust them, in over a hundred years.”

She touches the mask that covers her nose and mouth, a standard pre-

caution for anyone confronting the Talusar. “They’re Fevered. Isn’t that enough of a reason?”

The Talusar empire stretches across the entire planet—the temperate regions, anyway—and what unites its people is Fever. The Fever is highly infectious, and it kills everyone who contracts it—every single person.

Half of them stay dead.

The other half come back to life, two or three days later. Their bodies regenerated. Possessing special gifts.

As a result, they’ve come to worship the Fever as a god, and it’s hard to blame them. But Elegy’s people, the people of Cedre, view the Fever as what it is: a virus that devastated their planet’s population; a virus whose fifty-fifty survival rate isn’t worth the risk, regardless of the power it offers. So from the start, Cedre sealed itself off from the Fever. To the Talusar, this is denial of God, the height of blasphemy. To Cedre, it’s simply survival.

Shir’s hand is steady between Elegy’s shoulders as they walk to the Cenobium’s front doors. It’s larger up close than it looked from afar. The biggest part of the building, which she assumes is the sanctuary, is spool-shaped, with walls of interlocking stones and a slatted roof made of wood. Another part extends east, a line in the salt—living quarters, if she had to guess. Even augurs need sleep and food.

Waiting at the set of double doors in the sanctuary is a pale older woman with her gray hair in a tight knot. She’s dressed in black robes that are stained gray at the bottom from the salt. Her feet are bare.

“Hello,” she says, once they’re close enough to hear her. “Welcome to the Cenobium. My name is Nerina, head attendant to the augurs.”

Elegy wonders, as she often does when confronted with the Talusar, what this woman’s gift is. Most of the infected have the gift of retrocognition, which means they perceive the past, not the future—as near in the past as a few seconds ago, and as distant as a millennium. Elegy’s even heard talk of Fevered people who can erase memories, seal them off, or warp them. But the rarest gift of all that the Fever produces is the opposite: precognition, the ability to see the future. Only ten people alive have it, and she’s about to meet them.

“This is your daughter?” Nerina asks the Sword. She’s speaking Talusar. Her voice makes the language sound as delicate as a song.

“Yes,” the Sword replies.

Elegy tenses at the description of herself as “daughter,” but she’s not petty enough to argue. Nerina looks right through Shir without greeting him. If he’s bothered, he doesn’t let on.

"She looks nothing like you," Nerina says, after looking Elegy over. "Her name is Elegy? Was her arrival in the world a lament?"

"Maybe," Elegy replies, also in Talusar. "I've never asked."

Nerina looks surprised, and then laughs. Elegy can feel the Sword staring at her.

"Forgive my rudeness," Nerina says. "Not many Cedrae speak Talusar. I just assumed you wouldn't."

She leads them into a dim, plain antechamber. Lanterns hang from the walls, and Elegy stares at the flame flickering behind the glass. No electricity here. The energy fields emitted by Fever-changed people tend to interfere with it.

"Wait here a moment. I'll find out if they're ready." Nerina points to a line of slippers near the door. "There are no shoes allowed in the sanctuary. Only the two of you are permitted inside."

Elegy glances at the Sword, who kneels to untie her boots. They're fine shoes, polished, not sensible for walking across salt. The Sword is from Cedre Station, so unlike Elegy, she's not used to walking on the ground.

"I'll just wait out here," Shir says. Elegy didn't really expect him to be able to come into the sanctuary with her. But it's better to have him close.

"Obviously," the Sword replies, without looking at him.

Elegy makes a face at Shir, who makes an identical one back. Stifling a laugh, she undoes her own shoelaces and strips off her mismatched socks, one striped and the other covered in little hearts. She stuffs them into the toes of her boots and stands. The stone is cold under her heels. She ignores the shiver that moves through her at the thought of what waits past the sanctuary doors.

The Sword is staring at her. She opens her mouth to speak, then hesitates, and then does.

"You weren't a lament," she says.

Elegy stiffens.

"We thought we might lose you, your father and I. So. When you came, and you were healthy and strong . . . you brought joy with you, and relief."

It seems like she's going to say more, but Nerina returns with an ornate gold thurible at the end of a long golden chain. Smoke spills from its decorative openings.

"Stand together, please," Nerina says. "I need to prepare you."

"Prepare us for what, exactly?" Elegy says.

"To receive the future." Nerina gives her the gentle smile of an adult being patient with a child. "It requires fortitude. You'll see."

Elegy is about to object when the Sword pinches her arm.

The Sword stands beside Elegy so their shoulders are together, their arms brushing. They're the same height. Nerina swings the ball so the smoke spills out of it in long, jagged lines that wrap around Elegy and the Sword. It smells like sage and something greener, like eucalyptus.

Nerina finishes, and opens one of the doors to the sanctuary with her shoulder. Just before following her, Elegy looks back at Shir. He gives her a lopsided smile.

"I'll be right here," he says.

Elegy's mouth is dry. She follows the Sword through the sanctuary door.

Her steps falter. The room is bigger than she expected, and circular, the outer wall made of thousands of small stones arranged in a spiral from bottom to top. The ceiling is wooden, hundreds of narrow planks converging in the center at a round window that lets in a shaft of light. The floor is white-dusted stone, as cold as the antechamber, and in the center of the room is a mirror with the light from the skylight sparkling on its surface.

It's as big as a pond, and fragmented, so it reflects bits and pieces rather than whole images: a wisp of cloud, a wink of sunlight, a sliver of blue.

Standing in a semicircle around that mirror are ten people in dove-gray robes with bands of white across their throats. The augurs.

The Sword ushers Elegy forward, toward the augurs and the future she doesn't want to know.

The augurs are all different ages, the oldest a straight-backed elderly woman, the youngest a teenager with soft, pink cheeks. All their eyes lock on her the moment she walks in, and the effect is unsettling. Those eyes see more than hers ever will.

"Go to the center of the mirror," Nerina says to her.

Elegy glances at the Sword. She may not like the woman whose body formed hers, but in this strange place, she's Elegy's only ally. The Sword nods, and Elegy walks past Nerina to the edge of the mirror. It looks fragile, like her weight will break it, but when she steps on it, it feels solid. She can see herself reflected upward at a dozen different angles, in one a downturned mouth, in another a fidgeting hand. She walks to what looks like the center, the window showing blue sky above her. Sunlight stretches across her body. At once, all the augurs step forward and look at the reflections of her in the glass.

"You see," the youngest one says, pointing at one of them. "It *is* her."

"That's the faulty logic of the young," one of the others replies. "One piece of evidence and you say it's certain."

“Enough,” the oldest augur says. “We’ve decided on a course of action, and no debate will change it.”

The other augurs nod, and fall silent again.

The oldest augur goes on: “Elegy Rosyk. Welcome.”

“That’s not my name,” Elegy says, before she can stop herself. “Rosyk” is the Sword’s name—Elegy goes by her father’s, which is “Ahn.”

“It’s not your name yet,” the oldest augur says. “But we can hardly be expected to keep track of ‘yet.’”

“‘Yet’ is meaningless,” one of the others says, rolling his eyes. “Everything is *was*.”

Elegy doesn’t get a chance to puzzle over this bit of nonsense. A heavy door closes somewhere deep in the building. There are voices. Scuffling. A moment later another black-robed attendant, like Nerina, comes into the room from the door behind the augurs, identical to the one Elegy used to come in. She’s followed by a Talusar woman.

The woman is tall. The tallest woman Elegy has ever seen. Her feet are bare, but she wears armor in the pattern of a thousand tiny copper plates layered over each other to look like feathers. Her dirty-blond hair is braided into a crown around her pale face, which has an aristocratic look to it, her nose hooked and her mouth pinched.

“Stand beside her,” the woman’s attendant says to her, gesturing toward Elegy.

The woman looks Elegy over with a mixture of contempt and curiosity. She steps onto the mirror, and Elegy shifts to put more space between them.

“Rava Vidar,” the oldest augur says. “Welcome.”

Elegy chokes, and tries to disguise it by coughing. The Sword told her the Talusar would be here, but she didn’t mention one of them would be *Rava Vidar*, the Butcher of Calgara.

The Talusar empire spans their planet under the headship of the emperor, Icar Talus. Rava is his grandniece. Her mother, Icar’s niece, is the most famous of the family members the emperor has installed to reign over his territories, known for her exacting standards and her fatalistic acceptance of brutality.

Rava is her mother’s enforcer and her right hand. It’s a job she’s had from a young age, young enough that all of Cedre made jokes about the child general. (*What does the Talusar general say to her first in command?* someone would ask. And the answer: *Nothing, she just learned her first word last week!*) But Rava attained early victories against Fever-changed rebels from the north, and then—Calgara. She invaded Cedre’s colony

there, infected its residents with Fever, and turned the cold war between the Talusar and the Cedrae boiling hot.

The jokes about Rava Vidar's age didn't sound so funny after that.

"It's only right that you should be introduced," one of the augurs, a bearded man with round spectacles, says. "Rava Vidar, daughter of Ileth Vidar, this is Elegy Rosyk, daughter of the Sword of Cedre."

Elegy sees herself through Rava's eyes: a woman not much younger than she is, who stands a head shorter than her, in worn black pants and a rumpled shirt, her face covered to protect against Fever. Compared to this blond titan in febra armor, she's nothing and no one. Daughter of the Sword, what a joke.

"I'm sure you're both wondering why you're here," the oldest augur says. "Or perhaps . . . why the other is here."

Rava and Elegy don't look at each other.

"There is a prophecy," the youngest augur says, his pink cheeks even pinker than before. "It might concern you—" He gestures to Rava. "And it might concern you—" He gestures to Elegy. "It will decide the fate of one of your nations, or the other."

"It . . . *might* concern me?" Elegy says, her voice muffled by the mask.

"Show some respect," Rava says to her. "Cedre swine."

It doesn't occur to Elegy to be angry. She just looks at Rava with interest. She's never been called "swine" before.

"Some augurs deal in words, and some in images," the oldest augur says, as if neither of them spoke. "Some see few visions, and see them clearly, and some see many, and see them vaguely. We work together to arrive at the path we believe to be the most likely, but it's not an exact science. And in this situation, we have reached an impasse. That is partly because of the relationship between you."

The oldest augur steps onto the mirror. Her skin is freckled across her nose. There are creases around her mouth, as if she's spent a lifetime keeping words in. The end of her robe trails on the glass. She stops in front of Elegy and Rava.

"The two of you share a two-pronged lineage, of which each of you is the last living descendant," she says. "This prophecy trickles down that bloodline—all the way down to Ileth Vidar, and her many-generations-removed cousin: Keen Ahn."

Elegy thinks of her father, Keen Ahn, slouched over his morning coffee, his hair sticking straight up as he checks her math homework. The memory aches. The thought of him being related to Rava Vidar even distantly is laughable. But the augur doesn't appear to be joking.

“What does this prophecy say?” Rava asks.

The augur smiles.

“That is where our solution to this problem comes in,” she says. “This prophecy concerns the future of your respective people. It assures victory for one of you over the other—and through you, victory for your people over the other’s.”

Elegy feels a laugh bubbling up inside her, but it’s not a mirthful one. It’s all panic, all confusion. *Victory for one of you over the other*. She can’t look at Rava Vidar, the titan, the warrior, the legend. Elegy and her mismatched socks are no match for her. *Victory for your people over the other’s*. Victory for the Cedrae over the Talusar isn’t something she’s ever imagined. She thought they were fighting to survive, fighting to maintain the little corners of this planet that they occupy—not fighting to *win*.

The augur goes on: “But this prophecy is . . . a storm. Chaos and confusion. Tumult and rupture. And we have devised a way to make it settle.” She looks back at the other augurs, her body angling away from Elegy so she can’t see the woman’s face. “Half of us believe it speaks of one of you, and half of us believe it speaks of the other. So we will divide and reveal it to you separately. The questions you ask, and the guidance you receive, will force the prophecy in one direction or the other. But you will not know which—not until it’s too late to change anything. By the time you leave this place in peace, the wheels of fate will already be in motion. One of you will triumph, and the other will not. The Cedrae will be victorious . . . or the Talusar.”

The augur looks from Rava to Elegy.

“We will proceed immediately. Yes?”

“Yes,” Rava says.

And though all Elegy wants to do is refuse, run out the double doors to the salt flat, and leave this place far behind her, she knows that’s not an option.

“Yes,” she answers.

2

Elegy sits with the Sword in the antechamber, on a bench that makes her back ache. Salt prickles on her palms. At the Sword's request, Shir stands just outside. The shadow of his boots interrupts the line of light under the door.

When Elegy was a child, a blast from a nearby furnace blew a hole in one of the buildings in the market. Chaos erupted in the street and she lost track of her father. So she crawled to the nearest market stall, climbed it, and stood on top of the awning to look for him in the crowd. He spotted her crouched there over a row of paper umbrellas.

She remembers that now, and she tries to find that feeling—to climb *above* this somehow for a better vantage point. Instead the words of the augur rattle in her head. *This prophecy is a storm.* Standing within reach of Rava Vidar, more legend than woman, more monster than Talusar. *One of you will triumph, and the other will not.*

"I never wanted children," the Sword—her *mother*—says, and Elegy chokes a little.

"The fun never stops when you're around, you know that?" she says.

"I don't say this to wound you." The Sword rubs beneath her eye socket where the mask digs into her cheekbone. "I say it to explain. I was destined from birth to be the Sword; the Cedre founders believed that having the role of protector be inherited would serve us better than leaving the office of Sword vulnerable to eager campaigners. And I was suited for it, this guardianship of my people, but I wasn't suited for every part of it."

Elegy doesn't want to hear this. She's comfortable with what she is and who she is: her work with the search and rescue team, her rank as primary, her marriage, their little apartment in Losan that they barely spend any time in, and a specter of a mother she never has to deal with. She doesn't want the Sword to come any closer to that life.

"I was told to produce at least two children. I chose Larke's father as a clever bit of social maneuvering, and I chose your father because I believed he would be a capable teacher and protector, and so I had two daughters, just as I was told to." The Sword clears her throat a little. "No one expected

me to struggle with it, because despite all the progress we've made toward equality, people still view women as naturally maternal and I am a woman. Yet I did struggle with it. I did."

The Sword's mouth twists, and Elegy feels sympathy, despite herself. Cedre encourages its citizens to have children, if they can, but it's not compulsory. She never thought about the fact that her mother didn't have another option.

"But despite my various failures," the Sword goes on, "both my daughters have grown up capable. So it all turned out well, somehow. My point in telling you this is to explain that fate doesn't require us to be well-suited to our roles . . . it simply requires us to fill them."

Cedre is supposed to be a nation of choices. The choice of Quorum leaders. The choice to quarantine from Fever rather than surrender to it. The choice to speak whatever language you wish. "Fate" isn't something Elegy has ever thought about . . . but now it's a hand wrapped around her throat.

"I'm supposed to ask them questions," Elegy says, and there's a note of panic in her voice that she wishes she could get rid of. "And the questions I choose will affect the future of Cedre. How am I supposed to know which ones to ask?"

"That's my point, I suppose," the Sword says. "Simply ask the questions that occur to you. Trust that you will be what you're required to be, in this role you didn't choose."

Elegy laughs again. "You make it sound so easy."

"It's the only wisdom I can offer you," the Sword says, a little gruff.

Elegy leans her head back against the stone. "Well . . . I guess I'll take it."



When Nerina invites her back into the sanctuary, it's empty. The augurs have disappeared into some rear chamber, and Rava Vidar is gone.

Elegy walks to the edge of the mirror and looks at her reflection in one of the larger facets. It's strange that all her life, she thought that if some important role were to fall in her lap, it would come through her mother, not her father. But if the augur is to be believed, it's her father's bloodline that brought her here. Some fine, breakable thread connects her to Rava Vidar.

Keen's eyes stare back at her, Keen's downturned mouth.

She steps onto the mirror again, disrupting her reflection, and walks to its center. With the sky reflected back at her, it almost looks like she's floating. She tips her head back to look at the window above.

The door opposite her opens for the augurs. She's curious to see which ones will come in—which ones believe in her, and not Rava. The oldest is the first to enter; the youngest, with his bright cheeks, is last. There are three others: one with a shaved head, one who's at least a head shorter than any of the others, and one with black hair down to her waist. They stand in a semicircle around the edge of the mirror, fanned out so she can't look at them all at once.

The oldest augur clears her throat.

"I saw a vision." She takes a piece of what appears to be chalk from the pocket of her robes, then bends down to draw a horizontal line on the stone floor in front of her.



"I saw a great lever, with the Cedrae on one side and the Talusar on the other," she says. Beneath the horizontal line, right at its center, she draws a triangle.



"And beneath it, a fulcrum that determines which side rises and which side falls."

The augur tucks the chalk back into her pocket. Elogy recognizes the drawing from her brief study of physics. It's a seesaw, basically, and it balances on a single support. In this case, that support is a triangle the augur called a fulcrum.

"She who moves the fulcrum," the oldest augur says, "controls the outcome."

Before Elogy can process that statement, the youngest augur steps forward.

"When I saw the great lever, I received words," he says. "I heard that the three points of the fulcrum are three voices in harmony." He kneels before the drawing the oldest augur made, and touches a finger to each point of the fulcrum's triangle as he speaks. *Three voices in harmony*. "She who moves the fulcrum controls the outcome."

Elogy's mind is blank. She doesn't understand this image, this abstraction. Moving a fulcrum that's made up of three voices—it's nonsense. It's meaningless.

The augur with the shaved head steps forward. "I saw a vision of a sign