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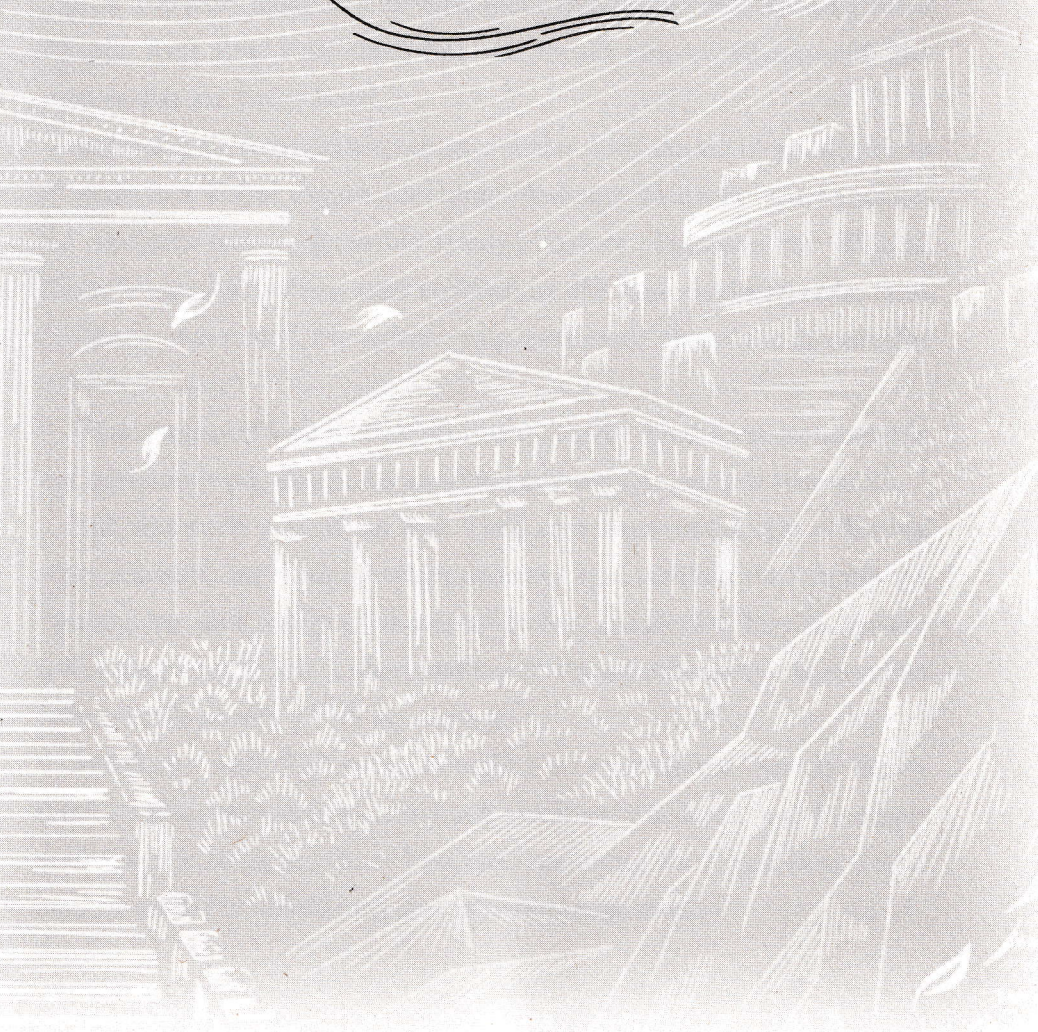
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PART I
LOYAL



Ruh

Ruhyan Veturius was dead. He knew this because a monster of hunger and shadows had ripped his heart out.

For a few moments, his spirit drifted above his body and he saw the horror of what the monster had done. Of what Ilar—whom he thought was his friend—*allowed* the monster to do.

Ilar had come to his Tribe months ago. Asked for help finding a story. Listened to Ruh, laughed with him, made him feel special, like they were friends. And after Ruh aided her, she repaid him by allying with the demon that ate Ruh's heart.

Suddenly, he'd found himself in a forest with thick old-growth trees as wide as a Tribal wagon was long. He knew where he was based on his mother's stories, from his family's history. This was the Waiting Place, where lost spirits were soothed by the Ban al-Mauth—the Soul Catchers—who took the spirits' pain and eased them into a peaceful afterlife.

Wrath suffused Ruh at the injustice of it, the kind he sometimes felt but never showed. Anger, his ama had advised him, eats at your soul.

Ruh was never sure about that. He'd seen anger in the eyes of his big sister Karinna, particularly when someone had insulted their family or doubted her skill. Sufiyan, his oldest brother, and Zuriya, his other sister, rolled their eyes at Kari's *overreactions*. Ama would sigh and worry. His father would shrug. *That's how she is*.

And Ruh—well, Ruh never thought Kari overreacted. And he didn't think he was overreacting now. He'd just been murdered, and his anger grew like the chick of a Karka vulture, sprouting claws and beak and a need to rend. He would hurt Ilar, take his vengeance—

All this passed through his mind in a second as a familiar white-haired, scar-faced figure appeared.

Nan. His grandmother was the Bani al-Mauth, one of the Soul Catchers of the Waiting Place.

“Welcome to the Waiting Place, the realm of ghosts,” she said in her low rasp. “I am the Soul Catcher, and I—” She peered at him as she got closer and gasped. “*Ruh?*”

“My heart got eaten, Nan.” Ruh’s voice was small. “I—I—Aba and Ama will be so sad—”

“Oh no—no—” Nan glanced around, impatient, as if waiting for someone to speak. “This isn’t right, is it?”

No, a low voice responded, sounding like a storm that had decided it had something to communicate to an inconsequential human. *Go, Bani al-Mauth.*

Ruh had never heard that voice before, but again, he knew who it was because of Ama’s stories. Mauth, the power that lay at the heart of the Waiting Place, the source of all magic in this world. Ruh stared at Nan, gape-mouthed, the storyteller in him marveling that he’d heard Mauth, *Mauth*, who spoke to so few.

“Your spirit chose a good spot to arrive, lad,” Nan said. “Stay here. Don’t move. Don’t talk to any other Soul Catchers, though I doubt they’ll come this way. They’re all jinn, and jinn can’t stand this place. I’ll be back.”

She moved in a blur, her magic lending her speed, and was gone. But Ruh didn’t understand what she thought she could do. He was dead.

He glanced around the forest. He’d come to the Waiting Place before, though he always stayed at Nan’s cabin. He liked it there. She had lots of fat-knitted blankets and hot cups of sweet pink tea.

The forest around him, on the other hand, felt cold and heavy with the stain of some old memory. “H-hello?” he called out.

He was met with silence at first. Briefly, he thought he heard voices.



Children, like him, whispering, crying. Then the sounds quieted.

He wasn't sure how long he waited for Nan. Time warped, like thread pulled too tight on a loom. Ruh couldn't see if it was early in the day or late. The light never seemed to change.

When Nan did return, it had been hours but also no time at all. Her golden-brown face looked paler than normal. She'd changed her clothes.

"Well, lad, seems you've gone and got your heart ripped out by a creature calling itself Div. Though I don't think that's her real name." Nan's hand settled on the dagger at her waist, as if she'd like to use it. "It shouldn't be me passing you to the other side, and it won't be."

"Why not?"

"It's not your time."

"Death is death, you taught us. Even if we don't want it to be," Ruh reminded her. "Will you let me say goodbye to my parents? Aba will be angry. He'll want vengeance." Ruh paused, his anger seeming to burn his insides, even though he was a ghost. "I want vengeance too."

"You and me both, lad. But no, I won't be letting your parents say goodbye. Your mother is the reason we're in this mess."

Ruh bristled. "Don't you go blaming Ama!"

"Why not?" Nan snapped. "It's her fault. She was the one who released the monster that killed you."

"That's not true. Ilar did," Ruh said, but he wasn't quite sure. Nan sighed.

"Ilar only picked up a book your mother wrote," Nan said. "After she became a Kehanni, Laia was out in the desert looking for stories. Div spoke to her, for she is a corrupt and ancient magic and had been waiting for a sympathetic audience. Your mother, pure soul that she is, swallowed the creature's sad tale. Set it down in books."

"What was the story?"

"Ha! I'm not fool enough to tell it. As it is, the books corrupted any

tale-spinner who read them. Duranis, they called themselves. Chaos storytellers. In a way, your ama was the first.”

“But—but Ama doesn’t eat children,” Ruh said, horrified, and then considered. “Does she?”

“Don’t be stupid, boy, of course she doesn’t,” Nan said. “Your ama was safe from the corruption of Div’s tale because Mauth protects her bloodline. A little gift from him for all she sacrificed to save our world when she battled the Nightbringer twenty years ago. But no one else who read the tale was safe. Eventually, Tribe Saif’s old Kehanni had the books destroyed. But one must have escaped.”

“The one Ilar had.”

“Yes. Div manipulated that girl through the last book. Got Ilar to bring her blood. I suspect it was blood that sealed Div in, so blood allowed her to escape. Yours, in this case.”

“Why didn’t you stop Ama telling the story in the first place?” Ruh crossed his arms, glaring at Nan.

“Because I can’t interfere unless Mauth tells me to,” Nan said. “Which he hasn’t done in the twenty years I’ve been the Bani al-Mauth. Until now.” Nan looked at Ruh like he was a particularly irritating puzzle box. “Sometimes, lad, something happens that is so terrible it twists the world in a way it shouldn’t be twisted. Your death—it shouldn’t have happened. Mauth had other plans for you.”

The boy must fix this, Bani al-Mauth, that deep, earth-rumbling voice came again.

“He’s ten, you great brute. And dead. How is he supposed to fix it?”

He sees what will come. He dreams. But he does not understand this, yet. I will teach him—though there will be a cost. He must come to the Owa Khel.

Ruh cringed; he did not want to go there. The Owa Khel was where the Soul Catchers threw all the pain and suffering from lost spirits. It

was Mauth's domain. He ruled it and kept every horrid feeling there from bleeding into the human realm.

"That's a wretched place to send a child, even if he is dead," Nan said. "Teach him here. You've taught me, and skies know I'm a terrible student. The boy will learn quickly."

He is not yet meant for death. But if he remains, the jinn will sense him. They will insist he be passed on.

"Tell them you don't want him passed on. You're always bossing me around."

And what will I say to them of their own children, Bani al-Mauth? Those who were so cruelly murdered on the very ground you stand upon? What will I say when they ask why I did not bring those children back?

Nan sighed in defeat. "What do I do with the, ah—" She shot a quick look at Ruh. "With his—"

"You can say *body*, Nan," Ruh said. "I'm not a baby."

Bring it here. The jinn do not come here. I will nourish it. When it is time to retrieve it, I will tell you.

"Why don't the jinn come here?" Ruh said.

Nan frowned. "Weren't you listening? This is where their children were slaughtered. All of them. A thousand little flames quenched, all at once. Murdered by humans who were jealous of their power."

Ruh nodded, for the story of the jinn was the first one his mother told as a Kehanni, and the first story her children ever heard. The jinn children had been escaping the great war between humans and jinn. But humans had betrayed them and killed them all in one horrible night.

"Enough old tales," Nan said. "Mauth says you're to go to the Owa Khel. That is where I must take you." She paused, and her blue eyes softened as they did only for her grandchildren. "I think you can say no, if you wish, child. I—I can pass you on. He cannot *make* you stay. You

may be a spirit, but you still have a choice. You can rest if you wish.”

It would be nice to rest, for Ruh was weary without his heart.

But he thought of Ilar. Of how he had cared for her and helped her, treated her like family. He thought of how he had trusted her, how foolish he was for doing so. And of how badly she’d betrayed him.

He thought of how his parents and siblings would mourn him. How Karinna and Sufiyan would blame themselves.

“I want vengeance more than rest, Nan,” he whispered.

“Well, if I wasn’t sure you were my grandson,” she said, “I certainly am now. Come on, then, lad.” She offered her hand, sadness flashing across her face. “Walk with me into the dark.”

Quil

Quil Farrar had missed many things about the Empire. The raucous markets and warm summers. The majestic architecture and wealth of sculptures and murals.

But he did not miss the regular stream of people trying to kill him.

Though, to be fair, the raider who currently had Quil in a headlock didn't appear to have specifically targeted him. Nighttime in the Serran Mountain Range was stygian, and Quil's face was covered. The man was a scavenger, hunting the mountains for easy pickings along with the other members of his raiding party. He likely had no idea that it was the crown prince of the Empire he was attempting to choke to death.

Fortunately, this killer wasn't very skilled. The ale he stank of might have had something to do with that. A vicious elbow to the groin loosened the raider's grip. Quil ducked away, drew his scim, and would have shoved it in the man's back.

If his magic hadn't flared.

An image passed through Quil's mind: the raider, crouched at a river-side next to a boy with the same wild blond hair as him. His son, perhaps, or younger brother.

The raider's gentle expression in the memory was so incongruous with the grimace of rage he wore now that Quil paused, leaving himself open to a staggering punch to the jaw. *Stupid!*

Quil didn't bleeding have time for a fistfight with a barbarian brute. By now, he was meant to be at a Kegari base farther up the mountain, sabotaging his enemies while his companions destroyed a field full of ordnance.

The next time the man threw a punch, Quil sidestepped and tore his scim across his belly. The raider groaned and collapsed, dead.

“You hesitated,” a voice said. Aunt Hel, in black fatigues and dented armor, her scim unsheathed and gleaming with blood in the strange pink moonlight. As ever, her crown braid was impeccable.

“My magic. Wasn’t expecting it,” Quil said. Seeing memories, whether by touching an object or looking into someone, struck Quil as forbidden. A violation of sorts.

“You must use it if you wish to control it, Quil,” she said. “Magic doesn’t like to be chained.”

The words were an eerie echo of Quil’s dreams of late, in which he often found himself in a dark, circular cave with his young friend Ruhyan Veturius, murdered nearly two years ago now.

Help me, Quil. Use your magic, Ruh would say in the dreams. *Chaining it is against its nature.*

The same whisper to Quil night after night, a haunting he couldn’t shake.

He forced the dreams—and the magic—from his mind, peering into the shadows around him for other threats. Beside him, Aunt Hel knelt, wiping her scim on the dead man’s clothes.

“Another vulture,” she said of the man. “Picking at what’s left of us.”

Aunt Hel spoke without bitterness. Her cold practicality was armor and shield and second skin. Her affect used to frustrate Quil. Now it was a comfort because it still existed in this world. She was here. And beneath her cool exterior, her hatred of the Kegari and her wrath at their destruction of the Empire burned as hot as his own.

“Quil, Empress.” Tas, Quil’s oldest friend, emerged from the blue pines surrounding them, followed by three Empire legionnaires. “Sufiyan and Elias took out the last of the raiders, but the Kegari base isn’t far. The sky-rats will send someone to investigate. Let’s move.”

They ran swiftly after Tas, for their failure would be a catastrophe. In



the city of Serra, which Quil and Aunt Hel had managed to wrest back from Kegari control only two months earlier, a hidden Imperial smithy held the key to defeating their enemy for good: Ikfa, a rare and notoriously finicky metal that could neutralize Kegari magic.

And a few days ago, Spiro Teluman, the Empire's greatest blacksmith, had figured out the secret to working it.

I only need time, my prince, he'd told Quil. A few weeks and we'll have weapons to counter Kegari magic and their accursed aircraft.

Spiro's confidence awakened the first stirrings of hope in Quil since the war began, but within a few hours of Spiro's news, Musa of Adisa had sent a message. Musa, the former ambassador of Marinn, was Aunt Hel's spymaster now. One of his sources warned of a Kegari air base high up in the Serran Range. It was packed with ordnance and perfectly positioned to wipe the secret smithy—and the rest of the city of Serra—off the map.

As the terrain grew steeper, their progress slowed. Sufiyan and his father, Elias, appeared out of the woods. Elias murmured a greeting. Quil tried to hide his glower. He had little to say to the big man.

Sufiyan, meanwhile, handed Quil a small pot. "That's going to be a heinous bruise." He nodded to Quil's jaw, wincing. "Put this on it tonight. Will keep you from looking even uglier than normal."

"You're very solicitous," Quil said. "Might this have anything to do with Arelia's threat?"

"That she'd put sand vipers in my laundry if I didn't bring you back in one piece? Possibly." A long pause. "How would she even catch them?"

"Knowing her, she already has." Quil grinned. "Better hope nothing happens to me up there."

Ahead of them, Tas stopped, gesturing above. Their path led them near the ruins of an old fort, through open terrain. But a fleet of six Kegari Sails flew overhead, no doubt looking for whoever had laid waste to the raiders.

Quil tapped his boot impatiently as they waited. *Those odious Sails*. The sky-rats had used them to decimate Navium, Silas, Sadh, and Nur. Tens of thousands of Empire citizens were dead. Millions had fled to the few safe havens—the Bhuth badlands, Estium, Delphinium, and Tiborum—all of which were overcrowded and running low on food and supplies. The southern settlements now crawled with pirates. The countryside was infested with Karkaun raiding parties.

The Empire was on its knees because of those Sails. And with the resurrection of the Kegari leader Aiz bet-Dafra, their enemy had only grown bolder while the Empire flailed.

She shouldn't be alive. Quil watched Sufiyan stab Aiz again and again. No one could survive that. And yet Aiz had. Quil first worried that perhaps Div, the creature who had given Aiz her power, had survived too.

But when Elias hired Sirsha to kill Div, their deal created an oath coin. Elias's oath coin had disappeared from the chain around his neck, which meant the oath was fulfilled. Div was dead.

But Sirsha . . .

Quil grasped at the coin he wore at his own throat. It was an Adah coin, a physical manifestation of their bond. For Adah meant *soul half*; that's what Sirsha was to Quil.

Other than the hairpins he'd nicked from her, the coin was the only connection he had to Sirsha. He didn't know if she was alive or dead or worse. When he touched the coin, all he felt was a weighty chill.

"Move," Tas said, for the Sails had passed. "Go—quickly now."

A flower moon flared through heavy clouds as they passed the fort, giving the stones an ethereal appearance, hiding the worst of the rot and decay. As Quil eyed it, a shiver crept up his back, as if he were being watched. But when he scanned the woods behind him, they were empty.

"Nephew." Aunt Hel dropped back to jog beside Quil. Her scent washed over him, crisp like a winter morning.



"Are you all right to pair up with Elias for the mission?" Aunt Hel said.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

The Empress snorted. "Perhaps because every time you look at him, I think his skin is going to peel off. Not that I blame you. I've certainly wanted to punch Elias a time or two—"

"Or ten." Quil offered.

"Or twenty," Aunt Hel said. "You've a right to be angry, from what you've told me. But I do think you should talk."

"By *talk*, do you mean grab a scim and sort it out on a field?"

Aunt Hel glanced at him askance. "Of course," she said. "You didn't think I meant . . ." She gestured vaguely at Quil's face. "Speaking with mouths? What good would that do?"

She smiled, a rare enough sight that Quil found himself smiling back. Her pale blue eyes met his, and there was an openness within that he last remembered from childhood. A softness that was a gift, for she showed it to so few.

Her gaze fell to the Adah coin at his throat, and her face grew sad. "Anything?"

"No," Quil said. He'd wondered if Aunt Hel would judge him for falling in love with Sirsha—especially when his first love, Aiz bet-Dafra, had ended up being a two-faced, murderous snake.

But when he told Aunt Hel that Sirsha had disappeared after defeating Div, she'd taken his hands, stricken. *Oh, Quil*, she'd said. *Oh no*.

Quil could almost see Sirsha. Smell her. Feel her palms on his chest, the burn of her regard, the secrets behind her smiles. He could hear the many shades of her laugh, low and mocking, high and joyous.

Just days ago, he'd called out to her. *Sirsha*. The coin had warmed, a barely perceptible heat, and he heard a voice. *Her* voice.

Quil.

His heart had leapt. But he'd been imagining things.

Now there was only the trail before him. Distantly, thunder rumbled. The moon faded as rain clouds overtook the sky.

"I wish I knew if she lived," he said to Aunt Hel, turning the coin over in his fingers, the finely etched lines catching on his calluses.

"Have hope," Aunt Hel said. "Sirsha is a survivor. Your paths have diverged, but it might not be forever." Aunt Hel met his gaze, her own hard and sober. The Empress once more. "Focus on the now, Quil. Millions of lives depend on our success."

"Sst." Tas silenced them, and the group crouched in a stand of pines, watching an immense Battle Sail pass above the treetops, its metal fletching catching the fading moonlight.

"We'll meet you at the waypoint," Tas said. "Try not to die." He, Sufiyan, and the three legionnaires disappeared into the forest as thunder rumbled again and lightning flashed. A slow drizzle descended.

Quil groaned. He knew the Serran Range well, having grown up fishing its clear green rivers and hunting along its rocky spires. The storms were as swift and vicious as a jackal's temper. In a quarter hour, their clothing would be soaked through.

After Aunt Hel nodded her goodbye and faded into the rain, Quil looked sidelong at Elias. The big man shifted his stance.

"Quil," Elias began. "I know you're angr—"

"Let's go."

Surprise and hurt mingled on Elias's face. *Good*, Quil thought.

He wanted to believe that Elias didn't understand the cruelty of what he'd asked of Sirsha. That he didn't realize the binding oath would force her to hunt for Ruh's killer at the expense of all else. But Elias was widely read and traveled. He must have known.

Quil never would have imagined Elias being quite so mercenary. But then, Ruh's death had changed them all. Elias, Aunt Hel, Sufiyan, Karinna—Quil himself. Even Laia told no tales.

Everything awful seemed to stem from Ruh's death. As if in the grand