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GRENWICH & LENNOX



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PROLOGUE

In the beginning, there were only the Primordials. Beings whose thoughts shaped reality itself, who breathed life into nothingness and painted existence across the Abyss.

From their dreams came oceans and forests, mountains and stars. From their whispers came mortals. From their pride came the Aesymar, divine children who carried fragments of their makers' power.

But power breeds ambition.

Among the Aesymar, twelve rose above the rest. Their desires reached further, their hungers grew deeper, and they gazed upon Elaren, the mortal realm, not as shepherds but as rulers waiting for their crowns.

What followed is spoken of only in fragments. A rebellion whispered in half-remembered hymns, a war too vast for mortal minds to understand. Some claim the creators simply withered, exhausted by the act of shaping reality. Still others say they sleep, sealed beyond reach, waiting to return.

Whatever the truth, the Primordials are long gone.

In their absence, Olinthar, mightiest of the Twelve, claimed the highest throne as King of Gods. Under his dominion, a new order was born, with the Twelve at the apex, the remaining Aesymar beneath them, and in time, the divine-born children of their unions.

Yet creation had been scarred. Divine power bled into the mortal world like a wound, seeping into flesh and bone. Some mortals changed, touched by sparks too great for ordinary lives. They became dangerous, unpredictable, and precious.

Thus came the Trials of Ascension, a crucible where the power-touched could prove themselves worthy. Those who endured joined the pantheon's lowest tier, honored as Legends. Those who failed were cast aside, their names left to dust.

And so, for millennia, the order has stood.

SALT AND STARS

THE OYSTER KNIFE SLIPPED IN MY HAND, SLICING INTO MY THUMB instead of between the stubborn shell. "Shit," I muttered, watching blood well up from the cut. My head pounded with the special kind of agony that came from too much ale and too little sleep.

"Thatcher, you absolute ass," I whispered to the empty shed, sucking the blood from my thumb. The metallic taste mingled with the stench of low tide—rotting seaweed, briny muck, and the sharp smell of fish left too long in the sun. It was the kind of smell that would send most people retching.

But the oyster beds waited for no one, not even for those of us suffering the consequences of last night's poor decisions. My twin was undoubtedly still in some bed with company, nursing the same hangover but without the responsibility.

I winced as salt water from the next oyster stung my cut. When had I become the responsible one? It certainly wasn't my natural inclination. The night before flashed through my mind. Dancing on tables at Sandbar, the only tavern in our tiny village. Leading the crowd in bawdy sailing songs so filthy they'd make a captain blush. Challenging three fishermen to a drinking contest and winning while Thatcher cheered and collected bets. I'd matched them drink for drink, slamming down my final cup to thunderous applause while maintaining perfect balance. And somehow, I'd still managed to drag myself out of bed at dawn while my brother slept off his excesses.

The weight of making sure everything ran smoothly had settled onto my shoulders years ago—a mantle I'd never asked for but couldn't seem to put down. Every decision, every choice, required careful consideration of consequences. What if the oysters weren't sorted properly? What if we didn't make enough at market? What if I failed at the one thing Sulien still expected of me—this simple reliability, this quiet competence that seemed to be the only currency I had left to offer him? The constant mental calculations exhausted me more than any physical labor ever could.

I lined up another oyster. This one yielded to my blade, revealing glistening meat within the pearlescent shell.

I tossed it into the basket for market and reached for another from the pile, establishing a rhythm despite the throbbing in my head. Briden always reserved two baskets of pre-shucked for his earlier patrons. We prepared those first thing, packed them in seaweed and ice, and delivered them before the regular market even opened. The rest we'd bring live and shuck to order throughout the day. A pain in the ass, but it kept the oysters at their best and earned us a premium.

Eventually, the shed door creaked open, spilling harsh morning light across the worn wooden floors.

"You look like shit warmed over," I said, not bothering to glance up. "Twice-warmed, actually."

Thatcher laughed, the sound bouncing painfully between my temples. "And you look positively radiant, sister dear. That special glow that comes from pure spite." He swaggered in, an hour late and looking entirely too pleased with himself. The linen shirt he wore was misbuttoned and wrinkled, the deep forest green fabric askew across his broad shoulders, and his hair stuck up in several creative directions, bearing the unmistakable evidence of fingers that weren't his own.

My own clothes were practical and well-worn—a simple, cream-colored blouse tucked into dark brown trousers that had been patched more times than I could count, sturdy leather boots scuffed from years of beach walking, and an old fishing vest that had belonged to Sulien, the pockets still holding bits of net and shell fragments.

I had the same black hair as Thatcher's, though mine fell in salt-stiffened waves past my shoulders while his was cropped short. We both had the same square jaw, dimpled cheeks, and freckles scattered across fair skin tanned from years under the coastal sun. Our indigo eyes were a trait from our mother, much like our stubbornness and affinity for trouble, according to Sulien.

"Nice of you to grace me with your presence," I said, tossing an empty shell into the discard pile and tucking a strand of hair behind the point of my ear. "Did your newest escapade finally kick you out, or did you leave before her father discovered you?"

Thatcher picked up a knife and settled beside me at the sorting table, reaching for an oyster. "The latter," he replied with that infuriating grin. "Keth's daughter says hello, by the way."

"Which one?" I asked, though I already knew. The elder's youngest had been making eyes at my brother all summer, poor fool.

"The pretty one." His grin widened as he effortlessly shucked an oyster. Always frustrating how the work came so naturally to his hands, even half-drunk and barely awake. He had that ease about everything—the kind of charmed existence where things just worked out, where doors opened without pushing, where smiles appeared without effort. "You know I prefer women with fair hair."

"They're both pretty." I tossed another oyster into the market basket. "And both too good for you. I hope she knows you're just adding her to your collection."

"Oh, she knew exactly what she was going to get." Thatcher wiggled his eyebrows, looking so ridiculous I almost forgave him for leaving me alone all morning. "And what she was getting, repeatedly, until about an hour ago. Although she did most of her talking with other parts."

I elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"Weak constitution," he teased.

I flicked my knife, sending a spray of oyster brine directly into his face. He spluttered, coughing dramatically.

"Trying to drown me now? I thought you'd be in better spirits after your midnight swim with lover boy."

"I walked the cove after leaving the tavern. Alone." I shrugged.

"Alone, huh?" The single word carried a weight of implication.

"Unlike some people, I don't need company every hour of the day."

My brother's shoulder bumped against mine. "Liar. You were with Marel. I can always tell when you've been with him—you get this smug look, like a cat that's found the cream." He leaned closer, dropping his voice. "Also, you have a bite mark just below your ear that you missed when you were getting dressed."

My hand flew to my neck, face burning. Thatcher burst out laughing.

"You self-satisfied jackass," I hissed, flicking more brine at him, but couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips. "Why am I cursed with you for a brother?"

"Because you'd be bored without me," he replied, deftly shucking three oysters in quick succession, showing off. He glanced at me sideways, sincerity creeping into his voice. "When are you finally going to give in and let

him properly court you? Marel's been mooning after you for what, two years now?"

I kept my eyes on my work, my rhythm unbroken. "It's not like that."

"It could be."

"It won't be," I said firmly. "You know that."

Thatcher sighed but didn't press further. He knew me too well to argue when my mind was set. Better yet, he was far too aware how I felt about this particular topic. It was better to keep things casual. Better that Marel think of me as nothing more than an occasional pleasure, a wild spirit impossible to tame. Even if he wanted more. Eventually, he'd move on.

Thatcher's hand briefly covered mine, stilling my knife. When I looked up, his expression held no teasing, just understanding. He might chase every eligible woman in the village, but deep down, he carried the same burden. Me.

For us, some doors would always remain closed.

"I've always got your back, Thais. You know that."

I nodded once, returning to my work. Somehow those simple words from him I never doubted.

We finished the first batch just as the sun crested, painting the water gold beyond the shed windows. We stepped out into the fresh morning air, the village of Saltcrest stretching before us. Fishing boats dotted the harbor, early risers already pulling in the morning catch. Our cottage sat a short walk up from the shore, smoke curling from the chimney.

I paused, taking in the view I'd seen every day of my twenty-six years. Simple wooden houses with their weathered gray boards, the stone temple on the hill, fishing nets hung to dry between posts. Nothing ever changed here, which was exactly how we needed it to be. Perhaps that was why I launched myself into every tavern challenge, every wild swim, every midnight tryst.

Because I'd never been able to escape the feeling that, at some point, all of it was going to end.

The market square was buzzing with the usual morning activity when we arrived with our baskets of fresh oysters. Thatcher immediately began setting up our stall while I hauled the day's catch to the front, arranging the oysters in neat rows across beds of seaweed.

"If it isn't the Morvaren twins," called Dorna, the baker's wife, approaching

with a basket of warm rolls. "You two are looking particularly haggard this morning."

"Speak for yourself, Dorna," I replied, flashing a grin. "I've never looked better."

She laughed, her round face crinkling. "Word is you and that brother of yours nearly drank the Sandbar dry last night."

"Only half-dry," Thatcher corrected, appearing at my side and snagging a roll from her basket. "We're saving the rest for tonight."

"Always the considerate ones," Dorna said with a fond shake of her head. "Your father must be so proud." She moved on to the next stall, leaving the smell of fresh bread in her wake.

The morning passed in a pleasant blur of transactions and gossip. A good haul meant good coin, and we'd brought the best of the beds to market. Thatcher had wandered off, predictably, leaving me to manage the remaining customers. I caught sight of him across the square, leaning against a wall and charming a smile from the blacksmith's daughter.

A momentary lull gave me the chance I'd been waiting for. I ducked behind our stall, into the narrow space between buildings where no one could see. Glancing around once more to ensure my privacy, I turned my palms upward and concentrated.

The stars weren't visible in the daylight sky, but that didn't matter. They were always there, always connected to me in ways I couldn't explain. The familiar tingle numbed my fingertips, then the cool rush of power as tiny points of light appeared above my palms, swirling into a miniature constellation.

I shaped the lights with my thoughts, forming them into a small fish that swam through the air above my hands. The light cast blue shadows across my skin, beautiful and forbidden and terrifying all at once. This was the secret that could destroy everything—the power I'd been born with, the reason we could never leave Saltcrest.

A sudden prickle at the back of my neck made me close my fist, extinguishing the lights. I stepped back into view, arranging my face into simple indifference as I straightened the remaining oysters.

Thatcher appeared a moment later, the blacksmith's daughter forgotten. "Practicing again?" he murmured, low enough that only I could hear.

"Just a little," I admitted. "It's been building up."

He nodded. My power was like a well that constantly filled; if I didn't release it in small, controlled ways, it would eventually overflow. And we certainly couldn't allow that to happen.

"Be careful," was all he said, but I caught the undercurrent of worry. Thatcher had spent our entire lives being careful on my behalf, watching for signs of attention, distracting suspicious eyes, creating cover stories when needed.

"Always am," I replied, bumping his shoulder with mine. "Besides, I've got you to watch my back."

It had been this way for generations now—mortals manifesting powers that once belonged solely to the gods. It began centuries ago, when the veil between the divine and mortal realms thinned, allowing cosmic energy to seep into our world like water through a cracked dam. At first, just a few drops. Small gifts, barely noticeable.

But over time, the leak widened. More mortals began showing signs of divine blessing. The ability to manipulate fire, to speak with animals, to heal wounds with a touch. But that type of power was never meant for mortal hands. And the gods noticed, of course. How could they not?

So they created the Trials of Ascension. Every decade, those with gifts were gathered, tested, broken down, and rebuilt in the gods' image. A few would ascend to join the pantheon. The rest would die, their power reclaimed by the Aesymar.

That was the story spread by the priests—that the gods benevolently allowed worthy mortals to join their ranks. What the stories didn't say was that participation wasn't optional. Those who refused the *honor* were taken by force. Those who hid their abilities were hunted down, sometimes executed as examples.

By late afternoon, our baskets were empty and our coin pouches satisfyingly heavy. As we packed up our stall, I noticed an unusual level of activity around the harbor. Additional boats were arriving, larger vessels than the everyday fishing skiff. My stomach knotted as I watched the fine ships with their pristine sails. The priests of the Aesymar always arrived in such vessels, beautiful and terrible in their perfection.

They came for the Trials, yes, but also for their quarterly duties—collecting offerings, ensuring coastal shrines were properly maintained. Mortal

servants of divine masters, wielding borrowed authority that made them nearly as feared as the gods themselves.

Thatcher followed my gaze, eyes narrowing. "Early arrivals for the festival."

The word sent a chill through me despite the warm afternoon sun. I'd been successfully ignoring the approaching date, pushing it from my mind whenever it surfaced. The festival marking the start of the Trials was still two weeks away.

The cooper's son hurried past, nearly colliding with our stall. "Sorry!" he called over his shoulder, not slowing. "Have to tell Keth—he'll need to begin preparations!"

"It's fine," Thatcher said quietly, reading my tension through our bond, the one we'd had since birth. When we were close enough, our voices could travel down the string connecting us. Otherwise it was just feelings or ghosts of thoughts.

But it wasn't fine, and we both knew it. The festival was always preceded by priests searching for those with gifts. The blessed, they called them.

Dinner that night was a strained affair. Our father, Sulien, had clearly already heard the news about the priests' arrival. Though he said nothing directly, it showed in the extra drinks he poured, in the lines around his eyes as he glanced between Thatcher and me.

"Good haul today," he commented, pushing food around his plate.

"Sold everything," I confirmed. "Got Breen to pay extra for his wedding order."

Sulien gave a strained smile. "That's my girl. Always driving a hard bargain."

Thatcher kicked me gently under the table, a silent signal passing between us. I gave a tiny shake of my head. I knew what he wanted me to say, but I had no intention of bringing it up. Instead, I launched into a story about Dorna's gossip from the market, drawing a reluctant chuckle from our father.

"So, the Priests . . ." Thatcher said suddenly, shooting me a look.

Sulien's hand tightened around his cup so hard I thought it might shatter.

"They're early this year," I added when he said nothing.

"It's an inevitability," he finally replied, his voice low and tight. He refilled his cup, spilling drops of dark wine that looked like blood against the wooden table. "The festival approaches. They always come."

"Two weeks early though," I pressed, unable to stop myself. "That's unusual."

Sulien drained half his cup in one swallow. "Nothing about them is usual. Nothing about them is right."

The bitterness in his voice silenced us all for a moment. We so rarely spoke directly about the gods, about what had happened to our mother.

"What if we left?" I suggested softly, not for the first time. "Go somewhere else?"

"Where?" Sulien laughed without humor. "The cities? Where priests walk every street? The mountains? Where every traveler is scrutinized? At least here we're just oyster farmers—no one looks twice at us." He shook his head. "This tiny village is the closest thing to safety you'll ever have."

His words hung in the air like a death sentence. I stared at my plate, appetite gone. Thatcher's hand found mine under the table, a brief squeeze of solidarity.

"He doesn't deserve to still have this power over us," I whispered, the rage I usually kept carefully banked flaring hot in my chest. "After what he did to her."

Sulien's eyes snapped to mine but softened at whatever he saw in my face. "No," he agreed quietly. "He doesn't."

She'd traveled inland for the solstice twenty-seven years ago. The grand temple there drew thousands for the God's descent. She'd gone with other young people from the village, seeking blessings for marriage and healthy children, never imagining she'd catch the attention of a member of the Twelve. She was just another faithful worshipper in the crowd when he arrived in all his golden glory—when a young woman could vanish for three days and her traveling companions would be told she'd fallen ill, staying with temple healers.

Sulien said she never spoke of those missing days. Not even to him. But when she returned to Saltcrest hollow-eyed and quiet, when morning sickness came months later, he'd pieced together the truth.

There was only one fate for any mortal woman who carried a half-blood child to term. Death. At least in Elaren.

Only one mother had ever survived the birth, and she had done so in the divine realm.

A heavy silence fell over the table, broken only by the soft crackle of the fire. I could feel the weight of unspoken fears, the same conversation we'd danced around for years finally demanding to be acknowledged.

"You remember what you promised me," Sulien said quietly, his eyes finding mine across the table. It wasn't a question.

My throat tightened. "I remember."

"Never reveal yourself." His voice cracked. "I couldn't survive it. Not after what it cost your mother just to bring you into this world."

I'd made the promise years ago, when my power first manifested. Sulien had made me swear on our mother's memory that I would never seek the priests out, never reveal what I could do. The man who had raised us as his own, who had loved our mother more than anything—I couldn't break his heart.

"I know," I whispered. "I won't."

Thatcher's eyes moved between us, understanding the weight of what bound me even if he couldn't fully share it.

We'd always expected Thatcher to develop gifts too. Divine blood ran through his veins just as surely as mine, and most powers manifested in adolescence alongside the first stirrings of maturity. But years had passed, and while I'd learned to hide constellations between my fingers, Thatcher remained stubbornly, safely normal.

By the time we'd reached our twenties, Sulien had stopped watching him with the same careful anxiety he reserved for me. We'd all quietly accepted that whatever cosmic lottery had granted me abilities had passed Thatcher by.

But that blessing came with its own curse. Thatcher was free to live normally, to make real friends, to build lasting relationships. Yet he didn't. None of us did. My secret had become our family's secret.

We were twenty-six years old and still living like children under Sulien's roof—or rather, in the connected cottages he'd built when we came of age, close enough that we still shared meals every night but far enough apart to maintain some illusion of independence.

Sulien had never remarried, never even courted anyone seriously, though