

ASH  
PRINCESS



# ASH PRINCESS

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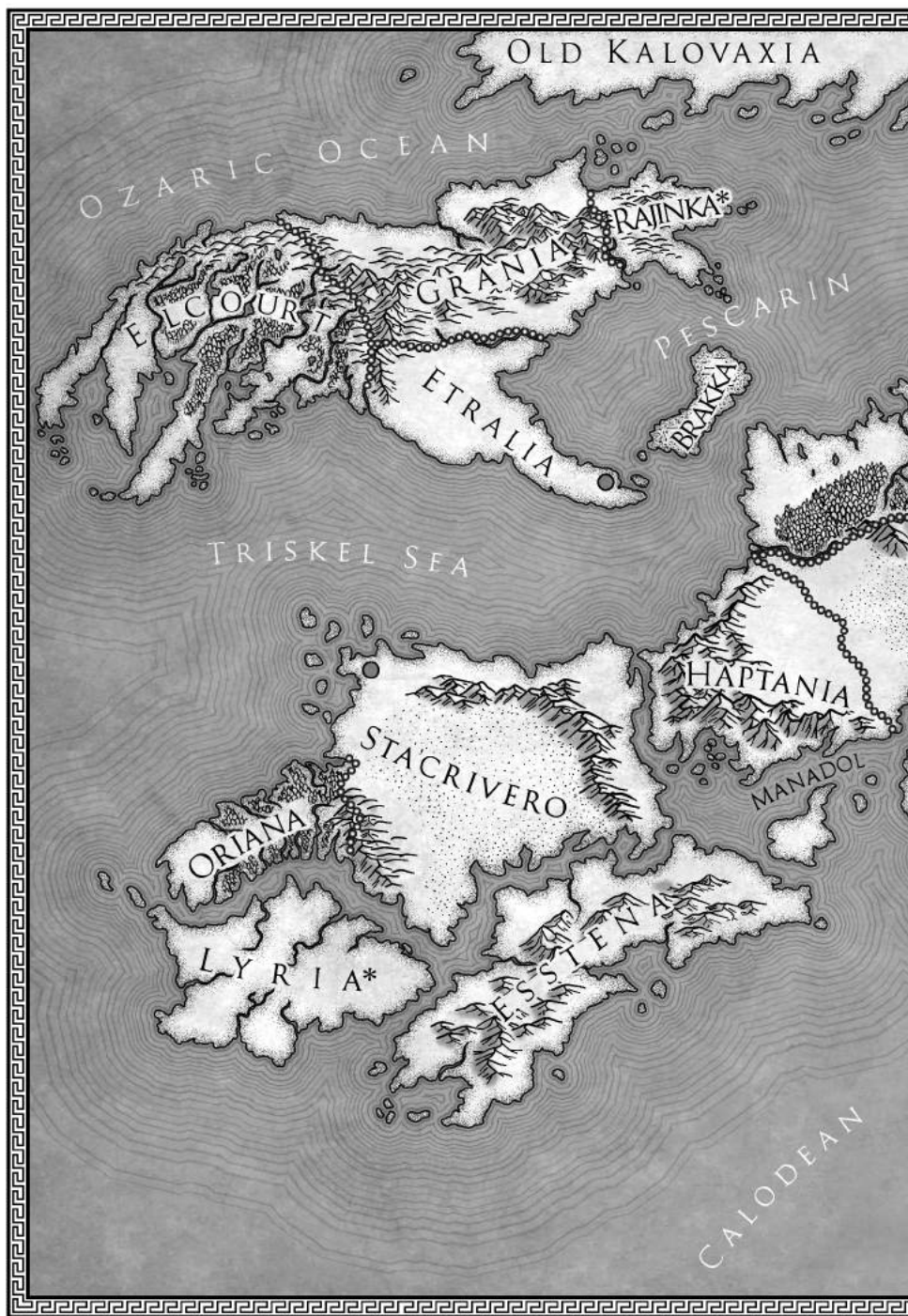
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FOR JESSE AND EDËN.

*May you always do the right thing,  
even when it's hard.*



OLD KALOVAXIA

OZARIC OCEAN

RAJINKA\*

LCOURT

GRANIA

PESCARIN

ETRALIA

BRACKA

TRISKEL SEA

HAPTANIA

MANADOL

STACRIVERO

ORIANA

LYRIA\*

ESTENA

CALODEAN



SEA

EASTERN SEA

TIMMOREE

CANADON

KOTA\*

ISLANDS\*

BINDOR

ASTREA\*

VECTORIAN ISLANDS\*

DORAN

ITAVAN

YOXI\*

GORAKI\*

KEY

- - REFUGEE CAMP
- \* - CONQUERED BY KALOVAXIA







KEY

- ★ - CAPITAL
- - MINE





# PROLOGUE



THE LAST PERSON WHO CALLED me by my true name was my mother, with her dying breath. When I was six years old, my hand was still small enough that hers covered it completely. She squeezed it so painfully tight that I hardly noticed anything else. So tight that I hardly noticed the silver of the knife pressing against her throat or the fear in her eyes.

‘You know who you are,’ she said to me. Her voice didn’t waver, even as drops of blood bloomed where the blade cut her skin. ‘You are our people’s only hope, Theodosia.’

And then they cut her throat and they took my name.



# THORA

---

‘THORA!’

I turn to see Crescentia barreling toward me down the gilded palace hallway, pink silk skirts lifted as she runs and a broad grin spread across her lovely face.

Her two maids struggle to keep up with her, their emaciated frames drowning in homespun dresses.

*Don't look at their faces, don't look,* I tell myself. Nothing good ever comes of looking, of seeing their dull eyes and hungry mouths. Nothing good ever comes of seeing how much they look like me, with their tawny skin and dark hair. It only makes the voice in my head grow louder. And when the voice grows loud enough to push past my lips, the Kaiser grows angry.

*I will not anger the Kaiser and he will keep me alive.* This is the rule I've learned to follow.

I focus on my friend. Cress makes everything easier. She wears her happiness like the sun's rays, radiating it to warm those around her. She knows I need it more than most, so she doesn't hesitate to fall into step next to me and link our arms tightly.

She is free with her affection in a way only a few blessed people can be; she has never loved someone and lost them. Her effortless, childlike beauty will stay with her until she is an old woman, all dainty features and wide crystalline eyes that have seen no horrors. Pale blond hair hangs in a long braid pulled over her shoulder, studded with dozens of Spiritgems that wink in the sunlight pouring through the stained-glass windows.

I can't look at the gems either, but I feel them all the same: a gentle pull beneath my skin, drawing me toward them, offering me their power if I'll only take it. But I won't. *I can't.*

Spiritgems used to be sacred things, before Astrea was conquered by the Kalovaxians.

The gems came from the caves that ran beneath the four major temples – one for each of the four major gods and goddesses of fire, air, water, and earth. The caves were the center of their powers, so drenched in magic that the gems inside them took on magic of their own. Before the siege, the devout would spend years in the cave of the god or goddess they swore allegiance to. There, they would worship their deity, and if they were worthy, they would be blessed, imbued with their god's or goddess's power. They then used their gifts to serve Astrea and its people as Guardians.

Back then there weren't many who weren't chosen by the gods – a handful a year, maybe. Those few went mad and died shortly after. It was a risk only the truly devout took. Being a Guardian was a calling – an honor – yet everyone understood what was at stake.

That was a lifetime ago. *Before.*

After the siege, the Kaiser had the temples destroyed and

sent tens of thousands of enslaved Astreans to the caves to mine the gems. Living so close to the power of the gods is no longer a choice people make, but one that is made for them. There is no calling or allegiance sworn, and because of that, most people who are sent to the mines quickly lose their minds and, shortly after, their lives.

And all that so the wealthy can pay a fortune to cover themselves in gems without even uttering the names of the gods. It's sacrilege to us, but not to the Kalovaxians. They don't believe. And without the blessing of the gods – without the time spent deep in the earth – they can possess only a shadow of a true Guardian's power, no matter how many gems they wear, which is plenty for most of them. The Water Gems in Cress's braid could give a trained Guardian the power to craft an illusion strong enough to create a new face entirely, but for Cress they only lend her skin a glow, her lips and cheeks a pretty flush, her golden hair a shine.

Beauty Gems, the Kalovaxians call them now.

'My father sent me a book of poems from Lyre,' she tells me. Her voice grows tense, as it always does when she speaks of her father, the Theyn, with me. 'We should take it up to the pavilion and translate it. Enjoy the sun while we still have it.'

'But you don't speak Lyrian,' I say, frowning. Cress has a knack for languages and literature, two things her father has never had the patience for. As the Kaiser's best warrior and the head of his army, the Theyn understands battle and weaponry, strategy and bloodshed, not books and poetry, but he tries for her sake. Cress's mother died when Cress was only a baby, so the Theyn is all she has left by way of family.

‘I’ve picked up a few phrases here and there,’ she says, waving a hand dismissively. ‘But my father had the poet translate some so I can puzzle out the rest. You know how my father enjoys his puzzles.’

She glances sideways at me to see my reaction, but I’m careful not to give one.

I’m careful not to imagine Cress’s father pressing his dagger to a poor scrawny poet’s neck as he hunches over his work, or the way he held it to my mother’s so long ago. I don’t think of the fear in her eyes. Her hand in mine. Her voice, strong and clear even then.

No, I don’t think of that. I’ll go mad if I do.

‘Well, we’ll solve them quickly, between the two of us,’ I tell her with a smile, hoping she believes it.

Not for the first time, I wonder what would happen if I didn’t suppress a shudder when she mentioned her father. If I didn’t smile and pretend he wasn’t the same man who killed my mother. I like to believe Cress and I have been friends long enough that she would understand, but that kind of trust is a luxury I don’t have.

‘Maybe Dagmær will be there,’ Crescentia says, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘You missed her . . . bold fashion choice at the countess’s luncheon yesterday.’ Her eyes glint with a smile.

*I don’t care.* The thought comes sudden and sharp as a bee-sting. *I don’t care if Dagmær attended the luncheon in the nude. I don’t care about any of it.* I push the thought down deep and bury it, as I always do. Thoughts like that don’t belong to Thora; they belong to the voice. Usually it’s only a whisper, easy enough to ignore, but sometimes it



grows louder and spills into my own voice. That is when I get into trouble.

I anchor myself to Cress, her easy mind, her simple pleasures.

‘I doubt anything can top the ostrich feathers she was covered in last month,’ I whisper back, making her giggle.

‘Oh, it was far worse this time. Her gown was black lace. You could practically make out her intimate attire – or lack thereof!’

‘No!’ I shriek, pretending to be scandalized.

‘Yes! They say she’s hoping to entice Duke Clarence,’ Cress says. ‘Though why, I can’t imagine. He’s old enough to be her father and he smells like rotten meat.’ She wrinkles her nose.

‘I suppose when you consider her actual father’s debts . . .’ I trail off, arching an eyebrow.

Crescentia’s eyes widen. ‘Really? Where did you hear that?’ she gasps. When I only smile in response, she sighs and elbows me lightly in the side. ‘You always know the best gossip, Thora.’

‘That’s because I listen,’ I say with a wink.

I don’t tell her what I’m really listening for, that I sift through each vapid rumor for whispers of Astrean resistance, for any hope that someone is still out there, that someday they might rescue me.

In the years after the siege, there were always stories about rebel Astreans striking out against the Kaiser. Once a week, I would be dragged out to the capital square to be whipped by one of the Kaiser’s men and made an example of while the heads of fallen rebels stood rotting on pikes behind me. I knew those faces most of the time: Guardians

who had served my mother, men and women who had given me candy and told me stories when I was young. I hated those days, and most of the time I hated the rebels because it felt like *they* were the ones hurting me by incurring the Kaiser's wrath.

Now, though, most of the rebels are dead and there are only whispers of rebellion, fleeting afterthoughts of gossip when the courtiers run out of other things to talk about. It's been years since the last rebel was caught. I don't miss those punishments, always more brutal and public than any others, but I do miss the hope that clung to me, the feeling that I was not alone in the world, that one day – maybe – my people would succeed and end my misery.

Footsteps grow louder behind us, too heavy to belong to Cress's slaves.

'Lady Crescentia, Lady Thora,' a male voice calls. Cress's hold on my arm tightens and her breath catches.

'Your Highness,' Cress says, turning and dropping into a curtsy, pulling me with her. The title sends my heart racing, even though I know it's not the Kaiser. I would know his voice anywhere. Still, I don't fully relax until I rise from my curtsy and confirm that I'm right.

The stranger shares the same long wheat-blond hair and cold blue eyes, the same square jawline, as the Kaiser, but the man in front of me is much younger, maybe a year older than I am.

Prinz Søren, I realize, surprised. No one has spoken of his return to court, which is surprising because the Kalovaxians are infatuated with their Prinz far more than they are with the Kaiser.

The last time I saw him was almost five years ago, when he was a scrawny twelve-year-old with round cheeks and a wooden sword always in hand. The man in front of me is no longer scrawny, and his cheeks have lost that childish roundness. A sword still hangs in the scabbard on his hip, but it isn't wooden anymore. It's a pockmarked wrought-iron blade, its hilt glittering with Spiritgems, for strength this time.

As a child, I saw Earth Guardians strong enough to haul boulders three times their weight as if they were nothing but air, but I doubt the Prinz's Spiritgems do much more than add an extra few pounds of force to his blows. Not that it really matters. Over the five years of Søren's training with the Theyn, that sword has drawn more than its fair share of blood. The court is always abuzz with whispers of the Prinz's prowess in battle. They say he's a prodigy, even by Kalovaxian standards. The Kaiser likes to treat the Prinz as an extension of himself, but Prinz Søren's achievements only serve to highlight the Kaiser's own shortcomings. Since taking the throne, the Kaiser has grown lazy and content, more interested in feasting and drinking than taking part in battles.

I wonder what the Prinz is doing back after so many years, though I suppose his apprenticeship with the Theyn is over. He's officially an adult now, and I can only assume he'll be leading his own armies soon.

He gives a shallow bow and clasps his hands behind his back. His placid expression doesn't change; it might as well be carved from marble. 'It's good to see you both again. I trust you've been well.'

It's not a question, really, but Cress still answers with a

flustered *yes*, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and smoothing the folds of her skirt, barely able to meet his eyes. She's been swooning over him since we were children, along with every other girl our age who grew up imagining herself a prinze<sup>s</sup>sin. But for Cress, it's never been a hollow fantasy. Astrea is only one of the territories her father has won for the Kaiser. They say her father has taken more kingdoms than any other warlord, and no one can argue that the elevation of his daughter to prinze<sup>s</sup>sin would be a just reward for such loyalty. Since Cress came of age six months ago, the whispers about such a match have grown deafening at court.

Another reason for his return, maybe?

If those whispers reached Søren, wherever he's been, he doesn't show it. His eyes glide over Cress as though she were nothing but air and light, landing instead on me. His brow furrows, the same way his father's does when he looks at me, though at least it isn't followed with a smirk or a leer.

'I'm glad to hear it,' he says to Cress, cool and clipped, though his eyes stay on mine. 'My father is requesting your presence, Lady Thora.'

Fear wraps around my stomach like a hungry python, tightening, tightening, until I can't breathe. The urge to run rears up in me and I struggle to keep my legs still.

I haven't done anything. I've been so careful. But then, I don't have to do anything to earn the Kaiser's wrath. Anytime there's a hint of rebellion in the slave quarter or an Astrean pirate sinks a Kalovaxian ship, I pay the price. The last time he summoned me, barely a week ago, was to have me whipped in response to a riot in one of the mines.

‘Well.’ My voice quavers despite my best efforts to keep it level. ‘We shouldn’t keep him waiting.’

For a brief moment, Prinz Søren looks like he might say something, but instead, his mouth tightens and he offers me his arm.

# TRAITOR



THE OBSIDIAN THRONE STANDS ON a dais at the center of the round, dome-roofed throne room. The great, hulking thing is carved from solid black stone in the shape of flames that appear to kiss whoever sits upon it. It's plain, almost ugly, amid all the gold and grandeur that surround it, but it is certainly commanding, and that is what matters.

The Kalovaxians believe that the throne was drawn forth from the volcanoes of Old Kalovaxia and left here in Astrea for them by their gods, ensuring that they would one day come and save the country from its weak and willful queens.

I remember a different story, about the Astrean fire god, Houzzah, who loved a mortal woman so much he gave her a country and an heir with his blood in her veins. That story whispers through my mind now in a familiar lilting voice, but, like a distant star you try to look at directly, it's quick to fade if I focus on it. It's better left forgotten, anyway. It's safer to live only in the present, to be a girl with no past to yearn for and no future to have ripped away.

The thick crowd of courtiers, dressed in their finery, parts easily for Prinz Søren and me as we make our way toward the

Kaiser. Like Cress, the courtiers all wear blue Water Gems for beauty and clear Air Gems for grace – so many that to look at them is almost blinding. There are others as well – red Fire Gems for warmth, golden yellow Earth Gems for strength.

I scan the room. Amid a sea of pale, blond Kalovaxians, Ion stands out in his place off to the side of the throne. He's the only other Astrean not in chains, but he's hardly a welcome sight. After the siege, he turned himself over to the Kaiser and begged for his life, offering his services as an Air Guardian. Now the Kaiser keeps him around to use as a spy in the capital and as a healer for the royal family. And for me. After all, I'm not as much fun to beat if I black out from the pain. Ion, who once swore himself to our gods and my mother, uses his gift to heal me only so the Kaiser's men can break me again and again and again.

His presence is an unspoken threat. He's rarely allowed at court functions; he usually only appears during one of my punishments.

If the Kaiser intended to have me beaten, he would want to do so somewhere more public. He hasn't ruled it out, though, which is why Ion is here.

The Kaiser aims a pointed look at Søren, who drops my arm and melts into the crowd, leaving me alone under the weight of his father's stare. I'm tempted to cling to him, to anyone, so I won't have to be alone.

But I'm always alone. I should be used to it by now, though I don't think it's the kind of thing a person ever grows used to.

The Kaiser leans forward in his seat, cold eyes glinting in the sunlight that pours through the stained-glass roof. He

looks at me the way he might a squashed bug that dirtied the bottom of his shoe.

I stare at the dais instead, at the flames carved there. Not angering the Kaiser is what keeps me alive. He could have killed me a thousand times in the last decade and he hasn't. Isn't that a kindness?

'There you are, *Ash Princess*.' To anyone else, the greeting might sound pleasant, but I flinch. There is always a trick with the Kaiser, a game to play, a thin line to balance on. I know from experience that if he is playing at kindness now, cruelty can't be far behind.

Standing at his right side with her hands clasped in front of her and her head bowed, his wife, Kaiserin Anke, lets her milky eyes dart up through sparse blond lashes to find mine. A warning that makes the python coil tighter around my stomach.

'You requested my presence, Your Highness?' I ask, dropping into a curtsy so deep I am almost flat against the ground. Even after a decade, my bones still protest the posture. My body remembers – even when the rest of me forgets – that I am not made for curtsying.

Before the Kaiser can answer, a guttural cry shatters the still air. When I rise, I notice a man standing to the left of the throne, held in place between two guards. Rusted chains are wrapped around his gaunt legs, arms, and neck so tightly they cut through his skin. His clothes are tattered and blood-drenched and his face is a mottled mess of broken bones and torn skin. Beneath the blood, he's clearly Astrean, with tawny skin, black hair, and deep-set eyes. He looks much older than me, though it's impossible to say



exactly how old he is with all the damage that's been done to him.

He is a stranger. But his dark eyes search mine as if he knows me, imploring, begging, and I rake through my memories – who could this be and what does he want from me? I have nothing for him. Nothing left for anyone. Then the world shifts beneath my feet.

I remember those eyes from another lifetime, set in a gentle face a decade younger and unbloodied. Memories surge forward, even as I try to press them down.

I remember him standing at my mother's side, whispering something in her ear to make her laugh. I remember his arms coming around me as he lifted me up in the air so I could pick an orange from a tree; I remember how he smiled at me like we shared a secret.

I push back those thoughts and focus instead on the broken man standing before me.

There is one man always mentioned in connection with the rebellions. One man who has a hand in every move made against the Kaiser. One man whose name alone is enough to send the Kaiser into a wild-eyed rage that leaves me whipped so hard I have to stay in bed for days. One man whose acts of defiance have caused me so much pain, but who has been my one spark of hope when I dare let myself imagine there is an *after* to these infernal years.

No wonder the Kaiser is so happy. He's finally caught the last of Astrea's Guardians, and my mother's closest guard. Ampelio.

'My Queen,' he says. His voice carries so that everyone gathered in the silent throne room hears his treason.

I shrink back from his words. *No, no, no*, I want to tell him. *I am no one's queen. I am Lady Thora, Princess of Ashes. I am no one.*

It takes me a moment to realize he's speaking Astrean, speaking forbidden words once used to address my mother. *My mother*. In another life, I was another girl. Another kind of princess. That girl was told that one day she would be queen, but she never wanted that to be true. After all, being queen meant living in a world where her mother no longer existed, and that had been unfathomable.

But that girl died a decade ago; there is no help for her now.

The man lurches, weighed down by his chains. He's too weak to make it to the door, but he doesn't even try for it. Instead, he topples to the ground at my feet, fingers grasping the hem of my dress and staining the pale yellow silk red.

*No. Please.* Part of me wants to drag him up and tell him he's mistaken. Another part wants to shrink away from him because this is such a lovely dress and he's getting blood on it. And yet another wants to scream at him that his words are going to ruin us both, but at least *he* will have the mercy of death.

'He refused to speak to anyone but you,' Kaiser Corbinian says in an acid voice.

'Me?' My heart is beating so hard in my chest that I'm surprised the whole court can't hear it. Every eye in the room is on me; everyone is waiting for me to slip, desperate for the slightest hint of rebellion so that they can watch the Kaiser beat it out of me again. I will not give it to them.

*I will not anger the Kaiser and he will keep me alive. I*

repeat the mantra to myself again and again, but the words have grown limp.

The Kaiser leans forward on his throne, eyes bright. I've seen that look too often before; it haunts my nightmares. He is a shark that has caught the scent of blood in the water. 'Don't you know him?'

This is the Kaiser's favorite kind of question to ask. The kind without a right answer.

I look back at the man, as if struggling to place him, even as his name screams through my mind. More memories come and I force them back. The Kaiser is watching me carefully, waiting for any sign that I am not under his thumb. But I can't look away from this man's eyes.

In that other life, I loved him.

He was my mother's most trusted Guardian and, according to just about everyone, my blood father – though even my mother couldn't say that for certain.

I remember searching his face for similarities to my own after I heard the rumor for the first time, but I found nothing conclusive. His nose had the same slope, and his hair curled around his ears in the same way mine did, but I looked far too much like my mother to be sure of anything. That was before, though, when my eyes were childishly wide and shapeless, impossible to place on my mother's face or anyone else's. Now the resemblance is so clear it hits me like a knife to my gut.

As a Guardian, he would travel often to keep the country safe with his fire magic, but he always returned with sweets and toys and new stories for me. I often fell asleep on his lap, my hand clutching the Fire Gem that always hung around his

neck. Its magic would buzz through me like a lullaby, singing me to sleep.

When my mother died and the world I knew turned to dust, I waited for him to save me. That hope waned with every Guardian's head the Kaiser had piked in the square, but it never disappeared. I still heard whispers about Ampelio's rebellions, and those kept my hope alive, even after all the other Guardians fell. Few and far between as they were, I clung to them. As long as he was out there, as long as he was fighting, I knew he would save me. I never let myself imagine, even in my worst nightmares, that I would see him like this.

I try to empty my mind, but it's futile. Even now, a dim hope flickers in my heart that this day will have a happy ending, that we will see another sunrise together, free.

It's a stupid, dangerous hope, but it burns all the same.

Tears sting at my eyes, but I cannot let them fall.

He doesn't wear his gem now. Taking it was the first thing the Kaiser's men would have done when they captured him. For an untrained courtier, a single gem can barely provide enough warmth to keep them comfortable on a winter's night, but Ampelio was blessed. One gem was all he would need to burn this palace to the ground.

'This is the famed Guardian Ampelio,' the Kaiser says, drawing out each word mockingly. 'You must remember him. He's been sowing treason throughout the mines, trying to rally them against me. He even instigated the riot in the Air Mine last week. The Theyn found him nearby and brought him in.'

'Wasn't it an earthquake that incited the riot?' The words slip out before I can stop them. They don't feel like my words

really. Or rather, they don't feel like Thora's.

Kaiser Corbinian's jaw clenches and I recoil, readying for a strike that doesn't come. Yet.

'Caused by him, we suspect, in order to rally more people to your cause,' he says.

I have a retort for that, too, but I bite it back and let confusion cloud my features. 'My cause, Your Highness?' I ask. 'I wasn't aware that I had a cause.'

His smile sharpens. 'The one seeking to, as they say, "restore you to your rightful place as Queen of Astrea."' "

I swallow. This conversation is taking an entirely new direction, and I'm not sure what to make of it. I think I'd almost prefer the whip to whatever new game this is.

My eyes drop to the ground. 'I'm not anyone's queen, and there is no Astrea anymore. I am a lady now, by Your Highness's mercy, and a princess only of ashes. This is my rightful place, and the only one I desire.'

I can't look at Ampelio as I recite the line that has been burned into my heart over the years. I've said it so often the words have stopped meaning anything, but saying it now in front of him causes shame to run through my veins.

The Kaiser nods. 'I said as much, but Astreans are stubborn old mules.'

The throne room erupts into laughter. I laugh, too, but it is a sound wrenched from my gut.

The Kaiser turns to Ampelio, his expression a mockery of sympathy. 'Come and bow before me, *mule*. Tell me where I can find your rebels and you can spend the rest of your days in one of the mines.' He grins at the broken man still lying at my feet.

*Agree! I want to yell. Pledge your loyalty to him. Survive. Do not anger the Kaiser and he will keep you alive. These are the rules.*

‘I bow before no one but my queen,’ Ampelio whispers, tripping over the hard edges of the Kalovaxian language. Despite his low voice, his words carry throughout the room, followed by gasps and murmurs from the court.

He raises his voice. ‘Long live Queen Theodosia Eirene Houzzara.’

Something shatters within me, and everything I’ve held back, every memory I’ve repressed, every moment I’ve tried to forget – it all comes rushing forward and I can’t stop it this time.

*Theodosia.* It’s a name I haven’t heard in ten years.

*Theodosia.* I hear my mother saying it to me, stroking my hair, kissing my forehead.

*You are our people’s only hope, Theodosia.*

Ampelio always called me Theo, no matter how my nanny, Birdie, chided him for it. I was his princess, she said, and Theo was the name of a dirt-streaked ragamuffin. He never listened, though. I might have been his princess, but I was something more as well.

He was supposed to save me, but he never did. I’ve been waiting for ten years for someone to come for me, and Ampelio was the last scrap of hope I had.

‘Maybe he’ll answer to you, Ash Princess,’ the Kaiser says.

My shock is dim, drowned out by the sound of my name echoing again and again in my mind. ‘I . . . I couldn’t presume to have that power, Your Highness,’ I manage.

His mouth purses in an expression I know all too well.

The Kaiser is not a man to be refused.

‘This is why I keep you alive, isn’t it? To assist as a liaison to bullheaded Astrean scum?’

*The Kaiser is kind to spare me*, I think, but then I realize once again that he doesn’t spare me out of kindness. He keeps me alive to use me as leverage against my people.

My thoughts are growing bolder now, and though I know they are dangerous, I can no longer quiet them. And for the first time, I don’t want to.

I’ve been waiting for ten years to be saved, and all I have to show for it is a scarred back and countless dead rebels. With Ampelio caught, there is nothing more the Kaiser can take from me. We both know he is not merciful enough to kill me.

‘May I speak Astrean?’ I ask the Kaiser. ‘He might feel more at ease. . . .’

The Kaiser waves a hand and slumps back into his chair. ‘So long as it gets me answers.’

I hesitate before dropping to my knees in front of Ampelio, taking his shredded hands in mine. Even though the Astrean language is forbidden, some of the courtiers here must understand it. I doubt the Kaiser would let me speak it otherwise.

*Are there others?* I ask him. The words sound unnatural in my mouth, though Astrean was the only language I spoke until the Kalovaxians came. They pried it away from me, made it illegal to speak. I can’t remember the last time an Astrean word passed my lips, but I still *know* the language somewhere deeper than thought, as if it’s embedded in my very bones. Still, I have to struggle to keep the sounds soft-edged and long, unlike the halting and throaty speech of the Kalovaxians.

He hesitates before nodding. *'Are you safe?'*

I have to pause a moment before speaking. *'Safe as a ship in a cyclone.'* The Astrean word for cyclone – *signok* – is so close to the word for harbor – *signak* – that only a practiced ear would understand. But one might. The thought is paralyzing, but I push past it. *'Where are the others?'* I ask him.

He shakes his head and drops his gaze from mine. *'Nowhere,'* he chokes out, though he draws out the second syllable to sound more like *'everywhere'* to lazy ears.

That doesn't make any sense. There are fewer Astreans than Kalovaxians – only a hundred thousand before the siege. Most are slaves now, though there were rumors they were working with some allies in other countries. It's been too long since I've spoken Astrean; I must have mistranslated.

*'Who?'* I press.

Ampelio sticks his gaze to the hem of my skirt and shakes his head. *'Today is done, the time has come for little birds to fly. Tomorrow is near, the time is here for old crows to die.'*

My heart recognizes the words before my mind does. They're part of an old Astrean lullaby. My mother sang it to me, and so did my nanny. Did he ever sing it to me himself?

*'Give him something and he'll let you live,'* I say.

Ampelio laughs, but it quickly turns into a wheeze. He coughs and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. It comes away bloody.

*'What life would it be at the mercy of a tyrant?'*

It would have been easy enough to slur together a pair of consonants and make the Astrean word for *tyrant* sound like the one for *dragon*, the symbol of the Kalovaxian royal family, but Ampelio spits out the word with enough emphasis,



directing it at the Kaiser, so that even those who don't speak a word of Astrean can understand his meaning.

The Kaiser leans forward in his chair, fingers gripping the arms of the throne so tightly they turn white. He gestures to one of the guards.

The guard draws his sword and steps toward Ampelio's prone form. He presses the blade to the back of Ampelio's neck, drawing blood, before lifting the sword again to ready the killing strike. I've seen this done too many times to other rebels or slaves who disrespected their masters. The head never comes off on the first swing. I ball my fists in the material of my dress to keep from reaching out to shield him. There is no saving him now. I *know* that, but I can't fathom it. Images swim before my eyes, and I see the knife drawing across my mother's throat. I see slaves whipped until the life leaves their bodies. I see Guardians' heads on pikes in the capital square until the crows take them apart. I've seen people hanged for going against the Kaiser, for having the courage to do what I haven't.

*Run, I want to tell him. Fight. Beg. Bargain. Survive.*

But Ampelio doesn't flinch from the blade. The only move he makes is to reach out and tether himself to my ankle. The skin of his palm is rough and scarred and sticky with blood.

*The time is here for old crows to die.* But I can't let the Kaiser take another person from me. I can't watch Ampelio die. I can't.

'No!'

The voice forces its way through the fractured bits of me.

'No?' The Kaiser's softly spoken word echoes in the silence and raises goose bumps down my spine.

My mouth is dry, and when I speak, my voice rasps. ‘You offered him mercy if he spoke, Your Highness. He did speak.’

The Kaiser leans forward. ‘Did he? I may not speak Astrean, but he didn’t seem particularly forthcoming.’

The words flow before I can stop them. ‘He had only half a dozen comrades left, after all your great efforts to destroy them. He believes the remaining men and women were killed in the earthquake in the Air Mine, but if any survived, they are supposed to meet him just south of the Englmar ruins. There is a cluster of cypress trees there.’

There is at least a fraction of truth in that. I used to play in those trees every summer when my mother took her annual tour of the town that had been leveled by an earthquake the year before I was born. Five hundred people had died that day. Until the siege, it was the greatest tragedy Astrea had ever faced.

The Kaiser tilts his head and watches me too closely, as if he can read my thoughts like words on a page. I want to cower, but I force myself to hold his gaze, to believe my lie.

After what feels like hours, he motions to the guard next to him. ‘Take your best men. There’s no telling what magic the heathens have.’

The guard nods and hurries from the room. I’m careful to keep my face impassive, even while I want to weep with relief. But when the Kaiser turns his cold eyes back to me, that relief turns hard and sinks to the pit of my stomach.

‘Mercy,’ he says quietly, ‘is an Astrean virtue. It is what makes you weak, but I’d hoped we saved you from that. Perhaps blood always wins out in the end.’

He snaps his fingers and the guard forces the hilt of his

iron sword into my hands. It's so heavy that I struggle to lift it. The Earth Gems glint in the light, and their power makes my hands itch. It's the first time since the siege that I've been allowed to handle any kind of gem, or any kind of weapon, for that matter. Once, I would have welcomed it – anything to make me feel like I had a little bit of power – but instead, my stomach lurches as I look at Ampelio lying at my feet and realize what the Kaiser expects me to do.

I shouldn't have spoken up; I shouldn't have tried to save him. Because there is something worse than watching the light leave the eyes of the only person I have left in the world – it's driving the sword into him myself.

My stomach twists at the thought and bile rises into my throat. I grip the sword, struggling to box myself up again and bury Theodosia even deeper before I end up with a sword at my throat as well. But it can't be done this time. Everything feels too much, hurts too badly, hates too fiercely to be contained now.

'Perhaps sparing your life was a mistake.' His voice is casual, but it makes the threat all the clearer. 'Traitors receive no pardons, from me or the gods. You know what to do.'

I barely hear him. I barely hear anything. Blood pounds in my ears, blurring my vision and my thoughts until all I can see is Ampelio lying at my feet.

'Father, is this really necessary?' Prinz Søren steps forward. The alarm in his voice surprises me, but so does the strength behind it. No one has ever contradicted the Kaiser. The court is as surprised as I am, and they break their silence with whispers that are only interrupted when the Kaiser slams his hands against the arms of the throne.

‘Yes,’ he hisses, leaning forward. His cheeks are a vicious red, though whether it’s anger at his son or embarrassment at being questioned it’s difficult to say. ‘It is *necessary*. And let it be a lesson to you as well, Søren. Mercy is what lost the Astreans their country, but we are not so *weak*.’

The word *weak* falls like a curse – to the Kalovaxians there is no worse insult. Prinz Søren flinches from it, his own cheeks coloring as he takes a step back, eyes downcast.

At my feet, Ampelio shudders, his grip on my ankle twitching.

‘*Please, My Queen,*’ he says in Astrean.

*I am not your queen!* I want to scream. *I am your princess, and you were supposed to save me.*

‘*Please,*’ he says again, but there is nothing I can do for him. I have seen dozens of men before him executed for far less than this. It was foolish to think that he would be spared, even if the information I gave had been true. I could beg the Kaiser until my throat was raw and it wouldn’t do any good. It would only end with a blade at my back as well.

‘*Please,*’ he says again before launching into rapid Astrean that I struggle to keep up with. ‘*Or he will kill you, too. It is time for the After to welcome me. Time to see your mother again. But it is not your time yet. You will do this. You will live. You will fight.*’ And I understand. I almost wish I didn’t. His blessing is its own kind of curse.

No. I can’t do it. I can’t kill a man. I can’t kill *him*. I’m not the Kaiser, I’m not the Theyn, I’m not Prinz Søren. I’m . . . Something shifts deep inside me. *Theodosia*, Ampelio called me. It’s a strong name – the one my mother gave me. It’s the name of a queen. It doesn’t feel like a name I deserve, but here

I stand, alone. If I am to survive, I *must* be strong enough to live up to it.

I must be Theodosia now.

My hands begin to shake as I lift the sword. Ampelio is right; someone will do it, whether it's me or one of the Kaiser's guards, but I will make it quicker, easier. Is it better to have your life ended by someone who hates you or someone who loves you?

Through the thin, torn shirt he wears – more red than white now – I feel the vertebrae of his spine. The blade fits below his shoulders, between two protruding ribs. It will be like cutting steak at dinner, I tell myself, but I already know it won't be like that at all.

He turns his head so that his eyes meet mine. There is something familiar in his gaze that wrings my heart in my chest and makes it impossible to breathe. There is no doubt left in me. This man is my father.

*'You are your mother's child,'* he whispers.

I tear my eyes away from him and focus on the Kaiser instead, holding his gaze. *'Bend not, break not,'* I say clearly, quoting the Kalovaxian motto before I plunge the sword into Ampelio's back, cutting through skin and muscle and bone to strike his heart. His body is so weak, so mangled already, that it's almost easy. Blood gushes up, covering my dress.

Ampelio gives a twitch and a shallow cry before going limp. His hand slips away from my ankle, though I feel the bloody handprint left behind. I withdraw the sword and pass it back to the guard. Numb. Two other guards step forward to drag the body away, leaving a trail of slick red in its wake.

*'Take the body to the square and hang it for everyone to*

see. Anyone who tries to move it will join him,' the Kaiser says before turning back to me. His smile pools in the pit of my stomach like oil. 'Good girl.'

Blood soaks my dress, stains my skin. Ampelio's blood. My father's blood. I curtsy before the Kaiser, my body moving without my mind's consent.

'Clean yourself up, Lady Thora. There will be a banquet tonight to celebrate the fall of Astrea's greatest rebel, and you, my dear, will be the guest of honor.'

I drop into another shallow curtsy and bow my head. 'Of course, Your Highness. I look forward to it.'

The words don't feel like my own. My mind is churning so deeply I'm surprised I can find words at all. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want to take that bloody sword back and stab it into the Kaiser's chest, even if I die in the process.

*'It is not your time yet,'* Ampelio's voice whispers through my mind. *'You will live. You will fight.'*

The words don't bring me any comfort. Ampelio is dead, and with him my last hope of being rescued.