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## PROLOGUE

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### *Thirteen years ago . . .*

The matriarch of House Kore adjusted the Christmas present in her arms. It was a portable little theatre, full of brightly painted figurines and miniature objects—swords and capes, whirring carousels, and even a rich velvet curtain controlled by a small draw-string mechanism. Séverin would love it. She had planned the surprise after last week, when she had taken him to the theatre. Most six-year-olds would have looked at the stage, but Séverin had spent the whole time watching the audience.

“You’re missing the show, my dear,” she’d said.

Séverin looked up at her, large violet eyes questioning.

“Am I?”

She’d let him be after that, and afterwards he’d told her in a rush how peoples’ faces changed when something happened on the

stage. It seemed the magic of the performance had somehow been both entirely lost on and entirely understood by him.

The matriarch smiled to herself as she walked up the stone steps of the House Vanth manor where the bright lights of the Winter Conclave beckoned. Although this year's Winter Conclave took place in the cold shadow of the Rhône-Alpes Mountains, the itinerary had not changed in centuries. Each House of the Order of Babel would bring new and unmarked Forged treasures from their colonies to be redistributed in the Midnight Auction. It was a test for the many Houses, and a representation of their country's wealth and imperialism if they could bring in not only their own treasures, but purchase new ones. All Houses had a specific interest, but some had enough resources to diversify their interests.

House Kore had an eye toward botanical advancements, but her illustrious wealth and coffers brimmed with as much varied treasure as there were languages in the world. Others, like House Dazbog of Russia, drew little income from their colonies and could trade only in secrets and parchment. Regardless of the differences between the Order's attending Houses, the purpose of the Winter Conclave never changed: to renew their pledge to safeguard Western civilization and its treasures, to keep safe the Babel Fragments, and thus preserve the divine art of Forging.

But as lofty as it sounded, it was, essentially, a festivity.

The manor of House Vanth drank in the early winter sunlight, chimney smoke curling catlike along the roof. She could almost sense the fête inside: cinnamon sticks soaking in goblets of mulled wine, pine wreaths and ornamental snow Forged to spangle in the air like caught stars . . . and Séverin. Sweet and earnest and observant. The child she would have chosen for herself.

The matriarch moved her hand across her flat belly. Sometimes

when she walked, she thought she could feel the hollow parts of herself jangling together. But when she looked down, she caught sight of her Babel Ring, and she held her chin higher. Power liked irony, she thought. She had been denied a woman's power to give birth, but granted the power her birth as a woman should have denied. Her family still bristled at how *she* had become matriarch of House Kore.

But they didn't have to like it.

They just had to obey it.

Flanking the wrought iron manor door stood two large pine trees decorated with dripping candles. The House Vanth butler greeted her at the top of the steps.

"Welcome, Madame, please allow me to assist—" he said, taking the gift.

"Careful with that," she said sternly.

She rolled her shoulders, curiously missing the weight of the box, which, for a moment, had reminded her of what it felt like to carry Séverin . . . warm and sleepy in her arms as she had returned him to his home after the theatre.

"Pardon, Madame," said the butler guiltily. "Though I do not wish to detain you from the festivities . . . *she*, ah, wished to speak with you."

*She.*

The pine tree on her left rustled slightly as a woman stepped out from behind it.

"Leave us," said the woman to the butler.

The butler promptly did as she asked. The matriarch felt a stab of reluctant admiration for the woman who held neither power nor status in House Vanth, but commanded it anyway. Lucien Montagnet-Alarie had brought her back with him after an artifact

excursion to Algeria, and six months later she gave birth to their child, Séverin. There were plenty of women like her, women carried into another country while carrying a white man's child. Not quite wife or lover, but an exotic ghost haunting the halls and edges of society.

But the matriarch had never met a woman with those eyes.

Séverin could pass for a boy of France, but his eyes belonged to his mother: dusky and violet, the night sky veiled in smoke.

The Order of Babel had ignored this woman just as soundly as they had ignored the Haitian mother of the House Nyx heir . . . but there was something about the Algerian woman that demanded noticing. Maybe it was because she flaunted protocol, wearing her absurd tunics and scarves. Or maybe it was due to the rumors she cast before her, vast as her own shadow. That she had powers that didn't even look like any Forging affinity. That the patriarch of House Vanth had found her in an enchanted cave, a dark-eyed mirage who appeared as if from nowhere.

That she had secrets.

"You have no right to corner me like this," said the matriarch.

Kahina ignored this.

"You brought something for him," she said.

Not a question.

"What of it?" the matriarch shot back.

Guilt flickered through her when she caught Kahina's gaze: hungry. Hungry for all that the matriarch could do that was denied to her. Kahina had the power to give birth to him, but not the privilege to call him her son.

Power liked irony.

"Why did you choose that present?" Kahina asked.

The question threw the matriarch. What did it matter? She

simply thought he'd like it. She could already imagine him crouched behind the toy theatre, moving the puppets, his face not on the wooden stage but the imagined audience. He had a knack for understanding how things fit together. How to draw the eye. Perhaps he would grow up to be an artist, she mused.

"Do you love him?" asked Kahina.

"What—"

"Do you love my son?"

*My son.* The words felt like a slap. The matriarch of House Kore could take him to the theatre, shower him with gifts, but he was not hers. And yet, her heart did not notice.

"Yes," she said.

Kahina nodded once, as if steeling herself, and then said: "Then, please . . . you must promise to protect him."