

QUEEN OF THE SKOUR

Book Two of *The Bloodstone Dagger*

K.E. BARRON



Queen of the Skour

K. E. Barron

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To my nana, who is my biggest fan as I am hers.

By K. E. Barron

The Eye of Verishten
'Repudium' (Featured in *The Beginning and*
End of All Things: Stories of Man)

THE BLOODSTONE DAGGER SERIES

The Immortal Serpent
Queen of the Skour

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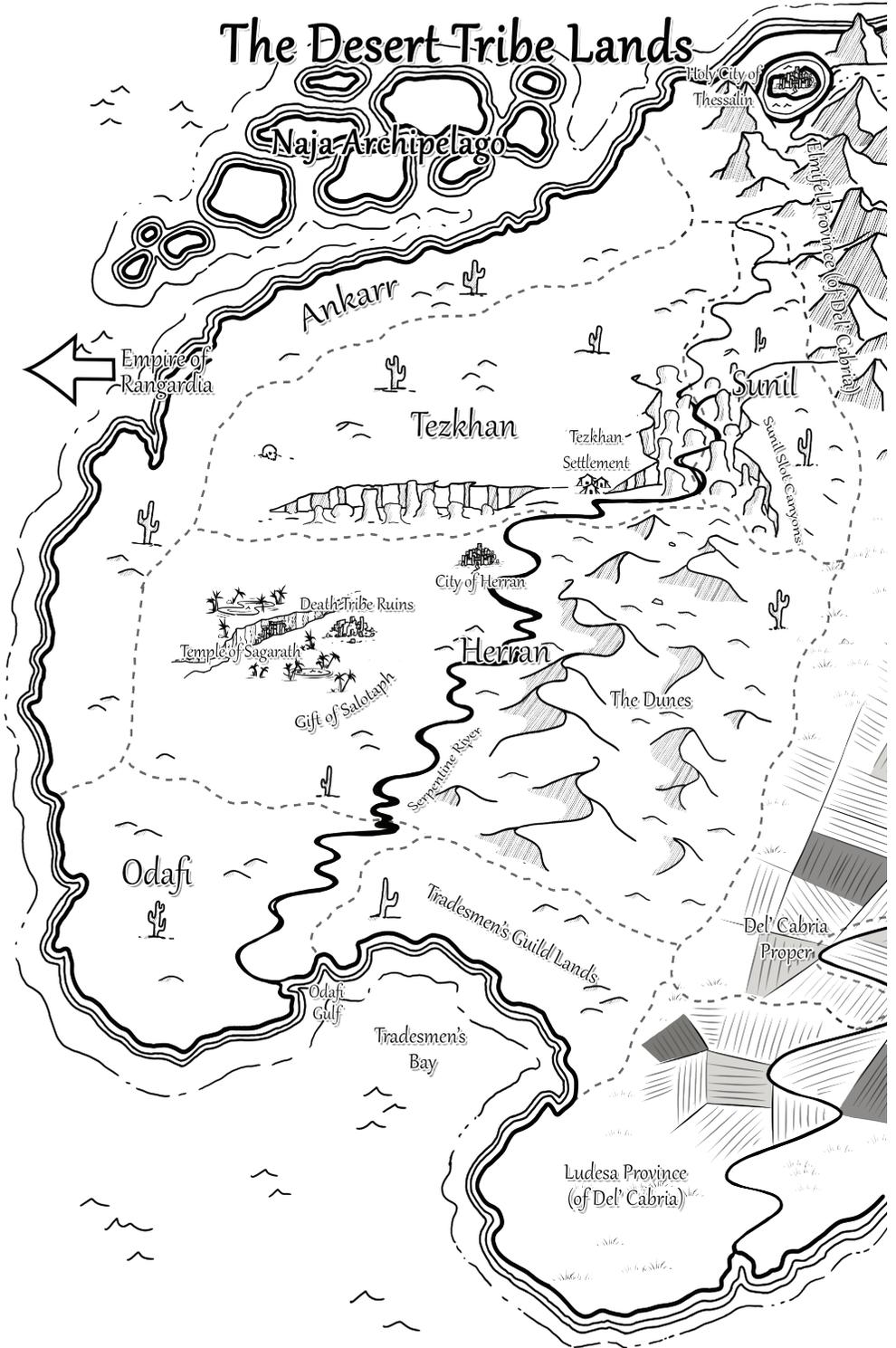
Praise for *The Eye of Verishten*

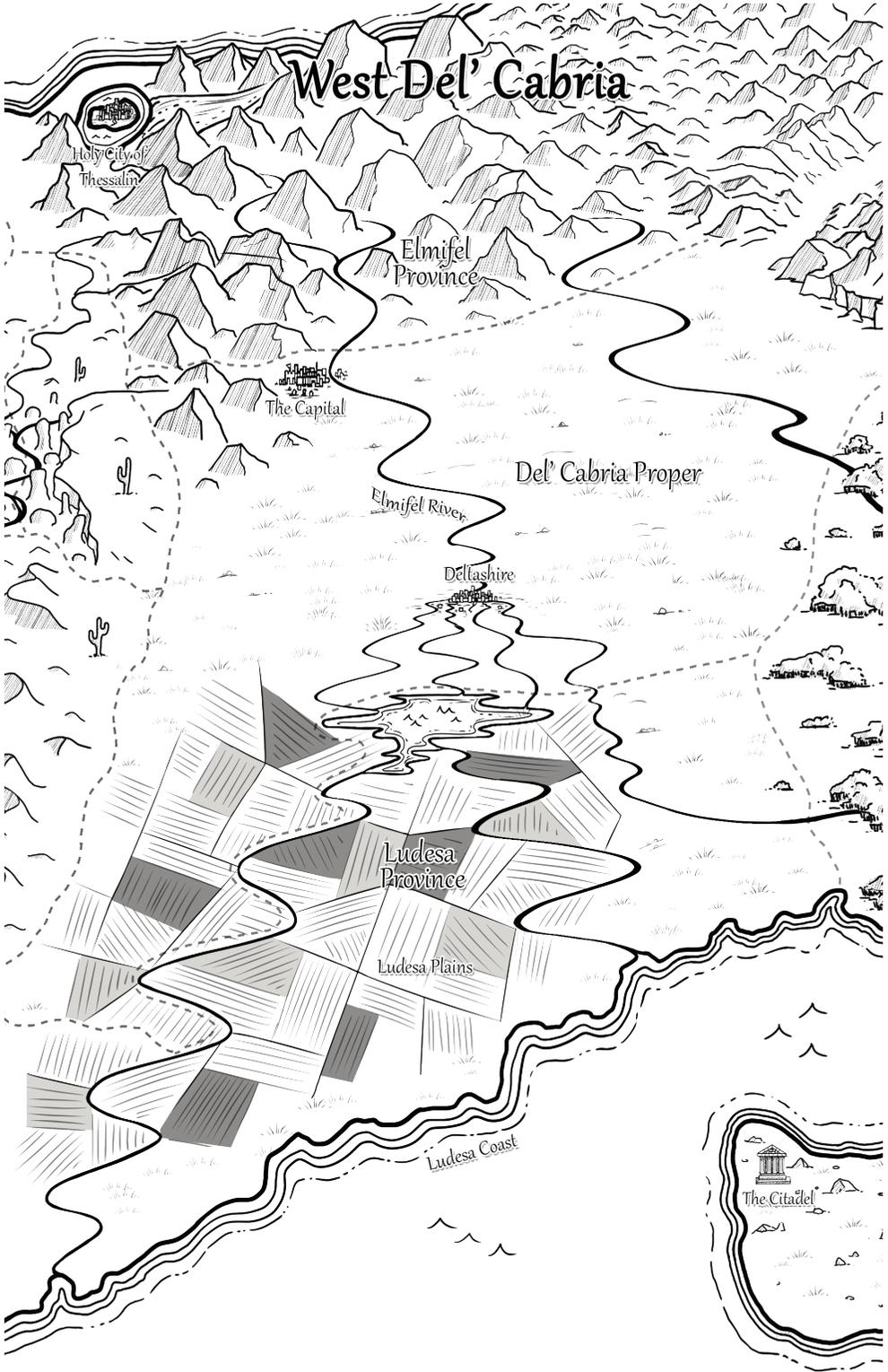
“A gripping tale of intrigue, with a fresh new take on a magical world.”

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The Desert-Tribe Lands





West Del' Cabria

Holy City of
Thessalin

Elmifel
Province

The Capital

Del' Cabria Proper

Elmifel River

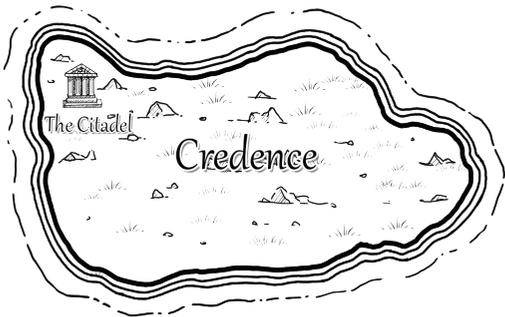
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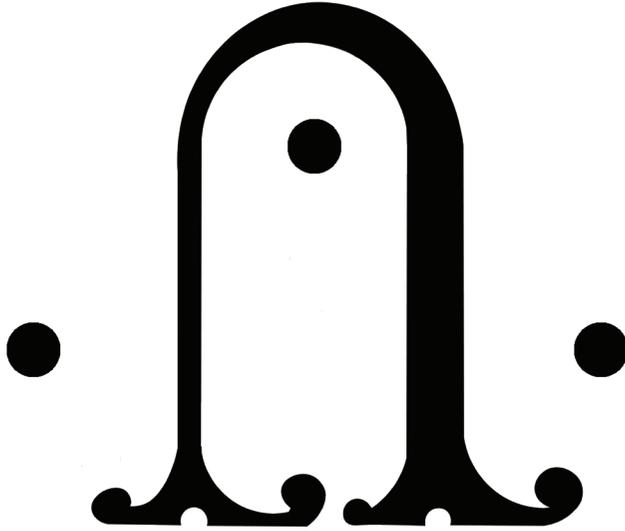
Ludesa
Province

Ludesa Plains

Ludesa Coast

The Citadel

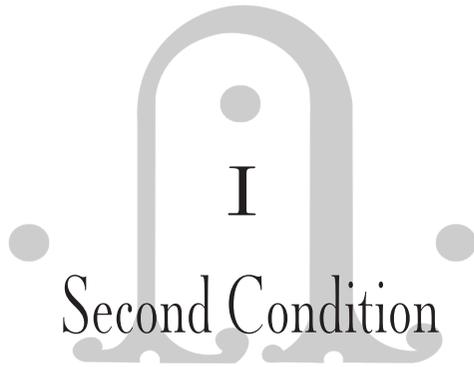




The Balance is the duality between the Pure and the Primitive.

Only through penance can one maintain it.

– Saint Orester of Del’Cabria



I

Second Condition

A glistening blue stream drifted up against the black, reaching for something unseen. An image splashed into focus. The Overlord of Herran stood at the base of the throne steps, his form an undulating visage before the King. Skeletal tattoos shimmered sapphire blue in a distorted sunbeam, streaking through the arched window panes. His charcoal-tinted armor, wide-legged pants, and headscarf were still dusted with fine flecks of sand from the desert.

When he opened his mouth to speak, the words sounded hollow as if underwater. “No soldier of yours will take up arms against any warrior of mine, lest our nations return to war.”

King Tiberius took a steady, even breath. His pulse, slow but strong. It was the urling way to keep one’s nerves in check, and Tiberius never failed in doing so—not even when face to face with the Immortal Serpent.

His calm, emphatic voice rebounded off the high ceilings of his throne room. “You’ve succeeded in driving my armies out of your tribe lands, but that does not award you the right to dictate the terms of this treaty. The men you’ve defeated make up only a fraction of our forces. You will find the bulk of them here, prepared to defend their home. Del’Cabria has faced far more dire threats than you, and still, it stands, stronger for having done so.” Tiberius’s tone hardened. “Empires of chaos, such as yours, do not last long.”

The Overlord’s serpent eyes blinked sideways as he gave a subtle smirk. “You may be right, Your Majesty, but as new empires rise, ancient ones fade. Yours can continue for many more years to come.

Peaceful co-existence with Herran is the only hope your kingdom has for a future.”

Tiberius tapped his fingers on his throne’s armrest, sending watery ripples through the air, then exchanged a serious glance with the Captain of the Royal Guard standing silent and steadfast at his left. “You murder one of our most accomplished senators, draw us into war, and now you bring your reptile hordes to our doorstep, all for peaceful co-existence?”

“Peace”—the immortal Mage nodded—“provided my conditions are met: First, my warriors require unrestricted access to Fae’ren Province for the duration of our siege at the Ingleheim borderlands. Second—”

The King held up a hand. “Your attempt to invade those mountain ranges will be the last invasion you ever plan.”

Seemingly unperturbed, Nas’Gavarr ambled toward the windows and stared out of them thoughtfully. “Your warning is appreciated but unnecessary. Concern yourself with the lives of your citizens as I reveal to you my second condition.” He turned back to Tiberius, his unnerving, reptilian stare causing the King’s heart rate to spike.

He stood up from his throne, his liquid surroundings parting before him. “Your immortality makes you believe you are unstoppable, but the Deities are on our side.” He took purposeful steps down to the Mage’s level. “Threaten my kingdom all you want, but the Serpentine has been and always will be a Conduit of death. No matter how hard you try to change its image to one of equality and freedom, you, along with your false gods, can be killed. Keep *that* in mind when you make your second request.” This was Tiberius’s kingdom, his throne room. These negotiations were on his terms. He would treat the foreign warlord’s ‘conditions’ as nothing more than mere requests. Ones he would surely dismiss.

The Overlord met the King’s eye.

Dong! Splunk!

A wax candle splashed over Nas’Gavarr’s grin, sending waves throughout the throne room.

Princess Zephira broke from her scry, gasping for air as her consciousness sharply surfaced in the castle chapel. The nun’s harmonious songs rushed back into her ears to replace the surging water in her mind. She was still kneeling before Saint Orestes’s effigy, intricately carved out of an egg stone pillar. Zephira’s candle had

somehow fallen into her brass water dish, which had tipped over on its side, the sacred liquid dripping off the altar step and wetting the ends of her gown.

“Oops. Sorry, Zephira . . .” said a lanky boy, his pale cheeks reddening as he cowered on the steps in front of her.

“Rubin?” *That wicked little brat!* She schooled her emotions, suppressing the urge to snatch him by the long ears and tug him off the step. Instead, she remained seated, knowing full well she could never act on such primitive impulses in a holy house of penance.

Pulling her gown away from the creeping puddle, she said in a calm yet assertive tone. “This side of the chapel is for women only. Leave here at once.”

“I want to pray too,” the scrawny prince whined. “But there are no lit candles in the men’s area . . . you weren’t supposed to see me.”

And what would you possibly be praying for? You still worship your toys! Zephira cleared her throat, shoving away the unwanted burst of emotion. “If you require assistance, find an altar boy. Now, get down from there before you anger the Deities further.”

Rubin did as he was told, his shoulders slumping. He clutched his right hand tight to his chest.

“What do you have? Give it here.” Zephira held out her palm. *You may get away with swiping trinkets from my room, but I’ll be damned if I let you steal from the Deities themselves,* she thought.

Rubin hesitantly showed her the knuckles on his right hand. They were blistering red.

“You’ve burned yourself.” She instantly forgot her previous mental accusation.

“I can put water on it.” He pulled out of her grasp and ran to the basin a few feet away, but Zephira snatched up his arm in a flash.

“*That* is water from the Sacred Spring of Elmifel, utilized only for prayer, not for silly boys who burn themselves.”

“But it hurts,” Rubin moaned.

“Good,” Zephira said. “Let the pain be penance for your sinful conduct.”

Tears welled up in his large blue eyes; his bottom lip began to quiver. *Oh, no, don’t do this here, not now!* Zephira silently pleaded.

Just then, a woman’s shrill voice rang off the chapel walls. “Rubin! You are not to be in here.”

Queen Henriette’s heeled shoes clacked upon the blue and white

checkered tile with each rushed step. Like Zephira, she wore a modest high-waisted gown, cinched at the bust and buttoned up to her neck with lace netting over her chest, appropriately modest for visiting a chapel.

She had promised Zephira earlier that she'd watch Rubin, but as always, the princeling snuck away to make his sister's day all the more infuriating.

"The candle burned me, Mummy." Rubin held out his hand.

"No, he burned *himself* on the candle," Zephira corrected.

Henriette bent over to inspect the injury in question. "Oh, Precious"—she kissed her son's knuckles—"let's get you something for it."

Zephira clutched her gown in irritation. "Please ensure he stays on the men's side. If one of the sisters had caught him, he would wish for the candle's flame." She knew better than anyone what a strap wielded by a Sister of the Unnamed felt like, and she had done a lot less to deserve such whippings. She could still feel the sting between her shoulder blades from the last time she had voiced a petty human thought in earshot of the headmistress.

"Zephira, have a little compassion. He's a child," said Henriette.

"He's almost twelve, older than I was when I started tutelage at the Holy City."

"You were always more mature than most children your age. Rubin's time will come. There's no need to rush these things."

"I suppose not." Zephira bit her lip.

It was the law that Rubin would take the throne ahead of Zephira simply because he was the male heir, but it was clear to her that only she possessed the urling resolve required to lead the Kingdom after their father. She prayed that Rubin would abdicate the throne when the time came in recognition of his older sister's worthiness. Such a thing was unlikely, however, since it would require him to take a vow of celibacy in service of the Faith or live in exile.

"Let's go, my Prince." Henriette placed her hand behind Rubin's back and started to lead him away.

"I want to pray with Zephira!" he protested.

"Oh hush, I'm taking you to the infirmary and then straight home." she cooed as the two disappeared down the basement stairs.

Sure her pesky little brother was gone, Zephira rushed back to her prayer space, eager to return to her father's deliberations with

the Overlord of Herran. A pang of guilt grew in her chest, making her pause. Not only was she scrying her father under the pretense of prayer, but she had promised him she wouldn't. *'There are things you are not yet prepared to see, my dear,'* he would say. *'Elmifel bestowed upon you a sacred gift. It shall not be used to spy on your kin.'*

With a sigh, she admitted there was no justifiable reason for her to scry any further. The Overlord could never break her father's resolve. No one could. Instead, she refilled the bowl with sacred spring water from the basin and returned to a kneeling position before the altar of Saint Orestes. The statue held a long candle, its faint light overwhelmed by the afternoon sun's rays streaming in from the windows thirty feet above.

Despite the time of day, the air inside the chapel was frigid. She raised her hood over her blonde hair, leaned forward, and pressed her forehead to the chilly stone step. "I implore thee, Deities That Cannot Be Named, to watch over our noble King while he is in our enemy's presence."

She unpinned the cameo brooch from her cloak and traced her fingertips over the ancient queen's features, sculpted out of white sardonyx shell and fastened to a velvet backing. She carefully placed it beside the water dish and said, "To Queen Orestes, merciful saint, may you grant him your wisdom so he may do what is right in the face of evil."

Zephira dipped her hands into the water, cold to the touch, even to her normally icy fingers. "And to the Spirit of Elmifel, source of all life, may you cleanse his mind and heart of primitive fears so that he may overcome the serpent's deceptions."

Clasping her wet hands together, she closed her eyes tight, willing the icy tendrils of anxiety to cease their climb up her spine. *What could the Overlord's second request be?* Zephira's thoughts spun.

No longer able to help herself, she wet her left hand again and traced the *Veil of Elmifel* on her forehead, customary in prayers involving the Sacred Spirit and vital for scrying. Besides, she reasoned, she would need to learn all she could about the Overlord of Herran in case she ever did become Queen.

She focused all her attention on the dampness on her forehead. Droplets of water lifted off her skin, forming a clear vapor that condensed into tiny phantom streams suspended in the air. A nun refilled the water basin nearby, paying the princess no mind. To her, it

would look like Zephira was only praying; no one was able to see the water the way she could.

There were always three streams: One for her mother, a thinner one for her brother, and the largest for her father. The more she used a stream, the more prominent it became.

Hands still clasped together, Zephira pushed her mind toward the largest stream. The Sisters of the Unnamed's voices became muffled by the sound of rushing water filling her ears, and the phantom stream cast her up toward the vaulted ceilings and out of the chapel. Her consciousness moved at such inconceivable speed, the world around her liquified, engulfing her in pure fluid energy.

The brightness of the castle throne room splashed into existence, the chapel now a distant memory. She once again saw through her father's eyes and listened through his ears. An underwater spectator within a body over which she had no control.

Tiberius stood next to Nas'Gavarr, both staring out the window, but now, where the Overlord appeared satisfied, her father struggled to keep himself from shaking with rage. What could Nas'Gavarr have said to upset her father so? "Long before I became known as the Immortal Serpent, I was just a simple Fire Mage," said Nas'Gavarr. "No matter how many essences I've mastered since, I never forgot where it all began."

The reason for the King's dismay soon revealed itself as his wide-eyed gaze fell first to the western city gates, then the north, then the east . . . to the black smoke billowing from every exit point in the city.

Nas'Gavarr's brow furrowed, deep in concentration, like an artist locked in the mania of the creative process. "Fire is the most misunderstood essence, which is why, apart from life force, it is the most difficult to manipulate. Its aura is virtually invisible to the Mage. It can only be felt"—the Overlord placed his forefingers to his temple—"like the throbbing rhythm of blood coursing through veins. Many Mages believe, as with other essences, once one senses the aura, they can learn to control it. But that's where fire differs. Only by understanding its *uncontrollable* nature can a Mage uncover its secrets."

Before Tiberius could utter a word, there was a reverberating pop, and more black smoke to follow, much closer to the castle. So close, he could feel its heat radiating around him, the smoke suffocating . . . but how? Tiberius was safe in the throne room behind glass . . . unless it wasn't Tiberius feeling it at all.

“My family is down there!” The King’s heart froze in his chest.

“Then they have nothing to fear. For what safer place than in the house of the Deities who you’ve assured me are ‘on your side.’”

A hand came down hard on Zephira’s shoulder, yanking her from her scry. Nuns’ shouts bounced off the chapel ceiling. “FIRE, FIRE!”

“Princess, this way!” Sir Kendall, her personal guard, pulled her to her feet.

Smoke stung her nostrils, and she blinked furiously as she followed her guard out the rear exit. They came to the courtyard, gasping. Lines of mulberry bushes and great willow trees erupted in flames. A blazing ring surrounded them, blocking every escape route.

“Back inside!” Kendall waved Zephira back toward the door as rising flames chased them with unnatural speed.

Zephira choked on the smoke that now filled the chapel. The front entrance had become engulfed in a fiery blaze in the few moments they had been outside. *It’s too fast!* Flames skirted across the rugs and climbed up the banners and tapestries on the walls.

Sir Allard emerged, coughing through the stifling haze to meet Kendall and Zephira. His charges, her mother and brother, trailed behind him, looking around the chapel in panic.

“Mother, why are you still here?”

“The front courtyard is completely engulfed,” the Queen’s guard replied in her stead.

“Mummy,” Rubin cried. “What’s happening?”

His mother coughed into her shoulder while pressing the young prince tightly against her as if her body were a fireproof cloak of protection.

A shrieking nun, her wimple ablaze, careened past the royal family and doused herself in the sacred spring water. Zephira rushed to the basin, wet her hands, and rapidly traced the *Veil* on her forehead. *Father, please just give him what he wants, whatever it is!*

“Stop this at once!” Tiberius bellowed. Zephira had never experienced him yell with such force before. Below the throne room, flames coated the yard and danced up the vines clinging to the stone towers.

“Wildfire.” Nas’Gavarr grinned. “Wind and fire essence working as one. The easiest to master combined with one of the most difficult, creating something virtually unstoppable. I can maneuver the flames wherever I wish, even where there is nothing to burn.”

“Put it out!” Tiberius said through gritted teeth.

“It likely won’t be the flames that kill them,” Nas’Gavarr continued. “The smoke will suffocate them first. It will feel like drowning. Some believe that is a more merciful death . . . but I am not so sure. It is one of the few deaths I have never experienced.”

“You ask for what I cannot give. My child . . . my legacy!”

Nas’Gavarr raised one arm, and the infernal pillars surrounding the Capital grew higher, rivaling the height of the walls themselves. Tiberius’s body was frozen in place, but his insides twisted in knots, helplessly watching his people in the distance scurry to evacuate and finding nowhere to go.

Beside him, Nas’Gavarr smiled out the corner of his mouth, real teeth forming a double layer with the teeth tattooed on his lips. “In a month and a half, the moons will join as one. As my people celebrate their freedom, yours will be rebuilding their homes and mourning their dead. That is, of course, if you continue to deny me. One way or another, I will have what I’m after.”

Henriette’s face appeared suddenly, dry and well-defined among the watery surroundings. Wiping off Zephira’s forehead, the Queen pulled her back to the burning chapel. “Zephira, stop that. We must hurry!”

The princess blinked to full awareness then looked straight at her little brother clutching his mother’s skirts. *Rubin* . . . Her heart froze despite the heat.

“To the men’s side, quickly,” ordered Allard.

Kendall took Zephira’s other arm and tugged her away from the basin. Smoke rose to the ceiling, completely obscuring the decorative carvings as they ran into the men’s chapel.

As they arrived, windows shattered and glass sprinkled down. More flames blew in, igniting every banner. Their fiery fingers wrapped around the stairwells and proceeded to jump across the upper balconies. “The entire building is surrounded!” a priest cried in panic. Others flung themselves over the balustrades of the second floor to escape the blaze pushing in through the broken windows.

“By the Deities, where do we go?” Henriette coughed. She tore off her wig of blonde ringlets and dabbed at the sweat pouring from her brow.

Zephira loosed her own hair from her circlet and pressed the garment to her nose and mouth. It didn’t seem to help much; each

breath was still a hot iron scraping the back of her throat.

“The downward stairwells are clear.” Kendall pointed to the sweeping staircase to their left before hacking into his arm. “The basement is our best chance.”

They descended to the chapel’s lower level, and the air cooled considerably, but hot orange waves rippled across the low ceiling in relentless pursuit.

Zephira panted, dragging hot air into her lungs. Flames blocked their way ahead, and they had to turn around. More flames raced up behind them.

The guards threw themselves against a locked door to their right, fire already licking the walls around them. It flung open, and they rushed into a dark dormitory. A lone nun was curled up underneath her bed, praying in terrified murmurs.

Allard spun around to inspect the room. “There are no windows. Blast these old structures!”

He went to close the door, but the blaze burst in from the hallway. He cursed and scurried back, pressing everyone against the far wall.

“Keep low!” Kendall placed both hands on Zephira’s shoulders, forcing her into a crouch. The others followed suit, priests and nuns spreading out flat on their bellies.

Tears mixed with sweat streamed down Henriette’s face. “You did all you could, brave sirs.” The royal family huddled close together as blinding smoke filled the room. Bright flames closed in, the heat overwhelming, the smell of burning bedspreads nauseating.

Zephira grasped for her brooch to find it missing. Her heart sank even deeper into her gut upon realizing she had left it upstairs. She prayed to the wise saint anyway: “Deliver us . . . may Father find the resolve to strike down the serpent where he stands.” Zephira’s eyes stung, the smoke so thick, she could barely see those right next to her.

Then, as if a brisk wind blew out of the room, the smoke and fire receded, hovering just outside the door. The immediate threat of burning alive seemed to be over, but Zephira knew Nas’Gavarr was not about to let them leave, which meant the King had made his decision or the decision had been made for him.

“The Overlord,” Zephira croaked. “He’s going to take Rubin.”

“What?” Henriette choked.

“How do you know that?” Allard asked, sweat pouring down his salt and pepper stubble.

“Mummy,” Rubin cried through violent coughs.

“It will be all right, Precious.”

Zephira’s core shook with rage watching her eleven-year-old brother, trembling in his mother’s arms, awaiting his dreadful fate. She vowed in that moment that when she became Queen, the Immortal Serpent would pay dearly for this. His desert barbarians would never dare set foot on Del’Cabrian soil again, and she would bring Rubin home. The Kingdom’s honor would be restored at all costs.

The smoke eventually cleared, revealing a way out of the sweltering dormitory. Heavy footsteps sounded from the basement hallway, growing louder as they neared the room.

“The fire’s going out,” said Allard, rising to his feet. “I will secure an escape route.”

“No.” Zephira grabbed hold of his pant leg. “He’s coming.”

Kendall, too, rose to his feet. Both guards unsheathed their swords. “Who’s coming?”

“The Overlord of Herran.” Zephira took her brother by the shoulders and pulled him from his mother’s grasp.

Henriette gasped, “Zephira wha—?”

She ignored her mother’s pleas and looked straight into her brother’s bloodshot eyes. “Listen to me, Rubin. He’s coming to take you away for a while.”

“Why?” he cried. “Mummy?”

With a firm shake, Zephira captured his attention. “You won’t be hurt, do you hear me? The Deities are with you, always.”

“I won’t go!”

“You will, little brother, but I promise to watch out for you, wherever you go,” she assured him, brushing stray hairs off his sweaty brow. “Just remember, you are the Crown Prince of Del’Cabria. You must be strong.”

“My Prince!” Henriette wrapped her arms around him and Zephira both. “You’re not going anywhere. I will not let that heathen touch you!”

“And neither shall we,” said Allard, exchanging a grim nod with Kendall.

At that moment, the smoke parted, and Nas’Gavarr stepped through. He stared down the two guards with his demonic serpent eyes.

“You will come no closer,” shouted Allard, voice quavering.

“Step aside, by order of your King,” Nas’Gavarr replied calmly.

The guards held their ground, swords outstretched.

Nas’Gavarr took a step forward, and Allard attacked. With barely a glance, the Overlord caught his sword in his bare hand, grabbed Allard by the neck, and flung him, the crack of his bones echoing off the stone walls of the small room. The guard collapsed like a limp mass on the floor as Nas’Gavarr’s sliced hand sealed before their eyes.

“Do not come any closer,” ordered Kendall, darting his eyes back and forth between the Overlord and his brother-in-arms slumped against the wall, motionless.

“Stay back, vile snake!” Henriette screamed, squeezing Rubin’s head tighter against her breast.

Zephira rose to her feet and stepped in front of her mother and brother. “What do you want with the prince?” Her voice came out as a terrified mouse trapped within her burning throat.

The Overlord’s head swayed to the side like an advancing cobra, not taking his eyes off Zephira. “It’s not him I came for.”

She felt her chest collapse as she fought to breathe. Below, her mother and brother rocked back and forth, arms clasped around each other.

Nas’Gavarr moved aside, exposing the doorway. “Come with me, Princess, and I will leave your steadfast protector unharmed.” He gazed pointedly at Kendall, who was rapidly pulling the Queen and prince to their feet and ushering them out of the room.

Henriette took Zephira by the arm. “Come, sweetheart!”

Numb, Zephira wouldn’t budge. “If I don’t go with him, he will burn the Capital and everyone in it.”

“Zephira!” her mother screeched, ignoring her daughter’s reasoning. Rubin’s high-pitched wails filled her head, along with the murmurings of the nun, still under the bed.

With a determined roar, Kendall advanced with his sword held high.

“Sir Kendall!” Zephira cried, but her loyal guard didn’t deter. The Overlord effortlessly dodged his blade, then grabbed hold of his head in two large hands and crushed his skull like an eggshell.

Zephira’s breath seized, staring at the handsome urling man who had been at her side since she was ten, crumpled and broken at her feet. Her legs, like two gelatinous masses, gave way beneath her. Henriette tried with all her might to drag her daughter away from the advancing sorcerer, but Zephira could not peel her eyes from her guard’s crushed

skull. She didn't even notice the priests and nuns having fled the room, leaving the royal family to face the demon Mage alone.

Now, he was looming over her. He took her by the bicep and pulled her to her feet with hardly an ounce of effort.

"Get your hands off her!" The Queen pulled Zephira's other arm until it felt like it would snap right off.

Tiberius rushed into the room, out of breath, followed by the Captain of the Royal Guard. "Henriette, release her and come to me. Now!"

"Tiberius. You must stop him."

"Let her go," he said again, his voice deflated.

"Tiberius, she hasn't yet reached marrying age. This heathen will add her to his harem. Please, don't do this. She's our little girl!"

Without another word, Tiberius marched over and forcefully yanked his wife away from Zephira and the Mage clutching her.

Henriette shrieked, fighting against her husband's grasp while reaching for her daughter, but she soon collapsed to the scorched floor in hysterics, soot staining her gown. Rubin stood flat against the wall, wide-eyed and trembling in pure terror.

The King turned to his captain and nodded toward his son. "Take him away from here." The prince was unresponsive to the captain's approach, too fixated on his big sister in the Overlord's unrelenting grip. The captain had to scoop him up and carry him out of the room as if he were a helpless toddler.

Nas'Gavarr released Zephira's arm and grabbed her head with both hands, forcing her to face him. She stood paralyzed as her mind buzzed. The sounds of her mother's cries, her brother's squeals down the hall, and the sole nun's frightened murmurs melded into a petrifying hum. There were no phantom rivers to take her away; any water left on her skin had long since evaporated.

"Don't be afraid, Zephira." her father's calm voice cut through the noise. "This is what is best for the Kingdom." The same sentiments she had just uttered to her brother didn't bring her any degree of comfort, only caused the dreadful chasm in her stomach to open wider. But it didn't matter how she felt; they were all primitive human emotions that had to be buried and the earth salted.

Her gaze stayed rooted on Nas'Gavarr's serpent eyes, but it was her father she responded to, a quote from King Cornelius II coming to mind automatically: "Fear does not serve in times of need. Only

duty.”

“And you will fulfill that duty,” expressed Nas’Gavarr with a knowing smirk. “You will be Queen.”

He waved his hand in front of her eyes, and the world faded to black.